The invisible author: films of re-enactment in the post-war period

In the ethnographic film-making that took place in the twenty years following the Second World War, the documentation paradigm continued to predominate, at least in the English-speaking world. The moving image camera was still primarily thought of, not as a means for making documentary films, but rather as a recording device that should be used to gather visual data in the most objective possible fashion. The interest in salvage ethnography also continued unabated, owing to an intensification of the political and economic processes responsible for the progressive incorporation of previously isolated communities into national societies, with the concomitant abandonment of traditional customs and ways of life. Many ethnographic film-makers of this period had a very keen sense that they were being confronted with probably the last chance to record for posterity cultural practices that had been going on, largely unchanged, for millennia, but which would soon disappear forever from the face of the earth.

As in the case of Alfred Haddon’s much earlier filming of the Malo-Bomai performance described in Chapter 1, this salvage documentation often involved the re-enactment of cultural practices that had already been abandoned, sometimes very recently, but in some cases many years beforehand. However, these re-enactments put film-makers working within the documentation paradigm in a contradictory position: on the one hand, they were seeking to use the camera as an objective recording instrument, while on the other, in their concern to capture authentic traditional culture, they found themselves intervening authorially at every turn – for example, asking their subjects to take off the European-style clothing that they had picked up through contact, or transporting them from one place to another in order to film them in supposedly more authentic surroundings.

In an attempt to sidestep this contradiction, some ethnographic film-makers developed a mode of praxis whereby their authorship would be acknowledged in preliminary or end credits, or in accompanying texts, but would then remain largely invisible in the main body of their films. In this way, the films could look like works of objective documentation even when the
situations that they portrayed had been entirely set up by the film-makers and the subjects were acting out a life that they no longer lived in reality.

This strategy of invisible authoring took a variety of forms depending on the particular technical or aesthetic choices made by the film-makers with the result that the films produced in this way could look very different from each other, even if the motivations underlying them were fundamentally the same. This can be illustrated by a comparison of two of the best-known re-enactment projects that took place during this period: one was carried out in the mid-1960s with a group of Inuit in northern Canada, while the other was a more or less simultaneous project involving Aboriginal people in Central Australia.

The past in the present tense: the Netsilik Eskimo project

The filming project carried out in Canada concerned the Netsilik Eskimo, or Netsilingmiut, as they are known today (literally, the Seal People). The Netsilingmiut live at Kugaaruk (formerly known as Pelly Bay), lying on the extreme northwestern lip of Hudson Bay, even further north than the area where Flaherty made Nanook of the North. Mostly shot over 13 months in 1962–63 and released between 1967 and 1969, these films were commissioned by the Education Development Center (EDC), an organisation based in Cambridge, Massachusetts and associated with Harvard University. This body was funded by the US National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation and had a brief to develop the teaching curriculum in US high schools. However, the films were actually produced by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), with their cameramen acting under the ‘supervision’ – as the film credits put it – of the anthropologist Asen Balikci, with ‘additional assistance’ from Guy Mary-Rousselière, a French missionary who had been based in the region for many years. In the NFB catalogue, the direction of the films is attributed to a certain Quentin Brown, but he appears to have been more the local producer than the actual director of the films. In other contexts, final authorial responsibility is often attributed to Balikci though the general form of the films was also greatly influenced by the various NFB cameramen who worked on the project as well as by the requirements of the EDC.

At the time of making these films, Balikci held a post at the Université de Montréal and was given leave of absence in order to carry out the project. He had recently completed an anthropology doctorate at Columbia University in New York, based on field research in Kugaaruk in 1959–60, and as part of his training he had attended Margaret Mead’s seminar on ethnographic fieldwork techniques in which she had emphasised the importance of using
audiovisual media. Mead had taught him, he later reported, ‘that the main purpose of ethnographic film-making was to record in an objective and detached manner, and as comprehensively as possible’.1

Shooting entirely in colour, Balikci and his colleagues produced a total of around 115 hours of 16 mm footage. With the exception of the material shot over a very much longer time period by John Marshall with the San (which I shall discuss in Chapter 4), this is probably the greatest quantity of 16 mm film footage ever shot in the course of a single English-language ethnographic film project. Even by today’s standards, when ethnographic film-making usually involves the use of digital media and the quantity of material shot is generally very much higher, this is still a very considerable amount. These 115 hours were later edited down into nine films, most of them an hour or more in length, with a total duration of almost eleven hours. Since they were intended for use in US high schools, most of the films were then subdivided into two or more parts of around 30 minutes, so that they could be used within the time constraints of a standard US high school lesson period. All these films are now available on the NFB website in remarkably high quality.2

Taken as a series, the films follow the migration of an extended Netsilingmiut family from camp to camp over the course of a year. Inspired by the then fashionable culture ecology theories of Julian Steward, the focus is overwhelmingly on everyday subsistence processes and domestic activities at each camp. With a high school audience in mind, there is also a strong emphasis on the life of children, notably on their play and on their relationship with their parents, particularly with their mothers (figure 3.1). Apart from a relatively brief sequence of drumming in the last 10 minutes of the last film in the series, At the Winter Sea Ice Camp, there is no reference to ceremonial life, nor to rites of passage or shamanistic religious practices. Nor is there any reference to social relations beyond the immediate family, such as those entailed in marriage exchanges, for example, or trade. The tenor of the human relations in the film is invariably harmonious – only the occasional bawl of a baby suggests any form of emotional discomfort or anxiety. The general approach suggests that Balikci had certainly taken to heart Mead’s injunction about comprehensiveness since most processes and situations are covered in great detail. But whether they can be considered ‘objective and detached’ in the way that Mead envisaged, is another matter.

The technical standard of these films was extraordinarily high for documentaries of the period. The three cameramen who worked on the series were all highly skilled: the first was Doug Wilkinson, who had already achieved renown for Land of the Long Day, a classic of Arctic documentary cinema released in 1952; the next was Kenneth Poste, a highly experienced NFB staff cameraman; the last was Robert Young, a freelancer who had already established a name for himself working for National Geographic.
Using a vibrant colour stock, these cameramen managed to capture the extraordinary beauty of the Arctic landscape and its animal life in the various seasons of the year. Their filming of the human subjects is also remarkable: discreet and intimate around the camp, it is often technically very skilful in other contexts, such as in the handheld shots of the subjects tramping through deep snow, or in one sequence showing two men harpooning caribou from their kayaks which has clearly been shot from a camera in its own moving watercraft. There are also many well-executed igloo interior shots that are artificially lit but in a manner that does not overly draw attention to itself.3

3.1 Netsilik themes. The series was mainly concerned with ecological adaptation: above left, a seal hunt on the winter sea ice, above right, building a kayak. Aimed at high school pupils, there was also a strong emphasis on parent–child relationships: below left, a woman cleans an ice window in her igloo; below right, a father shows his son how to manage a string figure.

One should also not underestimate the quality of the soundtrack, which is remarkably crisp, a great achievement given the windy conditions in which the film-making took place. Acting under the instruction of the cameramen, Balikci himself recorded most of the ‘wild’ ambient sounds on location. But particularly impressive is the quality of the subjects’ speech, which although limited, usually appears very well synchronised. However, it was only for the last film, At the Winter Sea Ice Camp, that synchronous
sound was actually recorded on location by a sound recordist. For all the other films, remarkably, the speech was post-synchronised: that is, it was recorded with the subjects later, with the assistance of the French missionary alluded to in the credits, Guy Mary-Rousselière, who was fluent in the local language. Much further work was done on the sound post-production, as indicated by the final credits, which always feature a long list of names related to sound editing. This took place, along with the picture editing, not at the NFB but in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the EDC was based.4

In an aesthetic sense, the films are very low-key: the general style is one of muted observational realism. But this effect has been brought about by very skilful authoring. The framing and exposure is generally immaculate and there are no self-conscious manifestations of cinematographic virtuosity: there are no zooms and only a few, limited pans. There is no voice-over narration, no music and although there is some post-synchronised speech, it is not subtitled.5 With only some very fleeting exceptions, the subjects do not acknowledge the camera and there are no interviews of any kind. The narrative structure of the films is provided by a chronological sequence of days and nights, or by the intrinsic structure of the subsistence practices or social processes that are the principal foci of the films. Each film begins with a subtitle indicating the month and the mean temperature, followed by a series of establishment shots of the environment and the animals that are in evidence at that time of the year. These are often accompanied by bird cries or the hum of insects, which serve to evoke the general atmosphere and a sense of place. Many films end with the fall of night or some other metaphorical ‘farewell’ shot, such as a family group disappearing into the distance.

Within this overall framework there is abundant use of feature film continuity codes. There are many matched cuts from wide shots to mid-shots or close-ups, and vice versa. There are many motivated cuts: from one speaker to another; from a shot of a subject turning their head to a shot of an animal at which they are supposedly looking; there is even one motivated cut that moves from a shot of a caribou in the distance looking up, to a shot of a series of cairns erected to give the impression that there are a group of hunters lying in wait in that direction. There are also many examples of intercut sequences clearly intended to suggest simultaneity but which would certainly have been shot at different times. These intercut sequences often contrast men engaged in some exterior form of labour out on the river, or on the ice floes, while women are at work at home in the camp. Alternatively, they contrast the parents at work, while children play, sometimes in an entirely carefree manner, at other times in a form that imitates parental subsistence roles.

This effect of muted realism is well achieved, creating the impression that one is watching descriptive research footage of life as it is lived among
the Netsilingmiut today. But, in fact, these films are all reconstructions of Inuit life as it was supposedly lived in the early 1920s, before the shotgun, metal traps and other items of modern technology – not to speak of the Catholic mission – had radically transformed Netsilingmiut life. The reconstructed nature of the life being shown in the films is clearly stated in rolling titles at the beginning of each film, but the low-key observational aesthetic and the apparently spontaneous behaviour of the subjects are both so absolute that it is only too easy to forget this as the films unfold.

The seductive reality-effect of the films can in part be put down to very successful ‘casting’ by Balikci. Consciously following Robert Flaherty’s example in casting Alakariallak as the eponymous central figure of *Nanook of the North*, Balikci decided to build the films around a principal ‘actor’, as Balikci himself describes the leading man. This was a certain Itimanguerk, then aged around 50, who retained a clear memory of traditional subsistence practices from his youth. Being a camp headman, he could co-opt his own family and some other younger people to join him in the venture (figure 3.2). Balikci gave Itimanguerk a free hand to select which traditional practices were to be reconstructed, which animals were to be hunted and where the camps were to be set up as the family migrated from one spot to another over the course of the year.

After initially being perplexed as to what was required, Itimanguerk and his fellow Netsilingmiut soon lent themselves enthusiastically to recreating the old ways of life and quite spontaneously went about clearing their camp of such recently imported items as rifles, teapots, canvas tents and cigarettes, though not metal cutting tools since these had been introduced well before the 1920s, probably as long ago as the eighteenth century when European whaling ships first started to penetrate the Hudson Bay area. Balikci acted as an intermediary between the subjects and the film crew, and it was he
who decided, often on the spot, which of the many reconstructed processes would actually be filmed. But as he was very concerned to preserve the spontaneity of their behaviour, he never told the Netsilingmiut how to act, nor did he interfere in any other way with the flow of social action. In this last respect, Balikci’s approach was very different from that of Flaherty who, as described in Chapter 2, took a very much more active role in directing his protagonists.

Moreover, although the Netsilingmiut films might look like research footage, their intended audience was not researchers, nor even university students, but rather US high school students. In commissioning the films, the EDC, led by the distinguished Harvard cognitive psychologist Jerome S. Bruner, was aiming to combat the then highly ethnocentric quality of the teaching of social sciences in US high schools. The EDC also had a more general pedagogical objective, which was to use film as means whereby high school students could engage directly with the world and learn about it through first-hand empirical observation. Ideally, the high school students would all have been transported to the Canadian Arctic and encouraged to make their observations there. As this was clearly impossible, a series of films was considered the next best thing.

It was this that accounted for the absence of any guiding commentary track or subtitling of speech. The idea was that without the support of an authoritative explanatory framework, students would ask themselves questions, which they could then pursue with the teacher after the screening, aided by dedicated accompanying textual materials prepared by the EDC. The combined package of films and texts, in those less gender-aware days, was entitled *Man: A Course of Study*, known as MACOS for short. In addition to encouraging autonomous reasoning based on empirical evidence, MACOS was also intended to promote an awareness of the role of culture in accounting for what is specifically human about human beings. It was hoped that this would encourage students to adopt an attitude of tolerance towards ‘other cultures’ and that this, in turn, would make them better citizens not just of the multicultural USA, but also of the world as a whole.

The anthropological aspects of project were overseen by a committee chaired by Margaret Mead. Her belief that the moving image camera should be used as a means of gathering ‘objective and detached’ visual data that could later be analysed by third parties would no doubt have harmonised well with the EDC’s concern that the films should provide the high school audience with direct access to a different cultural world. But although Mead and the EDC were both reportedly very satisfied with the results, the account of the Netsilingmiut world that the films provided was in no sense ‘objective and detached’. In fact, what the films offered was merely a sense of direct access to a world that no longer existed – if indeed it ever had existed in quite such an anodyne, conflict-free form.
In the original funding proposal, it was envisaged that the Netsilingmiut films would be the first in a series of projects enabling high school students to discover a broad variety of different ways of life, each based on a particular mode of ecological adaptation. The Inuit were chosen as the subjects of the first project because they were hunter-gatherers, and as such were considered representatives of the ‘simplest’ mode of ecological adaptation. Of the many possible hunter-gatherer societies that might have been selected, the Inuit were thought to be a particularly good choice because their way of life was already a well-known point of reference in US popular culture – in large measure, Balikci has argued, as a result of *Nanook*. Although still a relatively junior member of the anthropological profession in North America, Balikci was asked to supervise the project, not because he knew anything about film-making – which he readily confessed that he did not – but rather because he had only recently carried out fieldwork among a group of Inuit who were still living in a relatively traditional manner, at least from an ecological point of view. In due course, it was anticipated that similar projects would be carried out among a pastoralist people, and then in an agriculture-based society.

On the surface, the MACOS programme is redolent of the optimism of the Kennedy years in the USA, which was based on the belief that a combination of technological development and a liberal worldview was the most effective means to overcome prejudice and solve societal problems. Pedagogically, MACOS was undoubtedly very progressive for the period. Today, the use of audiovisual media in teaching has become so routinised that it is difficult to appreciate just how original a proposal it was at that time to use film in the classroom. The student-centered learning strategies and humanistic objectives underlying the project were also very radical for the time, and might even be considered to be so today, if perhaps somewhat naive.

However, remarkably, notwithstanding its liberal, humanistic objectives, the MACOS project was an indirect product of Cold War politics. For, in fact, the EDC was but one of several projects initiated by the US government that were aimed at regaining the technological initiative after the Soviet Union had successfully launched Sputnik, the first human satellite to orbit the earth, in 1957. The fact that the USA had fallen behind in the ‘space race’ was put down by some politicians to the failings of the educational system – hence the perceived need to improve teaching in US high schools and the setting up of the EDC. Initially, the EDC had focused only on curriculum development in mathematics and physics, but Bruner considered this too narrow, so the EDC’s remit was extended to include the social sciences. But the same conservative political impulse that lay behind the creation of the EDC would later turn round and destroy it, and the MACOS programme along with it.
The initial reaction to MACOS was very positive. Some 3,000 schools across the USA acquired the programme, and at its peak, in 1972, it is estimated that it was reaching 400,000 high school students. But gradually, critical voices began to emerge from within the most politically and culturally conservative circles across the USA. Certain right-wing politicians were appalled by the cultural relativism implicit in the programme, particularly as it was being funded by public money. The first to raise a formal objection was a Republican member of the House of Representatives from Arizona. Soon more influential figures, including the future President, Ronald Reagan, ‘added their voices to the choir’, as Balikci would later put it.

These politicians’ complaints were echoed by parents’ groups who were disturbed by the fact that their children, some as young as 9 or 10, were being asked to watch sequences of animals being unsentimentally killed and butchered, particularly caribou, a species that the children had come to love through such cartoon characters as Bambi and Santa’s Reindeer. The films made almost no reference to religious life, but even so, the programme was widely construed as being an attack, not merely on traditional American values, but also on ‘Judaean-Christian’ religion. As a result of the outcry, funding for the EDC was withdrawn in 1976. Margaret Mead went before a committee of the House of Representatives to defend the MACOS programme on two separate occasions, but to no avail. Plans to develop a second project, this time about a group of pastoralists in Afghanistan, in which Balikci was also involved and which was already underway, were summarily cancelled.

However, the outcry about the use of Netsilingmiut films in high schools did not prevent them from being used in university contexts and they continue to be used so today, particularly since they are now readily available online. They have also found their way back into school curricula, even if indirectly; owing to the films, the Netsilingmiut are the subject of a chapter in the most commonly used high school textbook on Native American peoples. The films have also been re-edited and used in many different formats by television companies all over the world. In 1970, Balikci collaborated with Robert Young to produce a television documentary for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *The Eskimo: Fight for Life*. In effect, this film was an abbreviated version of *At the Winter Sea Ice Camp* with the addition of an extended voice-over commentary written and performed by Balikci. It received high audience ratings and was later awarded an Emmy. Many other television stations have broadcast the material subsequently. The series has been shown in its entirety on Dutch, German and Russian television, albeit with locally scripted voice-over commentaries. In 2003, Balikci estimated that in one form or another, the films had already had more than 200 television bookings across the world, and no doubt they have had many more since.
Among the current audiences for the films are also the Netsilingmiut themselves. Initially, some younger Netsilingmiut rejected the films because by the late 1960s when the films were first released, the Netsilingmiut were living in prefabricated houses, wearing mini-skirts and riding motorbikes, and many did not want to be associated with what they then considered to be the primitive conditions shown in the films. But today, following the great social and material changes that have taken place in the interim, many Netsilingmiut have come to regard the films as an invaluable record of their history. But if it is a record, it is not the ‘objective and detached’ record recommended by Margaret Mead, but one that was most profoundly and skilfully authored.

**Aboriginal Elegy: The People of the Australian Western Desert Project**

In contrast to the Netsilingmiut project, which originated with a US government initiative, the Central Australian project was very much the personal initiative of Ian Dunlop, a British-born film-maker who had had some exposure to anthropology as a student at Sydney University. In 1957, while working on a film about a remote weather station in Central Australia for the Australian Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU), Dunlop came across a number of nomadic Aboriginal families who were living in the region. Overwhelmed by a ‘desire to portray that way of life’, combined with a ‘terrible sense of tragedy’ that such Aboriginal groups were giving up their traditional nomadic life style in the desert and settling down in squalid conditions next to religious missions and cattle stations, he felt that he had to make a film to preserve a record of this way of life before it was too late. 11

It was eight years before Dunlop was able to persuade the CFU to fund the project, but they finally agreed to do so in collaboration with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS). While the CFU would provide the logistical support, the AIAS would cover all the other costs. Dunlop then returned to Central Australia in 1965 accompanied by a professional cameraman, Richard Howe Tucker, and Robert Tonkinson, a young anthropology postgraduate with some knowledge of local Aboriginal dialects. This team was assisted by a number of Aboriginal guides from a nearby mission station who also acted as interpreters. Although similar to the Netsilingmiut project in terms of its salvage objectives and its use of re-enactment, this project was of a very different order regarding both its duration and the volume of material it produced. Over the course of three weeks, Dunlop and Tucker shot around five hours of material with two Aboriginal families, one from the Mandjintjadara linguistic group, the other
from the Ngadjadjadjara group. Two years later, they returned to another area of the desert in Central Australia where a patrol officer from the Woomera Rocket Range had located three related Mandjintjadara families still living a nomadic life. Over the course of a further three weeks, Dunlop and Tucker shot another seven hours of material with this third group.

The footage from both expeditions was then edited, at a remarkably low cutting ratio of only slightly more than 2:1, to produce the 19-part series, *People of the Australian Western Desert*.\(^ {12}\) This was released in 1969 and has a total duration of around five hours. Most of the films in the series concern the making of artefacts, the gathering of food such as nuts and witchetty grubs, and the hunting of various species of lizard, bandicoot, emu and kangaroo. There are also a number of films on therapeutic activities, such as preparing medicines, curing headaches and chasing out evil spirits that cause illness. In three of the films the subjects show places or objects that are considered secret-sacred by Aboriginal people and these are not now available for viewing without special permission from Aboriginal custodians. Unfortunately, however, there are no films concerning collective religious or ceremonial activities. This is simply because, in their traditional form, such events required the coming together of large numbers of people and by the time the films came to be made, the Aboriginal population still living in the Western Desert was too small for the celebration of these events to be viable.\(^ {13}\)

In discussing this work, Dunlop himself distinguishes between ‘record’ films and ‘interpretive’ films. The former, which constitute the great majority of the films in the series, mostly follow a particular technical process, event or situation in a more or less chronologically faithful manner. The ‘interpretive’ films, on the other hand, are structured by ‘as if’ chronologies, that is, they present material filmed over a period of several days or weeks, as if it were occurring within a more restricted time frame.\(^ {14}\)

There are only two major ‘interpretive’ films in this body of work, the first, *Desert People*, was released independently of the general series in 1966, the year after the first period of filming had taken place. *Desert People* has a running time of 49 minutes and is framed by a classical narrative trope, beginning in the morning with the Mandjintjadara family setting out on the day’s subsistence tasks and ending with the Ngadjadjadjara family settling down by their fires at night. In the main body of the film, material shot in reality over two or three weeks is presented as if it were taking place over the course of three or four days. The second ‘interpretive’ film, *At Patantja Claypan*, is 53 minutes long and is based on material shot during the second expedition in 1967. Released in 1969 as part of the main 19-part series, this presents material shot over two weeks as if it were two consecutive days in the life of the Mandjintjadara group who are the subjects of this second period of filming (figure 3.3).
Although this second ‘interpretive’ film is much less well known than *Desert People*, in many ways it is the richer of the two ethnographically, both in terms of the primary content of the material itself and in terms of the range of references in the voice-over commentary. It deals with a more complex social situation in that three different family groups are involved, while the subsistence activities, which include a dramatic emu hunt, are more varied and elaborate as well. Whereas both the action and the voice-over narration of *Desert People* remain very closely tied to subsistence or technical activities, in *At Patantja Claypan*, there are allusions to such diverse matters as bodily self-decoration, affinal avoidance and Dreamtime legends, as well as to the imminent abandonment of the desert way of life by Aboriginal people generally. It also begins and ends with some vigorous passages of Aboriginal song on the soundtrack, recounting the deeds of the first Dreamtime beings, the Two Watersnake Men. As such, it anticipates Dunlop’s later work in Arnhem Land, on the northeast coast of Australia, which I shall discuss in Chapter 6.15

In the two ‘interpretive’ films, the authorial role of the film-maker is very evident, certainly to any viewer with a knowledge of practical filmmaking. But as Dunlop candidly describes in the accompanying texts, the ‘record’ films involved extensive authorial intervention as well. In reality, of the two families portrayed in the 1965 films, only the Mandjintjadara family, consisting of a senior man, Djugamarr, his three wives and their seven children, was still living the nomadic way of life shown in the films. But the film-makers had only been with them for three or four days when, quite unexpectedly, they disappeared into the desert and were not seen by the film crew again. (Robert Tonkinson, the anthropologist advising Dunlop, believed that the crew’s Aboriginal guides wanted to return to their families in the mission, so they had encouraged Djugamara’s family to leave.) The
remaining two weeks of filming in 1965 was therefore spent with the Ngadjadjadjara family, consisting of a senior man, Minmarra Djuburula, his two wives and three junior members. However, this family group had been living on a mission station for nine months by the time that filming commenced, so in order for them to participate in the shoot they had to be taken back to the desert in the film-makers’ Land Rovers. Similarly, although the nine members of the Mandjintjadara group filmed two years later were indeed all living in the desert at the time of filming, some of them had also previously lived on the mission station. Moreover, all members of group returned to the mission station after the filming was completed.

Although this history of contact is duly acknowledged in intertitles and occasionally even in voice-over commentary, it is entirely absent from the films’ visual images. As Dunlop comments ironically in one of the accompanying texts, prior to filming he had to ‘dress the set and undress the actors’. That is, before filming began, the subjects’ camps were cleared of blankets, tins, paper and any other rubbish that they might have acquired through contact with the outside world. The subjects were also asked to take off the clothes that they had acquired in the mission. Many of the processes that one sees in the films were then enacted specifically at Dunlop’s request.

Dunlop and his crew would sometimes go to considerable lengths to make these enactments possible. Thus for a film showing the spinning of string from human hair, the actual hair was from Dunlop’s son; for the final film showing the butchering and cooking of a kangaroo (the only film shot in colour), the unfortunate animal had been shot with a rifle equipped with a telescopic sight by one of Dunlop’s Aboriginal assistants, Paul Porter Djarurru. More generally, Djarurru played a highly active role in explaining to the subjects what Dunlop wanted them to do, so much so that in Dunlop’s own words, at some points, he ‘almost became the film’s director’. Djarurru would also sometimes assist the subjects with traditional tasks, but as he was dressed in a ‘modern’ Australian manner, he would be careful to withdraw before the actual filming began. Dunlop describes an amusing instance in which Djarurru helped a young boy to make fire by rubbing a stick in dried kangaroo dung, but once the stick had begun to smoulder, he then stepped back and, off camera, lit a cigarette with a match.

The nature and status of these films as records of the Aboriginal peoples of the Western Desert was also influenced by a decision that Dunlop took even before the filming began. Being very conscious that this might be the last possible opportunity to film traditional Aboriginal nomadic life, Dunlop wanted to produce a film record of the highest possible technical quality. As 35 mm colour film was out of the question on grounds of cost, he chose to shoot on 35 mm black and white stock instead. When asked, many years later, why he chose not to use 16 mm colour film, which would have been cheaper still, Dunlop said that back in 1965, he was not confident that...
16 mm colour stock would stand up to the extreme temperatures of the Central Australian desert. He was also doubtful that it could cope with the contrast in light between the very dark skins of the subjects and the shimmering, reflective landscape.17

In terms of its aesthetic impact on the films, however, it could be argued that the most significant consequence of this decision was not in relation to the colour of the image. Rather it was that by opting for 35 mm, Dunlop also ruled out the possibility of using the portable synchronous sound-recording systems that had been developed, relatively recently, for use in conjunction with 16 mm cameras. If he had chosen to record synchronous sound with a 35 mm camera, it would have been necessary to bring along a large amount of sound-recording equipment and at least one sound engineer. As Dunlop was keen to keep the size of his crew down to a minimum in order to reduce its impact on his Aboriginal subjects, he chose instead to do without sound completely.

Dunlop was also disinclined to enhance the soundtrack at the post-production phase by means of wild sound or sound library effects. This was a very common practice in documentary film-making at that time and central to the production of the Netsilingmiut films. Similarly, Jean Rouch had no reservations about post-synchronising the films that he made in Africa in the era prior to the development of on-location synchronous sound. But Dunlop considered post-synchronisation artificial and certainly did not want to ‘pollute’ the visual images with sounds taken from an effects library. As a result, the soundtrack of these films consists almost exclusively of his voice-over commentary, which is, moreover, very sparse and limited to contextualising factual information. The only exception is some passages of non-synchronous singing recorded on location during the second expedition in 1967. For general atmospheric effect, these are laid over the opening or closing sequences of a number of the second expedition films.18

The technical constraints under which Dunlop was working did not prevent his films from receiving highly positive reviews when they were released, both in specialised anthropological journals and in the art cinema press, particularly in France. For many cinema critics, the lack of sound and the sparse factual commentary, far from being seen as imperfections, were interpreted as an inspired aesthetic choice that complemented perfectly the similarly stark and uncompromising desert scenery.19

Many critics also commented on the quality of Richard Tucker’s camerawork, which is indeed truly remarkable and which, as Dunlop readily acknowledges, played a large part in the success of the films. Although this camerawork is rather formal, it is also very discreet: the subjects often move into the visual field of the camera in a manner that seems to have been very carefully prepared, but if so, they show not the slightest trace of self-consciousness. Throughout the material, Tucker plays very subtly with
effects of light and shadow, frequently framing his subjects in interesting ways, using found aspects of the environment, such as trees or grasses. Technical processes are followed in a very clear and informative manner, with a judicious mix of close-ups and reverse shots, while the quality of the night time scenes of bodies, hands and faces in the flickering firelight is magnificent. Despite the fact that there are some extremely tight close-ups on the faces of the subjects, which must have been taken from a position that was physically very close to them, they appear at all times to be entirely at ease with the cameraman’s presence.

In effect then, although it might have been Dunlop’s general ambition to produce an entirely objective record of the traditional Aboriginal nomadic life before it disappeared, the account that he produced – with Tucker’s assistance – was not only very carefully constructed but also has a pronounced authorial signature in a visual sense. In its poignant romanticism, it also carries a strong, if implicit, value judgement. This is particularly well exemplified by a shot from *At Patantja Claypan*, a still from which is reproduced in figure 3.3. This shows Djungurai, a senior Mandjintjadara man skirting the edge of the claypan, on his way to hunt emu in the early morning light. The shot has been taken from a studiedly low angle in such a way that Djungurai first walks into the foreground of the frame and then, as he moves into the middle distance, he is reflected in the water. This is no neutral objective registration, but rather a very carefully constructed image intended to evoke the essential nobility of the way of life that Djungurai represents. No one who sees this shot could doubt for a moment that the threatened disappearance of this way of life is anything other than the ‘tragedy’ that Dunlop considered it to be when he first came across nomadic Aboriginal groups some ten years earlier.

The record that Ian Dunlop produced of traditional Aboriginal life in the Western Desert is thus no more ‘objective and detached’, in the manner called for by Margaret Mead, than the record of Netsilingmiut life offered by Asen Balikci’s films. In reality, both bodies of work were profoundly authored but in such a way as to render that authorship invisible. That is, they were both based on a series of performances by the subjects that were in large part set up, and which were directed and edited by the film-makers to exclude any reference to the impact of the outside world, including the film-makers’ own presence. Although both film-makers were scrupulous in acknowledging in preliminary titles or accompanying literature that their films were based on re-enactment, they nevertheless invite the viewer to witness the human behaviour shown on the screen as if it were spontaneous and unmediated.

However, notwithstanding these similarities in motivation and praxis, not only do the Netsilingmiut and Western Desert films look very different in a stylistic sense, but these differences suggest a difference in the ontological
status of the subject matter. Though the aesthetic qualities of the Western Desert films have been widely praised and with just cause, arguably thereby vindicating Dunlop’s choice of 35 mm black and white stock, the effect of the monochrome image and the absence of any ambient sound, let alone of subjects’ speech, is to make these films appear to refer to the past, not only in terms of style – as the high point of a film–making tradition running back to Spencer and Gillen, as Howard Morphy has put it\(^2^0\) – but also in terms of content. Looking at them now, despite the engaging tone of Dunlop’s commentary voice and his concern to humanise the subjects by giving them personal names, the films read as an elegy to a nomadic way of life that was already irretrievably lost, even at the time of filming.

By contrast, on account of the brilliant colour and skilfully constructed soundtrack of the Netsilingmiut films, one can be lulled into believing that Netsilingmiut life continues in this way even today. Ironically, at the time the Western Desert films were made, the Aboriginal subjects were still living the way of life represented, or had only recently abandoned it, whereas the Netsilingmiut films present a form of life that had undergone radical change some forty years prior to the film–making and now lies almost a century into the past.

There was a period, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, when more participatory and reflexive ways of doing ethnographic film–making became an almost universal orthodoxy (as I shall discuss in Chapters 5–7) and re–enactment projects such as these came in for a considerable degree of criticism. The invisible authoring that they entailed was rejected not merely as false and artificial in a scientific or stylistic sense, but even as unethical in that it objectified the subjects and denied them a voice. In evoking a world that no longer existed, it was claimed, the film–makers were ‘othering’ the subjects by suggesting that they were living in a different time to their own. Even Balikci and Dunlop abandoned this way of doing ethnographic films and in their later work adopted more reflexive and participatory strategies.

However, in more recent years, as it has become clear that participation and reflexivity provide no guarantees of either truth or ethical probity, and as the inevitably constructed nature of all ethnographic films has become more widely recognised, these films of re–enactment have begun to receive a more favourable reception. This is true not only of audiences of anthropologists and film–makers, but also of the descendants of those appearing in the films, who have come to appreciate these works as highly valuable, irreplaceable accounts of their collective history.\(^2^1\)

What is certain is that both projects were executed to the highest technical, aesthetic and ethical standards, and though some commentators might contest the accuracy of the reconstructions, rather than criticising the fact that they were made, present–day viewers are more likely to express regret that those reconstructions did not cover a wider range of topics, particularly collective
religious and ceremonial activities. In that they took advantage of a particular historical moment to recreate life as it was experienced in the extreme environments of the Arctic tundra and the Australian desert before extensive contact with the outside world, with subjects for whom the memory of that mode of living was still fresh, both projects deserve to be acknowledged as works of great importance in the canon of ethnographic film.

Notes

1 Balikci (1989), 4. This section draws from this source in combination with Balikci (1988; 1995) and a filmed interview with Balikci conducted by Mark Turin in January 2003 which is available at www.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1111527.


3 In the filmed interview with Mark Turin (2003), Balikci explains that he worked with Doug Wilkinson for only two months, while shooting the first film in the series, Fishing at the Stone Weir. During this time, Balikci confesses that they ‘almost killed one another’ because, imbued with Margaret Mead’s ideas, he tried to teach Wilkinson his job. Most of the remaining films were shot by Kenneth Poste, but the film’s executive producer did not consider him sufficiently skilled to shoot the ceremonial scenes that were due to be part of the final film, At the Winter Sea Ice Camp. Among those who were approached to work on this last film were Michel Brault, the NFB cameraman who worked on Chronicle of a Summer with Jean Rouch, and the Direct Cinema pioneer, Ricky Leacock. After they both declined the invitation, Robert Young was recruited, though Poste remained as his assistant. Balikci greatly appreciated the work that Poste had done previously, but Young was in a different league: ‘Within minutes, I understood that I was in the presence of a great artist – he was not shooting with a camera, he was painting!’

4 Asen Balikci (personal communication, March 2014). The team of sound editors included Michel Chalufour who would later play a leading role in the sound editing of Robert Gardner’s films (see Chapter 9).

5 A limited number of the films are now available in subtitled versions, but these were a later addition and not part of the original conception of the films.

6 See Lutkehaus (2004). In addition to the sources already cited, these paragraphs draw on Through These Eyes (2004), an excellent NFB documentary directed by Charles Laird. See www.nfb.ca/film/through_these_eyes/.

7 The EDC first approached Edmund Carpenter to take on the role of anthropological supervisor. He was an established Arctic specialist and also a pioneer in the use of audiovisual media in anthropology. But he declined the invitation as the EDC would not guarantee him full editorial control (Prins and Bishop 2001–2, 119).

8 Ian Dunlop reports that a modified version of the MACOS programme was developed for use in Australian schools and for which his films about Australian Aborigines of Central Australia (discussed later in this chapter) were used instead of the Netsilik films (personal communication, March 2019).

9 The project in Afghanistan continued, but with different sponsors and objectives. The result was Sons of Haji Omar, directed by Balikci in collaboration with Timothy Asch and Patsy Asch, and released in 1978.

10 See Oswalt (2008).

11 See Morphy (2007), 325. I have also drawn on various accounts by Dunlop himself of his work in Central Australia. His notes on the Australian National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) website, the body that now distributes his films, have been especially useful (Dunlop 2003). More recently, he has advised Philippa Deveson on a comprehensive review of his work (Deveson with Dunlop 2012). I have also drawn on Ian Bryson’s history of film-making at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies.
I regret that for reasons of space it has not been possible to include here an account of the films of Roger Sandall, who was appointed as the first full-time film-maker at the AIAS in 1965. Sandall made a number of highly valuable films of Aboriginal ceremonial life in the following years, but many of which are now restricted because they contain secret-sacred material. See Sandall (1975); Loizos (1993), 31, 34–5; Bryson (2002), 32–54 (2007), 300–1 and especially Mortimer (2019).

As Dunlop explains (2003, 2), the term ‘Western Desert’ in this context denotes a cultural and linguistic region rather than a topographical one. This region covers an area of about 1.3 million square kilometres in Central Australia, embracing adjacent parts of the states of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia. The Aboriginal people of this region share certain cultural and linguistic characteristics, though local dialectical variations are very important in defining group boundaries.

However, Ian Dunlop reports (personal communication, March 2019) that a rich ceremonial life is still maintained by Western Desert Aboriginals now living a more sedentary life on mission stations and other settlements.

See the discussion of ‘as if’ chronologies in Chapter 2, pp. 104–6.

At the time of his first expedition, Dunlop had not met Jean Rouch, nor seen his films and was not aware that he had been successfully using 16 mm colour film in similarly harsh desert conditions on the edge of the Sahel in West Africa since the early 1950s.

There is also some limited Aboriginal chanting over opening titles and final credits of Desert People, but I have not been able to establish where this comes from. Ian Dunlop himself does not remember the exact origin of this music: while he is certain that it is Western Desert singing, he thinks that it was probably recorded at entirely different time and place, and with a group of people other than those shown in the film (personal communication, March 2019).

The reaction to the lack of sound was not universally positive. While noting that the films were a ‘testament to human dignity and endurance’, Roger Sandall, who was also experienced as a film-maker with Aboriginal people, commented in a review that the lack of voice or ambient sounds gives one the impression, contrary to some of the pictorial evidence that ‘not only the desert but its inhabitants are bleak, emotionless, and austere’ (Sandall 1972), 193.

As recently as 2009, Sue Davenport, an anthropologist now working in the region where the Western Desert films were made, told Dunlop that before taking young boys out to the bush to teach them about the old ways, Aboriginal elders sit down and watch his films in order to remind themselves about how they used to live (see Deveson with Dunlop 2012), 73.