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The Aesthetics of Communication and the Communication of Cultural Aesthetics: A Perspective on Ian Dunlop's Films of Aboriginal Australia

The subject of this paper is the changing aesthetics in Ian Dunlop's films of Aboriginal Australians made over a period of over 30 years. I deliberately write 'in' rather than 'of' since I am concerned as much with the aesthetics of the people portrayed as with the aesthetics of the films themselves. While it is not always easy to separate the aesthetic approach of the film from the aesthetics of the subject it is a conceptually useful distinction. It is possible to imagine a film in which the aesthetics of the society is masked by the film rather than revealed through it, for example a film in which philosophers and art critics talk about abstract expressionism without showing examples of a single work. The film may have aesthetic qualities but those qualities differ from those of the film's subject.

All categories of film have the potential to use aesthetic qualities to create meaning, stimulating the senses to evoke emotional responses that enable the audience to take part in the action or sense the atmosphere of a place. In ethnographic film the filmmaker has the possibility of shooting the film and editing the footage in such a way that it conveys the result of his or her analysis or interpretation of the material filmed. Indeed Robert Gardner¹ once defined ethnographic film as a mode of observation which combined the techniques and sensibilities of both the artist and the scientist. Gardner is drawing attention to the fact that the subject of an ethnographic film is also the direct subject of the footage on which the film is based, something that ethnographic film shares to a greater or lesser extent with other documentary genres. A 'mode of observation' implies an ethical position in which the filmmaker intends to interpret or represent the culture as he or she observes (or interprets) it to be. While it is possible to imagine documentary footage being used in a way that contradicts the actuality of the events, such usage lies outside the boundaries of ethnographic or anthropological film. Certainly in Dunlop's case the objective of ethnographic film "is to bring understanding of, and with this respect for, the diversity of human experience. It attempts to treat its subject with respect, and to maintain the integrity of the filmed material."²

In this paper I am concerned with both the aesthetics of the subject and the aesthetics of the film itself. The concept of aesthetics can be applied at many different levels: from the visual properties of a particular art work to the

¹ Gardner 1966

² Film Australia's Ethnographic Film Programme: A report by Ian Dunlop to the Film Australia Review Committee 31 October 1986

affective sensual experience of being in the world. At its most general, a societal or cultural aesthetics concerns the particular environment of sense-experience people are socialised into, what MacDougall³ refers to as an aesthetic landscape; it is a social abstraction yet also a form of poetics. In Dunlop's films I will be considering both the more general level of aesthetics such as the sense of time in Western Desert cultures and more specific instances such as the aesthetics of dance, song, and material culture objects. However equally relevant are the ways in which Dunlop uses aesthetics to convey his own interpretations of the significance of Aboriginal ways of life, his feelings about Aboriginal culture and the Australian environment.

In any mediated system of communication such as film the process of interpretation is complex, especially in cases where meaning is being conveyed cross-culturally by the evocation of aesthetic effect. The possibilities of misinterpretation between the film subject, the filmmaker, and the different audiences of the film are enormous. My analysis here can only be suggestive based on the films themselves, critical response to them and anthropological understandings of Aboriginal society.

Dunlop's films of Aboriginal Australia fall neatly into two sets: the Western Desert films and the films of the Yirrkala project. The Western Desert films were made over a period of four years (1965-9) and comprised the 19-part series *People of the Australian Western Desert*, and *Desert People* (1966) a film made for a more general audience out of parts 1, 2, 4 and 5.⁴ The Yirrkala project began in 1970 but the first film *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka-way* was not completed until 1979. In editing terms more than 10 years separates the Western Desert films from the earliest films of the Yirrkala project. The situation is made more complex because although there is an aesthetic unity to all of the Western Desert films which reflects the same underlying conception of what the films are about, the Yirrkala films are if anything characterised by their diversity of style and content. The initial focus of this analysis is the Western Desert films: the Yirrkala material is used for reflexive comparison. In interpreting the Western Desert films I will use mainly Dunlop's own accounts of his motivations and objectives in making them and critical responses of the time to the films. In the case of the Yirrkala films I have used my long term involvement in the project as the basis for my interpretations.⁵

³ MacDougall 1999:3

⁴ Dunlop also made a shortened version of *Desert People* for use in the new South Wales schools programme. This film *Two Desert Families* was divided into two parts for classroom use, *Diagamara* and *Mimma*.

⁵ Frances Morphy and I first met Ian Dunlop while we were engaged in fieldwork at Yirrkala in 1974. Together with Nancy Williams, his anthropological adviser for the project as a whole, we worked with Ian, in the field and in the studio, on many of the

The editing of the Yirrkala films was delayed in part because in 1969 Dunlop, almost simultaneously, became involved with a second major project working with the anthropologist Maurice Godelier on the daily life and initiation rituals of the Baruya of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. This resulted in the nine part series *Towards Baruya Manhood* (1972). Some have argued⁶ that the Baruya films are in some respects transitional between the Western Desert and Yirrkala films. While I think it is possible to see relationships that cross-cut Dunlop's Australian and New Guinea films I do not think it helpful to see them linked as part of a process of transition.

People of the Australian Western Desert: The Critical Context

The history of ethnographic film has been bound up in the history of the cinema no more so than in Australia. In the early days of the history of film its uses as a scientific recording technique were inextricably interlinked with its development as an art and entertainment form. Baldwin Spencer was one of the pioneers of Australian cinema and developed techniques of film construction that were similar to those subsequently used in the making of feature films.⁷ Spencer screened his films to mass audiences in Melbourne in the early years of the twentieth century. Subsequently filmmaking remained part of the ethnographer's practice in Australia especially in South Australia. Dunlop himself was trained as a filmmaker after studying anthropology at Sydney University and his ethnographic filmmaking is influenced equally by the history of the cinema and of Australian ethnographic film. Indeed what the professional filmmaker contributed in opposition to the gifted amateur ethnographer is one of the themes that Dunlop's retrospective evoked in some French critiques of his films.

People of the Australian Western Desert occupies an ambiguous position in the history of ethnographic film. In some respects it is the high point in a style of ethnographic filmmaking that is in continuity with the pioneering films made by Spencer and Gillen in Central Australia in 1901.⁸ Dunlop's intention was to record a way of life that had been part of the Western Desert for thousands of years and would soon be no longer. He believed that to record that way of life as accurately as possible it was vital to use professional filmmakers who were informed by anthropological understandings. Dunlop's filmmaking differed from his amateur predecessors – from Spencer and Gillen, to Norman Tindale and T. G. H. Strehlow – not only in a technical and filmmaking sense, but also in his attitude to and understanding of Aboriginal society and its historical

subsequent films. My book 'Journey to the Crocodile's Nest' is an accompanying monograph for *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka-way* (Morphy 1984)

⁶ e.g. Tawre 1984

⁷ Cantrell and Cantrell, 1982

⁸ see Dunlop 1983

position. This difference comes across in the films most directly in the commentary but also in those subtle features of film style that makes people write that they present a humanistic vision. However the difference is also reflected in the central place that ethical considerations had in his filmmaking and the use he made of his films in advocating Aboriginal rights.

The Western Desert films were made at the time of paradigm change in which ethnographic filmmaking began to move away from an objectivist recording of cultures to one in which the filmmaker acknowledged a more interactive role in the process of documentation. This change of perspective is often said to be associated with more general changes in anthropology with the final overturning of the functionalist paradigm, the realisation of the constructed nature of ethnographic writing, and a move to more historically positioned and less bounded views of social and cultural processes. Indeed it has been argued that some of the changes that occurred in anthropology were fore grounded in developments in ethnographic film. The Western Desert films were also made on the cusp of the introduction of new technology – the development of lightweight cameras and recording equipment that made synchronous film sound recording easier to accomplish, and the development of more flexible and cheaper colour film. Moreover the films were made shortly before subtitled dialogue began to be commonly used in ethnographic film. *The People of the Australian Western Desert* series as black and white films, silent apart from the commentary, and by definition without subtitles are not, in these respects, likely to be used as exemplars of the paradigm changes in ethnographic films that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

The audiences at the time understood Dunlop's intention and responded to the films in the way he had hoped. However because the films, though contemporary, were not involved in the process of paradigm change they were open to criticism on the grounds that they did not reflect current developments in film style or anthropological discourse. Martin Taureg for example writes "In accordance with the then existing ethnographic film conventions, Ian Dunlop avoided anything that would reveal the presence of film crew."¹⁰ He argues that the pseudo-objectivity "partially eliminates the respect, shown by Dunlop, for Djakamarra, Minma and their families, and overshadows the humanistic attitudes which characterises these films." Bryson et al. argue that the film, though aesthetically beautiful, has dated because audiences are not able "to hear the people's voices", a point made much earlier by Jean Rouch.¹⁰ The critique

¹⁰ "Mit Sorgfalt hat Ian Dunlop, den Konventionen im damaligen ethnographischen Film getreu, alles vermieden, was auf die Anwesenheit des Filmteams oder überhaupt anderer Menschen hindeuten könnte." Taureg 1984:177.

Bryson et al. 2000: 176.

began just at the time the films were reaching their maximum audience through their incorporation in the New South Wales schools' curriculum.

There is judgemental element in interpretation of film style which elevates participatory cinema to a higher ethical plane and an irony in the view that it is more authentic because it reveals the process of its construction. I would like to argue against an undirectional and 'progressive' view of ethnographic filmmaking.

People of the Australian Western Desert: Intentions and Interpretations

Dunlop from a documentary film director to an ethnographic filmmaker: The Western Desert films were the result of a personal quest that converted Ian Dunlop from a documentary film director to an ethnographic filmmaker:

I first saw the arid and beautiful desert country of Central Australia in 1957 when I was given a film to make about a small newly built very remote weather station called Giles (in the Gibson Desert). ... A mile or so to the north of Giles the red rock of the Rawlinson range rises suddenly above the surrounding features. A group of perhaps 50 Aborigines were camped in the pass. ... From the top of the Rawlinson Range I used to look out over the eternity of mallee and spinifex covered sand ridges and see the distant smokes of hunting groups and individual families on the move. I felt I had to make a film. (Dunlop n.d. 1)

He later had the opportunity, in 1964, to accompany Jeremy Long, a Native Affairs Patrol Officer on a patrol, which brought people in from the desert to settle them in the government settlement of Papunya. Although he believed that the people either through drought or loneliness 'willingly abandoned' the desert, Dunlop "felt a terrible sense of tragedy." The last remnant of a whole way of life was being utterly and irrevocably doomed. He became determined almost to the point of obsession to make his film before it was too late.

In these passages Dunlop's motivations come out clearly. He determined to film the "traditional way of life" of the people before it was too late both because of its intrinsic value and because of the people's achievement of being "able to survive in an inhospitable country where water is almost non-existent, where vegetation is very scarce, and hunting is limited to a few lizards and rabbits." Yet although he recognised the desert as a harsh environment in which to live, its beauty overwhelmed him, and he wanted to create a sense of empathy between the Ngadjadjara and Mandjindjara people and the environment that reflected his separate appreciation of both. His focus on the material culture and daily life of the Ngadjadjara and Mandjindjara reflected his desire to show how they gained their living and was also a recognition of the fact that filming ritual life in the circumstances was going to be virtually impossible. Rituals in the desert require large gatherings of people in favourable circumstances and with the voluntary and enforced removal of the population to the settlements the context of performance had shifted with them. Dunlop was

also well aware at the time that filming ritual in Central Australia posed problems of secrecy. The fact that he did not anticipate filming the ritual life of Central Australia affected how he chose to film. Dunlop decided not to shoot in synchronous sound, because he was not intending to film ceremonial life.¹¹

Desert People and *People of the Australian Western Desert* achieved widespread acclaim within a very short time of their release and established Dunlop's reputation as a filmmaker. Critics and reviewers made frequent references to the aesthetic dimension of the films to their beauty, their artistry and their poetry. To Sylvia Lawson for example Dunlop "is much less a communicator than an artist",¹² to the correspondent of the *Sydney Daily Mirror* the mood is highly poetic. Yet interestingly Dunlop seldom referred to these factors as motivations in making the films. That does not necessarily mean that they were not factors at the time rather than that they were not his primary objectives. Perhaps what other people refer to as aesthetics Dunlop saw as a means to an end. He wrote:

The making of an ethnographic film today deserves the very best treatment we can give it. In many cases what is being recorded can never be recorded again because it will soon cease to exist. Fifty years ago there may have been all the time in the world. Today there is no time at all. (Dunlop 1966: 35)

Part of giving it "the very best treatment" involved taking with him a cameraman. Richard Tucker, recommended for the quality of his work. Aesthetics was there from the beginning, but is generally masked as a motive by the desire to create a lasting record. Indeed in writing about the choices that he made it is almost as if Dunlop is viewing his task from the perspective of a film archivist, with the future survival and uses of his film firmly in mind.

Dunlop had a clear vision in mind of the kinds of film he was going to make before he set out into the desert to search for the people. He intended to film everyday activities and he had to choose between 35 or 16 millimetre film and black and white or coloured. 35 millimetre colour was ruled out on the grounds of expense and he opted for 35 millimetre black and white. He hoped to record people working in their daily round. Filming would involve close-ups of technological processes and portraits of people as they worked. He would be filming dark-skinned people against the glowing white of the desert and he required a film of great flexibility that would record detail through its range of contrast. "Also black and white would be faster for night shooting and less sensitive to heat during the day" (Dunlop 1966: 36). He was also suspicious of the quality of colour film and the possibility of it being affected by the intense heat of the desert. Interestingly in justifying his decision not to use colour he makes one of his rare references to aesthetic motivations:

I had seen so many films with truly terrible colours, I thought this was the last opportunity to film anything and therefore wanted to make it as beautiful as possible. (Dunlop 1966: 36)

In his first public discussion of *People of the Australian Western Desert*, at the UNESCO round table on ethnographic film in Sydney in 1966, Dunlop again makes little reference to aesthetics. He distinguishes between three types of film, which fall under the general rubric of ethnographic film – a record film, an interpretative film, and popular entertainment. Interestingly at the time he saw the Western Desert films he had made thus far only as record films. He had yet to make *Desert People* the more explicitly interpretative film. He stresses that the sound track of the films is a simple factual commentary. This is significant since *Desert People* is made from precisely the same footage, edited differently, and with a more narrative form of commentary. Dunlop was here writing before the successful screening of his films in Europe in the following year, and one cannot help wondering if his response would have been the same had the UNESCO meeting been held two years later.

The Response to *People of the Australian Western Desert*

The critical response to the Western Desert films has on the whole not differentiated between the record films and the interpretative film. Interestingly the critics picked up on those features of the form of the films that Dunlop tends to argue were there either in the interests of making a lasting record, or on pragmatic grounds: the black and white images, the restrained 'informative' commentary, the absence of synchronous sound and the absence of the filmmaker. But they are taken up by the critics as striking features of the aesthetics of the films. However there is no disjunction between Dunlop's intentions and audience interpretations of the films: the aesthetic response is often related to the content of the film in ways that are in harmony with the themes that motivated Dunlop. While some critics used the film as a stimulus for locating their preconceptions about the nature of primitive society, and distanced the peoples of the Western Desert from the present, most did not.

The 35 millimetre black and white film did, as Dunlop anticipated, evoke the shimmering light of the desert sandscapes in contrast to the dark skins of the hunters, while simultaneously revealing the details of the environment and the facial expressions and bodily movements of the Ngadjadjara and Mandjadjara. "Those who see *Desert People* ... will hardly be able to escape the classic beauty of the frames."¹³ The photography was seen to evoke a sense of being in the desert and experiencing the enormity of the landscape and of the human achievement in living in this apparently hostile environment. At the most

¹¹ see Dunlop 1966: 36

¹² Sylvia Lawson Nation June 22 1968

¹³ "Wer *Desert People* ... sieht, wird sich kaum der klassischen Ästhetik der Bilder (Kamera Richard Howe Tucker) entziehen können." (Taureg 1984)

general level the synergy is asserted: "This could be regarded as an outstanding example of the pure documentary, for in it the beauty of the photography corresponds exactly with that of the subjects of the film."¹⁴ More specifically, "It strives by its qualities of form, particularly of really praiseworthy photography. For example we switch from the dazzling sunlight of day to a fantastic scene of huddled bodies, separated only by fires to guard them from the frosts of the night."¹⁵ And "with the help of outstandingly clean and glowing camera work by Richard Tucker, Mr Dunlop watches man centred in his huge and hostile landscapes."¹⁶

The black and white footage is often linked to the sparseness of the commentary, which in turn can have connotations of the desert environments. "His sparse picture of Aboriginal life in the Western Desert ..."¹⁷ In black and white accompanied by a sober precise commentary ...¹⁸ The "remarkable restraint" of the film is thought to evoke the sense of "wanderings in search of a source of water or a little food. Our patience is rewarded by the sight of indisputable beauty, a high point of ethnographic filmmaking turns into a poetic vision."¹⁹ Or as Claudio Bertieri saw it: "[Dunlop] has invented a new temporal dimension to better express the painful stages of the nomadic life of solitude."²⁰

The aesthetics of starkness sometimes provokes metaphysical speculation. The starkly unemphatic commentary and the precisely contrasted pictures correspond with the stark nakedness and the precise movements of these people – our ancestors not by genealogy but by analogy. Their twilight corresponds with our dawn simply because they have been less lucky than us, no more than that. The smug view of history dear to Christians who follow Bossuet, to Marxists who disagree with Engels, or to Positivists of the school of Durkheim, fails to the ground before the simple sight of the human animal. (*Positive Cinema Review* July 1967)

This simplicity is sometimes seen to have ethical connotations, reducing the presence of the filmmaker: "The simplicity of the shots and the preciseness of the contrasts are only rivalled by the understatement of the commentary. The absence of music or any other form of background sound, gives evidence of a profound modesty joined with effectiveness."²¹ This apparent simplicity and starkness is linked to another attribute of the film the "unobtrusive visitor", the deliberate exclusion of the filmmaker and any detritus brought with him from the world. James Pierson noticed "an occasional child glances towards the camera. But careful filming and editing provide the viewer with the feeling of

being an unobtrusive visitor."²² To Tindale, writing very much from behind the paradigm shifts in ethnographic film, "a measure of Tucker's success as a photographer is the entire absence of the camera as an intruder and his systematic reliance on actual settings in which the native work is done. In this regard his films contrast most favourably with some recent colour films where the camera registers the very obvious shudder of the subject as the director commands him to begin his activity in a posed setting."²³ And even more explicitly "the cinematographic art [of Desert people] becomes in this case, a purely instrumental function (a movie camera which a group of scientists used in the desert) so much so that one soon forgets that he is only a spectator in a mediated show."²⁴

Many critics emphasise the fact that the film brings the audience closer to the peoples of the Western Desert: "[In] the film ... all the activities shown are closely related to family life in a difficult terrain – the personalities quickly establish themselves not by any artificial dramatic means on behalf of the filmmaker but by the vividness of the participants' facial expressions and gestures. You very quickly get the feeling of *knowing* the people in these families."²⁵ Quoting a general statement of Rouch, Monique Salzman writes that Dunlop was able to convey to the audience that: "Il découvrait que les autres hommes n'étaient pas 'les sauvages' de la fable et qu'ils avaient les institutions aussi compliquées que les nôtres, des religions aussi respectables, un comportement aussi logic."²⁶ The films evoke at times precise and surprising analogies that draw the Ngadjadjara and Mandjindjara closer to the writer as neighbours. Commenting on a sequence in the film the reviewer in *Positive* notes "Other creatures are slung round their wastes, as some fishermen in the Mediterranean do with their catch. It is indeed a kind of 'land-fishing' that these swift hunters on foot engage in, when they unearth the prey that they have located by an almost invisible rippling of the sea of sand."²⁷

Knowing and Not Knowing

Critical response suggests that through the films the audience, in addition to learning about aspects of the Ngadjadjara and Mandjindjara way of life, gets to know them as people. While this reflects both Dunlop's intention and his empathy with his subject it can also be used as a basis for criticising the films. The viewer gains a sense of knowing, when so much was unknown. The

- ¹⁴ Martin 1968
- ¹⁵ *Positive Cinema Review* July 1967
- ¹⁶ Sylvia Lawson Naton June 22 1968
- ¹⁷ Baxter 1973:88
- ¹⁸ Salzman 1967:130
- ¹⁹ Ciment 1967
- ²⁰ Bertieri 1967
- ²¹ *Cahiers du Cinéma* Venice November 1967

- ²² Pierson 1986
- ²³ Tindale 1968:438
- ²⁴ Laurenti 1967
- ²⁵ Louzos 1968
- ²⁶ Salzman 1967. She is citing Jean Rouch 'A propos des films ethnographiques' *Positif* 14-15 (November) 1955:145-9
- ²⁷ *Positive Cinema Review* July 1967

postmodern critique of anthropology was motivated in part by the very convincing nature of the ethnographic monograph in the face of theoretical and existential doubts about getting to know any world, let alone a world very different from one's own. Knowing became, explicitly, a more complex enterprise.²⁶

In reflecting on the postmodern critique it is often difficult to separate out elements of style from matters of substance. To an extent, things that were previously implicitly understood became part of the explicit content of film and writing and as a consequence shifted to becoming the central focus of discourse. Dunlop's writings at the time of *People of the Australian Western Desert* stress the modest nature of his objectives, a strong awareness of the constructed nature of film, and a strong awareness of the ethical dilemmas that this posed. Reflecting on his Ngadjadjara and Mandjindjara collaborators he writes:

They were always very patient and courteous, but because communication at any deep level was impossible, I could never resolve my nagging worry: what right had I to be intruding into their lives? For me this question will never be resolved. (Dunlop n.d.: 12)

Dunlop wrote this soon after the films had been made and it may be that the answers to this and other questions that he posed began to emerge more clearly as he worked on the Yirkala project at a later date.

The Yirkala Project

If Dunlop foresaw the finished Western Desert films, when he stood on the top of the Rawlinson Range and looked out over the landscape a few years before the first sequence was shot, the opposite was the case with the Yirkala film project. This project had its origins in an initiative of the Department of the Interior which, in 1969, requested that the Commonwealth Film Unit make a film of the mining developments on the Gove Peninsula. The following year the Office of Aboriginal Affairs suggested that a film be made on the impact of the mining developments on the Aboriginal people. It was these two requests that provided the impetus for Dunlop's involvement with the Yolngu people of Yirkala.

Yirkala is on the Gove Peninsula in north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. The area came under effective state control in the 1930s with the establishment of a Methodist mission station. The region however remained fairly isolated until the 1960s, and the Yolngu perception was that they had established relations of peace with the Euro-Australians and retained their autonomy. They became gradually more involved in the wider Australian society through the production of art and craft for sale and the expansion of the missionary enterprise. However in the late 1950s vast reserves of bauxite were discovered in the region and the threat of mining operations

emerged for the first time. From the beginning Yolngu opposed mining on their land: they petitioned the Commonwealth Government in 1963 and eventually took them to court. Dunlop commenced filming in 1970, and a year later the people of Yirkala lost their land rights case. Their struggle was a major factor in causing the Australian government first to consider and then to introduce land rights legislation, which finally granted them title to their land in 1976. However that initial loss had resulted in mining leases being granted to NABALCO, and the mining town of Nhulunbuy was established on their doorstep.

Dunlop's original brief was to make a single documentary film on the initial impact of the mining. However he soon realised that its impact on the Aboriginal community was going to develop over a period of time, and persuaded Film Australia to support him on a longer-term project. In the end he made six filming trips over a period of 12 years, the last visit being in 1982.²⁷

The main filming was completed by the end of the fifth trip in October 1976. Dunlop envisaged the project from the start as a collaboration with the Yolngu people. Two main aims guided his filming: one was to make a record of contemporary Yolngu life including ceremonial performance and economic activity, the other was to document the impact of the mining and Yolngu responses to it. On this occasion it was the Yolngu who saw a threat to their way of life not so much in the demise of economic practices but in the loss of ceremonial life and ritual knowledge. The filming had to be negotiated with Yolngu at the level of formal institutional structures – such as the Yirkala Town Council – and with the leaders of the clans and the individuals concerned. Many Yolngu were highly educated in European as well as Indigenous systems of knowledge and had a recent history of strong political action to protect their rights. Dunlop wanted his filming to be interactive and negotiated, and so too did the Yolngu. Perhaps as a consequence of this Dunlop is a strong presence in many of the films.

Two other factors helped make the films very different from the Western Desert ones. One was that in the five-year interval between the end of the one project and the beginning of the other there had been major developments in the availability of lightweight sound synchronous film and sound recording equipment. Dunlop indeed would have preferred to film entirely in 16 millimetre colour but funding constraints still intervened, and Film Australia limited the availability of colour stock early on. The other factor was that it was possible to document the film more fully and transcribe and translate the dialogue. The fact that Dunlop intended to develop the project over a number of years created the time to document the material in detail and employ Yolngu to translate the dialogue. In the documentation process he also involved two anthropologists,

²⁶ e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986

²⁷ A further trip was made by Philip Robertson as part of the project in August and September 1972.

Nancy Williams and Howard Morphy and a linguist, Frances Morphy. Indeed as the Yirrkala project developed it became much more than a film making project. It produced a vast documentary archive, centred on filmed material but including much more besides.

The complexity of the Yirrkala project and the number of films made (23) makes it impossible to summarise in the way that the Western Desert ones can be. The films are characterised by their diversity and it would be quite wrong to imply a false aesthetic unity on them. There are continuities and discontinuities, but before these can be seen it is necessary to divide the films into a number of sets: 'the ritual films', 'the films of everyday life' and 'the narrative documentaries'. The types are not entirely discrete and some films could be placed in more than one category. But I am not concerned so much with creating rigid analytic types as with providing a guide for films with different 'aesthetic characters'.

Yirrkala Project: The Ritual films

The ritual film and the films of everyday life were completed almost before the first narrative documentary was made. The first film to be made was one of the last to be shot. This was *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka²wuy*, which recorded the burial ceremony of a child belonging to the Madarrpa clan.³⁰ The major ritual films are largely shot in colour, and are meticulously documented. Interestingly, the fact that he was not going to film ritual was one of the reason Dunlop gave for shooting the Western Desert films in black and white. He has nowhere stated explicitly why colour was so central to filming ritual, a viewpoint he shared with one of the founders of the Yirrkala films – The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. However it is not difficult to imagine that a strong realist documentary ethos lies behind this preference. While it is possible to imagine that in the details of everyday life, and in close-up portraiture in the desert, more may be gained by the definition and texture of black and white film, it seems 'self-evident' that colour is an essential element of Aboriginal rituals and that it needs to be 'captured' in film. Dunlop's view of ritual from the desert would have been influenced by the immensely elaborate body decorations headresses in feather, string and fibre, and bodies glistening in ochre mixed with kangaroo or emu fat, or painted in blood. Similar aesthetic considerations apply in Arnhem Land, where paintings and ceremonial constructions are a key component of ritual. The performances are operatic in scale, with powerful dancing sequences and explosions of dramatic action, grass burning and dust flying – it is hard to resist the idea that the events are best recorded in colour with synchronous sound.

Just as with Western Desert films, the form of Dunlop's Yirrkala films strongly reflect his documentary motivations, but to quite different effect. The

³⁰ see Morphy 1984

ritual films were in a very real sense commissioned by the Yolngu leaders who organised them. Dunlop did not begin filming in Yirrkala with the intention of filming ritual. Indeed it could be argued that ritual was part of the continuity of Yolngu society with its past and that his job was to film change – to concentrate on those areas of society where the mining company had had its most obvious impact. However such a view neglects to take account of the centrality of ritual to Yolngu life and the fact that in the perception of Yolngu elders the development of the mine posed a threat to it. Yolngu wanted Dunlop to film rituals so that their children would be able to use the films as part of the process of transmitting knowledge. However an equally strong motivation for the Yolngu was to make films that showed Europeans the value and spectacle of Yolngu rituals and helped them to understand them. Teaching outsiders to understand Yolngu culture had been a continuing theme of Yolngu contact with outsiders since before European colonisation.³¹

In the ritual film Dunlop had the problem of making films for two different audiences. On the one hand, he felt that he had to provide a comprehensive record of the ceremonies so that they would be of maximum use to the Yolngu. On the other hand, he needed to make films that explained the meaning of ritual action and ceremonial performance to a non-Yolngu audience. In the case of *Djunggwan at Gurka²wuy* this was partly achieved by making two films: an ethnographic film monograph for wider audience and an archival version of the film for posterity. Dunlop also had to take into account the restricted nature of aspects of Yolngu ritual. Restricted performances could only be used for archival purposes and in the public films the interpretation of ritual components required the guidance, authority and knowledge of the respective elders.

The existence of two audiences however did not alter significantly the way Dunlop chose to film the material. Yolngu wanted as complete a record as possible and Dunlop wanted the non-Yolngu audience to experience the ritual in a way that was as close as possible to its actuality, given the constraints of the medium. Most Yolngu rituals take place over extended periods of time – varying from the one or two days of a mortuary ritual, to the week or more of the regional ceremonies such as the Djunggwan. In the case of the shorter rituals there will be several days of preliminary organisation and preparatory performances. Dunlop was concerned to capture the pace of Yolngu rituals, to reproduce as much as possible whole sequences and complete songs, rather than extracts and to record the negotiations and preparations as much as the ritual action. In filming the dancing he was constrained by the use of a single camera, a small crew was required to lessen the degree of intrusion. However Dean Semmler, the cameraman for most of the ritual footage, had a great facility for filming dance sequences and creating the right balance between close-up and

³¹ see Morphy 1983

distant shots, enabling the action to be followed and at the same time allowing the drama of the dance to be experienced. His long sequences also allowed the spaces for commentary and in particular for subtling the songs and dialogue and hence allowed for a particular kind of interpretative information.

There is a strong switch between the Western desert and the Yirrkala films, from the aesthetics from the outsider's viewpoint to aesthetics projected from within the society. While the very nature of the film process and quality may reveal the 'social aesthetic landscape' of the Western Desert, in the Yirrkala films the viewer is pointed in the direction of the cultural context of Yolngu aesthetics. Dunlop provides the contextual information that enables the film to be understood from the viewpoint of the Yolngu – relating body paintings, to landscape elements and, to images of Ancestral Beings, showing how semantics is interwoven with visual imagery. The films become part of the process of anthropology.

Dunlop's ritual films are an almost inevitable compromise between these two objectives: giving the audience the experience of ritual action – allowing them to get a sense of the pace of the ceremony, the long pauses and the extraordinary bursts of heightened action – and at the same time enabling them to develop an understanding of the semantic density of the ritual, to learn what it means to the participants.

Yirrkala Project: The Films of Everyday Life

The films of everyday life show greatest continuity with the Western Desert films. Whereas the Western Desert films were explicitly designed to reconstruct or capture daily life in the desert the moment before colonisation, the Yirrkala films showed life as it was at the time of the filming. There are some exceptions that don't quite fit in with this distinction. *At the Canoe Camp*, for example, films the making of a dugout canoe. Such canoes were going out of use at the time the filming began, and continued to be made mainly for interest and demonstration. However, it was Yolngu who wanted canoe making filmed!

The main films of everyday life are *Narrtjin at Djarrakpi Parts One and Two*. Yolngu had continued to be hunters and gatherers throughout the mission period. Their hunting practices had been modified by introduced technology (guns and metal digging sticks and spear points), and their activities have also been adjusted to fit in with the mission schedule. Many Yolngu lived off the land away from the mission for long periods of time. The mission had, however, led to a concentration of the population at Yirrkala, and movement was focused on the surrounding area. The building of the mining town of Nhulunby coincided with the beginning of the outstation movement, in which people moved back to live in small settlements in their own clan lands. Narrtjin Maymuru, a renowned Yolngu artist of the Manggali clan, moved some 200

kilometres south to live at the settlement of Djarrakpi on Cape Shield. Dunlop filmed his move back to Djarrakpi and the daily life at the outstation.

The films, largely shot by Dunlop himself, use many of the same techniques of the Western Desert films. They comprise long shots and sequences that show hunting activities – digging for turtle eggs, collecting honey, spear fishing. They also dwell on the domestic life of the family, at the centre of which is Narrtjin. Narrtjin is shown directing action at the clearing of the airstrip, and instructing people in building a bark hut, and, for much of the time, sitting and painting surrounded by his large extended family. There are long sequences of him teaching his sons to paint and then instructing them about mythologically significant features of the surrounding landscape. The film is lyrical in its evocation of a rich and tranquil life. The style of the shooting, the often muted nature of the sound, the ever present environment – the sea, the sand dunes, the birds on the lake – all contribute to an atmosphere of harmony. And just as is the case with the Western Desert films, the commentary is low-key and there are few signs of the filmmakers: it is almost as if another member of the family is holding the camera. However in direct contrast to the desert films the Yolngu, far from being silent, carry much of the burden of the film with their subtitled dialogue, and often it is in the humorous asides that the filmmaker's presence is noted.

Yirrkala Project: The Narrative Documentaries

It is easy to imagine why the first films made were those of rituals and everyday life. The films were in direct continuity with Dunlop's previous work, that is the Western Desert films and the Baruya films which centred on the initiation ceremonies of a New Guinea Highland society. These films were relatively self-contained episodes in people's lives and the intention of the filmmaker was both to evoke those lives and to document them as accurately as possible. However, much of the footage that Dunlop shot in Arnhem land did not fit neatly into those categories and indeed related to a more investigative style of observation. The mining town had a radical effect on the Aboriginal population and on the region as a whole, and Dunlop chose to film crucial contexts in which those issues emerged. He filmed the Aboriginal Town Council discussing the impact of the mine, he filmed the liaison committee meetings concerned with restoring the environment, he filmed Yolngu working for the mining enterprise, he interviewed Yolngu drinking in the public bar that came with the mining town, and he filmed many different contexts in which Yolngu young and old met to discuss their future lives. The films were going to be difficult to make partly because they recorded a rapidly evolving situation in which neither the filmmaker nor the Yolngu were certain as to how the parts were going to fit into a whole. However, they also posed a challenge to Dunlop as an ethnographic

filmmaker. The material and indeed the objectives of the project required Dunlop in making a film that dealt with the impact of the mine, to cover the same ground as a more conventional investigative documentary. However, Dunlop also positioned himself as an ethnographic filmmaker which brought with it certain constraints on how the filmed material should be used to communicate the situation. It is not easy to specify precisely what those constraints are but they comprise both ethical concerns and matters of filmmaking practice: at its simplest it might be characterised as: the argument of film must come out of the filmed material itself. He was determined to retain the integrity of the material, not to edit it to fit a preconceived story line, to ensure that people's views were represented accurately and in context, and that the people observed should be the main narrators of the story.

The first films that I would place in this category of narrative documentary overlap strongly with one of the other categories. *One Man's Response*, for example, is both a ritual film and a narrative documentary. The film is centred on a ceremony that Nartijin Maymuru opened out to the population of the mining town in order to show them aspects of Yolngu culture. It was a gesture of reconciliation, but he also had economic objectives since he hoped to sell paintings from a small corrugated iron 'art gallery' he had built adjacent to the ceremonial ground. Dunlop's film covers the ceremonial performance in considerable detail, documenting its meanings and providing interpretations of the ritual action. He includes an interview in which Nartijin talks about his motivations and a sequence of him discussing the event with his daughter Galuma. The film is framed by placing Nartijin's actions in the context of the development of the mining town, through showing sequences of the mine site and township, and a concert put on by school children from the mission for the benefit of the townspeople. In a scene of profound irony, we are shown the landscape devastated by the mining operation while the soundtrack records the children singing 'This Land is your land, this land is my land'. Interestingly the film includes sequences in both black and white and colour. The ceremony itself is shot in colour whereas most of the other footage is in black and white. Dunlop's preference would have been to shoot everything in colour and he was initially concerned that the combination might prove difficult for the audience. Ironically the switch from black and white to colour that characterises some of the narrative documentaries, although born of necessity, is a strength rather than a weakness.

I cannot here consider the full range of films in this category. Not surprisingly, they lack the aesthetic unity of the other two categories. They were edited out of a huge archive of documentary footage by Dunlop and his co-editor Pip Deveson and often each film has its own individual character that evolved out of a combination of factors – the nature of the filmed material, the central characters of the film, and the editor's craft. *Conversations with*

Dandiwy Wanambi is a case in point. Ian Dunlop never set out to make a film biography of Dandiwy Wanambi. However, Dunlop worked with him a great deal and it was Dandiwy's ceremony that was filmed in *Djunggum at Garla'way*. Dunlop interviewed Dandiwy, just a little under the influence of alcohol, early on during his filming in the Walkabout Hotel in Nhulunby. Over the two decades of filming and filmmaking Dandiwy emerged as one of the greatest Yolngu artists, acquiring an international reputation as a painter and sculptor. He struggled with alcohol and had at times difficult relationships with members of his family. As Dunlop and Deveson worked through the archival material on Dandiwy, a film of quite extraordinary power emerged with its own unique aesthetic. The film itself is almost a palimpsest of colour and black and white footage, intercut with still images. The combination works extremely well, acting as a form of punctuation and creating a sense of time and dialogue. The black and white footage of Dandiwy in the Walkabout Hotel appears as a continuous point of reflection back on his life; a symbol of the disruptive effect of the mine and the constant struggle he has had with alcohol. A second, and of the mine and the constant struggle he has had with alcohol. A second, and structuring element, is Dandiwy's relationship with motor cars that recurs as a theme throughout – almost a love affair but one in which he is always let down in the end. The cars are always breaking down or getting involved in accidents – but these little local problems are inextricably linked into a wider nexus of causes. The first car we encounter is pushed off the road by a vehicle from the mine. The last car we see has been burnt to a skeleton by Dandiwy himself because of the tensions it has caused with his sons.

The film has a universal message: the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. Dandiwy's life is always on the edge of disaster, almost out of control. Yet he keeps on working at it – trying to find solutions, maintaining his optimism and sense of humour, sharing close relationships with others, and creating magnificent works of art.

In the narrative documentaries it is not as easy as it is in the other genres of film to see direct linkages between the intentions of the filmmaker, the aesthetics of the film, and the effect it has on the audience. Yet I sense that a strong relationship exists, and that meaning is conveyed to a considerable extent by the aesthetic characteristics of the film. It is in part a function of the editorial process itself to intuit those aesthetic effects, those synergies between form and content that engage the audience and inform them beyond the conscious intention of the filmmaker.

Conclusion

In reviewing Ian Dunlop's films over a period of some 30 years it would be possible to chart a course of progressive change in which his filmmaking has reflected changes both in film style and in anthropological theory. Any film-

maker is likely to be influenced by the current paradigms of filmmaking, which in turn create audience expectations and influence how they interpret films. The contrast between *Peoples of the Australian Western Desert* and *Conversations with Dandiny* *Manambi* seem so marked that they appear to belong to different eras of filmmaking. And in certain respects they do. The Western Desert films reflect a past era of film technology and production techniques. Dunlop's concern to represent the people as they were before the impact of European colonisation would no longer dominate the agenda to the extent it did then, though it would have still had priority. In writing about the shooting of the Western Desert films, Dunlop hints at a quite different direction that he could have pursued, one that fits in with a later, more reflexive mode of filmmaking. In filming the second family, the people brought out from Warburton mission, he was assisted by Paul Porter Diaranu, as guide and interpreter. Paul was obviously quite a character. "He could give us an outline of what the action was likely to be before we started shooting an activity ... perhaps when they thought filmmaking was a bit of a bore he urged them into action. Sometimes we wished we had the camera on him."³³ Dunlop then goes on to describe the kind of scene he missed. The crew was filming a young man trying to make fire by rubbing the edge of his spear thrower. He worked hard and created some smoke but no fire. Paul then took over and "his mighty frame shook as he rubbed for all he was worth". He then paused, and took a box of matches out of his pocket to light his cigarette before recommencing work with the fire drill.

In the Yirrkala films, such events are included and the involvement of the filmmakers and the Yolngu in the filmmaking process is often explicit. However it would be wrong to over-interpret the change of direction: to see for example *Conversations with Dandiny* *Manambi* as a response to the post-modern critique of earlier filmmaking styles. The ritual film and the films of everyday life are equally part of the overall project, and while they too clearly reflect changes in film technology and style, and the shifting ethnographic paradigm, they are much closer in their objectives and aesthetics to *Peoples of the Australian Western Desert*. The Yirrkala film project reflects a move towards a greater diversity of ethnographic filmmaking styles but not any simple progression. The questioning of the filmmaker's authority, the emphasis on reflexivity, the problematising of the reality of film, while all necessary components of film discourse, are themselves problematic components of filmmaking. The image of the desert fire-maker pausing to light his cigarette with a box of matches, while humorous and engaging, is not self-evident in its meaning. It too requires interpretation and contextualisation: what does it say about the time before, and the impact of, European colonisation, is it analogous to Dandiny's struggle with alcohol, was smoking a factor in Peter Porter's death?

³³ Dunlop n.d. p.43

There is a serendipitous element in the aesthetics of ethnographic film making. The films are both in and out of the control of the director. In the Western Desert series the final form of the films was much more controlled, from the outset, by the filmmaking process than it was in *Conversations with Dandiny*. *Conversations with Dandiny* was made out of footage shot over a long period of time, it combined black and white and colour, it is reflexive in multiple ways. *Conversations with Dandiny* *Manambi* seems to have an aesthetic that reflects the nature of the times – its uncertainty, the transforming context of people's lives, his own struggles within. Yet this intuition requires interrogation. The role of aesthetics in conveying information and in creating understanding has been so little explored.

What Dunlop's films have in common is his consciousness that, in Gardner's phrase, they are a "mode of observation". Aesthetics has been a factor in all of the films – usually one that is subordinated to getting the information across. However that information has always included ways of seeing the filmed world – ways of seeing informed by an understanding of what is observed.

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