By the time that *The Ax Fight* was released in 1975, a major change was already underway in ethnographic film-making in the English-speaking world. As a result of the general impact of postmodernism on academic anthropology generally, and the associated sense that the conduct of social research involved relationships of power just as much as the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, many ethnographic film-makers came to believe that a mode of film authorship based on detached observation was at best insensitive and at worst, politically suspect. At the same time, communities that had previously been the subjects of ethnographic film began to demand greater control over the way in which they were being represented.

In response to these changing attitudes, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, ethnographic film-makers developed a range of different practical strategies to share the authorship of their films with their subjects to some degree. These new ‘ways of doing’ ethnographic film involved setting aside the positivist scientific inheritance represented paradigmatically in the English-speaking world by Margaret Mead, with its emphasis on detachment and objectivity, and engaging the subjects more directly in the process of shooting and even, in some cases, in the process of editing a film. However, in this respect, even the most progressive film-makers in the English-speaking world lagged well behind developments elsewhere, notably in France, where, as described in Part II, Jean Rouch had begun to place such collaborative strategies at the heart of his work as early as the 1950s.

This more collaborative approach was greatly facilitated by a number of technological innovations that had gradually been taking place over the course of the previous two decades. A number of ethnographic film-makers, including once again Jean Rouch, but also John Marshall and others, had made an important contribution to these innovations. Undoubtedly the most significant was the development of portable synchronous sound technology. Although ethnographic film-makers had been making films with synchronous sound in remote locations as far back as the 1930s, it was not until the 1950s that the technology became fully portable, and not until
as late as the latter part of the 1960s that ‘lip-synch’ (i.e. synchronous speech), the most difficult form of synchronicity to achieve, became possible over the full 11-minute duration of a standard 16 mm magazine.

The impact of this new technology on the form and style of documentary film-making was profound. Most obviously, the possibility of representing people talking synchronously greatly increased the mimetic reality-effect of documentary film images, particularly when coupled with the use of colour film stock which also became increasingly common as the 1960s progressed and its cost declined. But much more important than the reality-effect as such was the impact of ‘lip-synch’ on the narrative devices that documentary film-makers could use to structure their films. For now it became possible to build the narrative of a film around the everyday language-based interactions of the subjects, as in a fictional feature film. It also became possible for the subjects to engage in conversations with the film-makers while the camera was turning.

These effects made possible, in turn, a much more subtle characterisation of the subjects. Previously, ethnographic film subjects had often been presented as representatives of some stereotypical social or cultural type, such as the ‘happy-go-lucky Eskimo’ referred to in the initial rolling titles of Nanook of the North. Although the best ethnographic film-makers had sought to individualise their subjects through intimate cinematography or by giving them personal names in voice-over narration, they remained relatively one-dimensional characters, existing within a limited emotional and intellectual register. But with the development of synchronous speech, it became possible to represent them in all their normal contradictory human ambiguity, no longer as archetypical representatives of a culture, but rather as idiosyncratic individuals who were able to reflect upon and even question their own cultural traditions.

Today, in an era when documentaries can be shot on mobile telephones, portable synchronous sound is so completely taken for granted that it is difficult to appreciate just how transformative this innovation was for documentary film-making. But in my view, the step-change that portable synchronous sound enabled in ethnographic film-making was considerably greater than the much-vaunted advent of digital technology a generation later. Certainly it is difficult to imagine the more collaborative approaches of the 1970s and 1980s taking place without it.

**Reflexivity and participation**

In the course of the 1970s, two new terms became commonplace in the English-language literature on ethnographic film-making. Implicit in both was an acknowledgement that the aspiration to use film for detached
observation, as envisaged by Margaret Mead, was misguided, and that an ethnographic film should instead be understood as the product of the film-maker’s relationship with the subjects of the film.

One of these new terms was ‘reflexivity’. In practice, this term was primarily used in two quite different ways, one referring to the subjectivity of the film-maker, the other to their relationship to the subjects. In relation to the subjectivity of the film-maker, ‘reflexivity’ was used to refer to a process whereby the film-maker would make clear, within the body of the film, how their personal subjectivity had come into play in the making of the film, be it on account of their personal biography, their intellectual or political interests, the technical strategies that they had adopted and so on. Almost paradoxically, the goal of achieving this kind of reflexivity represented a desire to hold on to the status of film as a means of objective documentation. For although it gave due recognition to the fact that a film-maker’s subjectivity would inevitably enter into the making of a film, it was based on the supposition that if an audience were made aware of this, it could somehow make allowance for this subjectivity and be left with some residual kernel of objective truth.

However, there are serious grounds for doubting that reflexivity of this kind could ever be fully realised. Even if a film-maker were capable of supplying all the necessary information about all the subjective elements that went into the making of their film – which would be difficult since they would probably be unconscious of many of the most significant – it seems unlikely that the audience would then be able to calculate the significance of this information as they watched the film and even more unlikely, given the constraints of duration that apply to any film, that there would even be sufficient time to deliver it.¹

The other sense in which the term ‘reflexivity’ often came to be used around this time was much easier to achieve. This use of the term referred to the direct acknowledgement, again within the body of a film, that the work had arisen from a relationship with the subjects. Whereas in the era of supposedly objective scientific film-making, any acknowledgement of the presence of the camera was regarded as a blemish, it now came to be considered as a badge of authenticity if a subject addressed the camera, held open a door, or offered the film-maker a drink. Equally appreciated was the appearance of members of a film-making crew in shot, or a cameraperson’s reflection in a mirror. But this kind of ‘reflexivity’ represented more of a statement about the ethical or political probity of a film rather than any sort of guarantee of its truth status.

In addition to the widespread recognition given to these two very obvious forms of reflexivity, there was also an acknowledgement, though less prominent, of a third form that did not pertain to the relationship between
the subjects and the film-maker as such, at least not exclusively or directly, but rather to the authorial signature of the film-maker as it is worked out in the very construction of the work. This ‘deep reflexivity’, as it has been termed by David MacDougall, is made manifest not only in the nature of the film-maker’s relationship to the subjects, including particularly its emotional tone, but also in such practical matters as camera positioning and choice of visual imagery, and in the formal attributes of the narrative developed in the edit suite. However, in contrast to the first sense of reflexivity defined above, which MacDougall describes as merely ‘external’, even the film-maker may not be fully aware of these reflexive qualities owing to their often unconscious, intuitive nature: in many cases, it will be up to the audience to identify this deep reflexivity inscribed in their work.²

The other term that came into common use around this time in English-language visual anthropology literature was ‘participatory’ film-making. This referred to a mode of film-making in which the subjects collaborated directly with the film-maker in the making of a film. At the simplest level, this could consist merely of the subjects actively cooperating with the film-maker in the practical realisation of the film. In fact, this was nothing new since most ethnographic film-making has been participatory in this sense since the very earliest days of the genre: even Haddon’s filming had depended on the collaboration of his subjects, while for Flaherty, the active collaboration of Alakariallak and his fellow Inuit had been the cornerstone of his authorial praxis. Similarly, none of the great documentation projects of the 1950s and 1960s described in the last two chapters could have been carried out without the collaboration of the subjects, though the Netsilingmiut undoubtedly ‘participated’ rather more actively than the Yanomami. What was new about participation in the 1970s was that it became acceptable, indeed almost a requirement, for the fact of this participation to be revealed in a ‘reflexive’ manner in the filmic text itself.

Some ethnographic film-makers in this period began to take the idea of participation much further than token ‘reflexive’ references in their films. Not only did they engage in discussions with the subjects beforehand as to what the topic of the film should be, and how this should be developed during shooting, but in some cases they also arranged for the principal subjects to join them later in the edit suite and advise on the cutting of the film. For film-makers working in a participatory manner, it also became axiomatic that once a film had been completed, it was essential to return to the community where the film had been shot and screen it there. There was both a moral and a pragmatic dimension to this return of the work: not only would the community see the outcome of the work but they could also comment on its validity. In the ideal case, this could then lead on to the development of future collaborative projects.
Among the English-speaking ethnographic film-makers who were most active in developing collaborative modes of authorship over the course of 1970s and 1980s were David and Judith MacDougall. Although David had taken some introductory anthropology courses when he was a student of literature at Harvard, otherwise neither he nor Judith had any formal qualifications as anthropologists. On the other hand, they had received an important part of their training as film-makers through the Ethnographic Film Program at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) in the late 1960s. It was through this programme that the MacDougalls had encountered the work of Jean Rouch and were inspired by his example to develop a mode of ethnographic film-making praxis that was more participatory than that which underpinned the work of John Marshall and Timothy Asch. This synthesis by the MacDougalls (along with various other film-makers connected with the Ethnographic Film Program) of the long-standing interest of English-speaking ethnographic film-makers in observation with the more participatory Rouchian praxis would give rise to ‘Observational Cinema’ a distinctive approach to ethnographic film-making that I consider at length in Chapter 10.

As they were among the first students to go through the Ethnographic Film Program, it fell to the MacDougalls to produce a number of the most important early examples of films based on the principles of Observational Cinema. In 1968, the same year as Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon made their first joint expedition to film with the Yanomami, the MacDougalls began working on what would eventually become two distinct series of films about pastoralist groups in East Africa. Initially, however, they went to Africa to work on a film about male initiation among a sedentary agriculturalist group, the Gisu of southeastern Uganda. This was directed by one of the teachers on the UCLA programme, Richard Hawkins, and was based on the doctoral fieldwork of the British anthropologist, Suzette Heald. The MacDougalls were still only students at the time, but they were equipped with what was then the dernier cri in 16 mm technology, the Éclair NPR camera, specifically designed for hand-held shooting, and a Nagra III reel-to-reel tape-recorder. Although they were supposed to be acting merely as the crew, in practice, given the constraints of the production, David ended up making most of the decisions as to how the various component scenes of the film should be shot.3

Once the Gisu shoot was over, the MacDougalls were permitted by UCLA to keep hold of this equipment and also some of the left-over film stock, and they headed off to the Karamoja District in northeastern corner of Uganda where, over several months, they shot the material for what
would eventually become three films about the Jie pastoralists. Two of these films are relatively short, *Nawi*, which is in colour and 20 minutes long, follows a family moving from its homestead to the camps where their cattle are grazing, while *Under the Men's Tree*, 15 minutes long, is in black and white, and as suggested by the title, presents the conversation of a group of men beneath a shade tree, interspersed with short sequences in which they are shown preparing leather straps cut from cowhide.

These two shorter Jie films are not dissimilar to John Marshall’s event films. As with the latter, they are shot in an intimate manner, covering relatively circumscribed situations and structured primarily by the internal development of the event itself rather than by a superimposed narrative. The subjects’ speech is subtitled, as in Marshall’s films too, but then still a relative novelty in ethnographic film. In terms of general form, *Under the Men’s Tree* is particularly reminiscent of Marshall’s films – for example, *A Group of Women*, in which San women chat as they lie in the shade of a baobab, dandling their children, or *Men Bathing*, in which San men chat as they wash in a pool. There is, however, a significant difference in content in the sense that whereas the San talk about personal matters entirely internal to their world, the Jie in *Under the Men's Tree* are mostly making observations about the habits of motor vehicle drivers, a theme that is strikingly at odds with their very traditional dress and appearance.

The MacDougalls’ third Jie film, *To Live with Herds*, is not only much longer, at 70 minutes, but is an altogether more complex work dealing with the problems faced by the Jie as a result of government plans to sedentarise them. This film demonstrated, perhaps for the first time in English-language ethnographic film-making, how the combination of the new synchronous sound technology and a participatory and reflexive authorial strategy could be used to portray the people of another culture in an intimate, personal manner. As such, it would have a major impact on ethnographic film-making, not only in the English-language world but also beyond, and for this reason we should consider it at some length here.

As with the MacDougalls’ shorter Jie films, *To Live with Herds* features a number of circumscribed events and situations, but these are linked together as a series of scenes within an overarching narrative structure subdivided into five thematically defined parts, reminiscent of the acts in a play. The first and fifth parts represent pastoralist life in its traditional form. The first part, entitled ‘The Balance’, is set in and around a Jie homestead, while in the last part, ‘News from Home’, one of the principal subjects, Logoth, leaves for the cattle camps where Jie herds are customarily taken when the grass immediately around the homestead is exhausted. These scenes of traditional life are in marked contrast with the subject matter of the three central parts, which concern the plans of the newly independent state of Uganda to sedentarise the Jie, ostensibly to
provide them with schooling and medical services, but also to control and tax them.

We learn that for the Jie, sedentarisation means hunger and the devastation of their herds of cattle, schooling represents the loss of their children to another way of life, while hospitals are seen as places where children are more likely to die than be cured. The fourth part of the film is particularly powerful as first we see the Jie forced to sell their cattle to stave off hunger and then we see them jostling with their gourds to receive famine relief flour at a government station. When we finally return to the traditional way of life in the last part of the film, we realise that its title is ironic. The harsh truth is that there is no ‘news from home’, except the no longer newsworthy fact that people are hungry (figure 5.1). As Logoth washes in a pool, the soundtrack echoes with a traditional salutation of well-being which, given what we now know about the present situation of the Jie, is particularly poignant, ‘May you live with herds, may you live with herds.’

Although the device was applied in *To Live with Herds* in a skilled manner that was unusual in an ethnographic film, cyclical narrative structures of this kind were already a well-established staple of documentary film-making more generally. What was innovative about the film was rather the way in which everyday life was presented, particularly in part 1 in the Jie homestead. Here people talk casually about their way of life and the values that hold it together. They gossip and play with children. The pacing of the film is slow and measured, and, as in everyday life, there is repetition and hesitation, which then – as now – was often cut out by documentary film editors. The camera discreetly observes, but it is no ‘fly-on-the-wall’. The subjects not only frequently acknowledge its presence, but actively engage the filmmakers in conversation. In one of the most celebrated sequences of the film, Logoth offers the film-makers a ‘guided tour’ of his homestead, and

---

5.1 *To Live with Herds* (1972). Left, Logoth and his wife Losike reluctantly say goodbye as he leaves for the cattle camps. Right, severely affected by drought, the Jie must sell their animals at knockdown prices in order to buy food.
points out on the horizon the various directions in which other pastoralist peoples live. Although there are a few brief commentary points voiced by David MacDougall, these are personalised rather than didactic: broader contexts are provided rather through intertitle cards. Mostly, however, the film proceeds through the informal subtitled dialogues of the subjects, primarily with one another, but also with the film-makers.

Following its release in 1972, the innovative contribution of *To Live with Herds* to ethnographic film-making praxis was acknowledged in the award of a major prize at the Venice Film Festival. Two years later, the MacDougalls returned to East Africa, and over eighteen months they made a series of three further films about pastoralists that would develop their distinctive mode of ethnographic film authorship. By this time, political unrest meant that it was no longer safe to work in Uganda, so they moved their base across the border to northwestern Kenya. Here they began to film with the Turkana, who are culturally and socially very similar to the Jie, and speak essentially the same language.5

The material that the MacDougalls shot in Kenya would, in due course, become the three-part series, *Turkana Conversations*. In terms of purely technical quality, these films demonstrate a mastery of the 16 mm technological ‘package’ based on a hand-held camera, portable synchronous sound and subtitled speech. The general standard of both shooting and audio recording in these films is remarkably high, certainly for the period, while the subtitling, a very important element, is well composed and the rhythm very fluent. In contrast to *To Live with Herds*, these films are in colour which, when viewed today, gives them a more contemporary feel.

A pronounced feature of the *Turkana Conversations* films is what David MacDougall would later characterise as the ‘unprivileged camera style’. That is, any scene based on human interaction is shot from the perspective of a participant witness rather than from some external vantage point that would only be available to someone positioned outside the group. Wide shots predominate and the takes are long, with action being allowed to develop within the frame. Pans are few and zooms even rarer. Although well-established conventions to ensure continuity between shots are respected in the cutting of these films, they are generally very discreetly applied.

These various attributes of technique and style are brought together in some remarkable hand-held tracking shots in the films, none more so than during the ‘guided tour’ that Lorang, one of the leading characters, leads around his homestead, picking out the houses of his wives and the kraals of his animals as he goes. There are also numerous linguistic exchanges between the film-makers and the subjects, but these are presented not as one-way interrogational interviews, but more as conversations between film-maker and subject, albeit usually through an interpreter, and sometimes using intertitle cards to pose the questions. In addition, outside these
5.2 *The Wedding Camels* (1977). The formal blessing of the marriage, left, is only a brief interlude in the incessant haggling about bridewealth between the bride’s father Lorang and the groom’s family, right.

In conversational situations, the subjects make frequent references to the presence of the film-makers. 

Perhaps the best known of the three films is *The Wedding Camels*, the first to be released, in 1976, but classified as the third in the series. This film explores a classical topic in the ethnography of East African pastoralist societies, namely, the wheeling and dealing that takes place in connection with the payment and the subsequent distribution of ‘bridewealth’. This is the technical anthropological term for goods given at marriage by the groom to the family of the bride (and in this sense, the reverse of the European tradition of dowry payments from the bride’s family to the groom). In East Africa, bridewealth consists primarily of cattle, including goats, camels and oxen as well as cows and bulls. Prior to a wedding, the negotiation of the terms of the bridewealth is typically a complex matter of much greater collective attention than whether or not the bride wishes to enter the marriage.

In the case of the marriage represented in *The Wedding Camels*, the negotiations are so fraught that at various points, it seems as if the marriage will not happen, and when it finally does, about two-thirds of the way through the 107-minute film, the blessing formalising the union consists of no more than a brief interlude in the incessant haggling over animals. This continues even after the bride has left her homestead to go and live permanently with her husband, as is the Turkana custom (figure 5.2).

As in many ethnographic films about ceremonial events, the structure of the event itself provides the narrative structure of the film. However, what distinguishes *The Wedding Camels* from most ethnographic films about ceremonies, including particularly the event-sequence films discussed in Chapter 4, is that the outcome of the event remains in doubt until the last moment and this serves to charge the narrative structure with a certain degree of dramaturgical tension. In fact, in this sense, *The Wedding Camels*
could be regarded as an example, even if a rather diffuse one, of the so-called ‘crisis structure’ that was typical of the work of the so-called Direct Cinema film-makers who, around this same time, were also using the new portable sound-synchronous technology to shoot observational documentaries, though with journalistic rather than ethnographic objectives and mostly on North American topics.7

As the central event in *The Wedding Camels* is extraordinarily complex, with many overlapping threads as well as a large number of participants, in order to aid comprehension the film is subdivided into a number of act-like parts, as in *To Live with Herds*, though in this case, there are only four. It has to be said, though, that this overarching quadripartite division readily gets lost in the veritable flurry of intertitle cards that are used throughout the film to provide the contexts necessary to clarify what is going on and who is who. These cards may seem excessive to some viewers, but presumably the film-makers concluded that this was a price that they were prepared to pay in order to avoid a didactic voice-over commentary.

They were fortunate, however, that they did not need to use even more intertitle cards since the Turkana, both women and men, turn out to be the most eloquent auto-ethnographers, explaining succinctly in their conversations with the film-makers how their way of life as pastoralists makes the payment of bridewealth so vitally important (‘Boys are born to herd animals … girls are born to marry. We Turkana are not farmers, so children are our gardens’) as well as providing insightful analyses of the events leading up to the wedding as they unfold.

Doubt and uncertainty are also features of the other two films in the *Turkana Conversations* series, albeit in rather different ways. From a narrative perspective, one of these films, *A Wife Among Wives* represents a mirror image of *The Wedding Camels*. If in the latter film the MacDougalls’ enquiries into the nature of marriage among the Turkana were located within the overarching framework of the events connected with one particular marriage, in this film their enquiries provide the framework and a particular marriage is located within it. In common with *The Wedding Camels*, this film too has a defuse ‘crisis structure’, and indeed doubly so, as the subjects’ doubts about whether the marriage will take place are skilfully interwoven through the film with the MacDougalls’ own doubts about whether they will ever get a marriage to film. Although classified as second in the *Turkana Conversations* series, *A Wife Among Wives* was the last to be edited, and it was not released until 1981. Of all the films that the MacDougalls made in East Africa, it is the most overtly reflexive in the sense of revealing the process of film-making within the film itself.8

The early part of the film features a series of stills of the MacDougalls with their subjects as well as lists and maps from their notebooks, while on the soundtrack David and Judith alternately read extracts from their field
diaries either describing the direction of their enquiries or chronicling their quest to find a marriage. Today, these devices have become commonplace, and might even be considered too contrived, but at that time they were highly arresting when encountered in an ethnographic film. Initially, the MacDougalls’ enquiries are directed towards discovering how polygyny is perceived by Turkana women. It transpires that Turkana women are greatly in favour of this system of marriage because, as the MacDougalls’ female interlocutors patiently explain, it is the best way within Turkana society of securing their future prosperity and for sharing out the labour that women have to do. They point out that a woman will often encourage her husband to take another wife, and will even contribute her own animals to pay the necessary bridewealth. They then mildly rebuke the film-makers for probing for examples of fighting or jealousy among co-wives, saying that these are European preoccupations, which Europeans can only afford to have because European women have so little work to do.

The film-makers also ask the women what they think should be in the film. While one woman says that she has no idea, as she is not a film-maker, others say that what they would most like to film has nothing to do with polygyny, but rather the film-makers’ possessions. So the film then cuts to a scene in which one of the older women is shown using a Super-8 film camera to film the MacDougalls’ house, their books and, eventually, David himself filming her while she films him.

The doubts concerning the marriage that is negotiated in the course of this film relate not only to the usual disagreements over bridewealth payments but also to the fact that the young girl who is supposedly to be married – to a much older man, as his fifth wife – is absent. Her relatives, both male and female, are anxious that she return, since once the marriage is concluded, they will receive a large number of animals as a bridewealth payment. She, however, is seemingly much more interested in consorting with the young men in the cattle camps. The situation therefore lends itself readily to another well-established narrative device, the ‘waiting-for’ trope, much used in documentary films generally as well as in ethnographic film, whereby dramatic tension is built around the much anticipated but uncertain arrival of a key protagonist who will transform the lives of the other subjects of the film.

The narrative develops with a series of scenes of senior men haggling over the bridewealth and deploring the attitudes of the young. As the rainy season begins, women are shown working in the millet fields and gathering in the crop that will be needed to provide food for the wedding guests – should there ever be a marriage. Eventually, these various ethnographic threads are woven together with the thread of reflexive enquiry to produce what is, finally, a happy ending: the bride-to-be, a figure of glistening youth and beauty, finally returns from the cattle camps and agrees to the marriage,
so the senior men have their marriage, her relatives get their cattle and the film-makers have an event to film (figure 5.3, left).

If *A Wife Among Wives* is overtly reflexive in so far as the presence of the film-makers is concerned and to a degree that was unprecedented in ethnographic film-making until that point, the other film in the *Turkana Conversations* trilogy, *Lorang’s Way*, is reflexive in a more subtle, but ultimately more significant way. This film, which the MacDougalls classify as the first of the *Turkana Conversations*, was actually the second to be released, in 1979. It offers a biographical account of the life and worldview of the eponymous Turkana elder, Lorang, and is arranged, as are the other films, as a series of scenes, divided into a number of thematically defined ‘parts’.

In sharp contrast to previous hero-figures in the genre of ethnographic film, Lorang is no black-and-white archetype: he is much more ambiguous. He is both curmudgeonly and generous, expansive and calculating in a meanly self-interested way. He is a worrier rather than a visionary, a pragmatist, but also something of an intellectual, capable of great lucidity on occasion about his own culture. But nor is he merely a simple mouthpiece for this culture. Although in some ways he is the bastion of tradition, in his youth, as he explains in the film, he spent some time living in the colonial world after he was forcibly recruited into a British colonial regiment, the King’s African Rifles. On his return, he used the skills and knowledge that he had learned in this external world to build up his wealth in traditional terms, that is, by acquiring large herds of animals, five wives and numerous children. And yet, he seems to remain sceptical about these achievements. When pressed to comment on the importance of traditional forms of wealth, he demurs and asserts that life itself is far more important.

In the final sequence in the film, the portrait of Lorang inclines powerfully towards the romantic: it is late afternoon, the cattle are streaming back to
the homestead under the watchful eye of Lorang’s handsome son. Lorang himself looks on, the master of all he surveys, silhouetted against the gorgeous colours of the evening sky. But just as one is about to succumb to the powerful narrative effect of closure and to the trope of this wise old Turkana Prospero discovering final contentment, Lorang’s rasping, doubting tones return in the form of voice-over to leave an unanswered question: ‘What then is life? Is it animals or what?’

If *A Wife Among Wives* is reflexive in relation to the film-makers, raising questions about their relationship to the world of the film, *Lorang’s Way* is reflexive in relation to the subject, raising questions about his relationship to the world in which he lives.

**Modes of participation: the MacDougalls in Australia**

Even before they had completed the editing of *Turkana Conversations*, the MacDougalls had moved to Australia to take up positions as film-makers working at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (AIAS). Here they encountered film-making conditions that were very different from those that they had known in East Africa, and they found themselves obliged to adapt their method of working accordingly.

One important difference was what David MacDougall would later describe as a difference in cultural ‘style’. The Turkana had proved themselves to be the most eloquent auto-ethnographers, very ready to provide verbal explanations for their customary behaviour. They also had no reservations about displaying their disagreements and conflicts in public. On the contrary, particularly among men, great store was set on the ability to speak well in public and, as necessary, overcome others through oratorical skills. Both these characteristics lent themselves well to the mode of documentary film-making that the MacDougalls were developing in Turkana: the subjects’ own explanations obviated the need for didactic voice-over commentary, while the public performance of disagreement lent itself well to a ‘crisis structure’ narrative.

By contrast, in Aboriginal communities, the MacDougalls found that there was an unwillingness to engage in public demonstrations of disagreement while the explanations offered for their customary behaviour were more allusive and metaphorical. While for the Turkana the ability to speak well was much admired, for Aboriginal people, reticence was a virtue. Rather than make claims in a verbal manner to promote their personal interests, they found that Aboriginal people had what David MacDougall later referred to as a ‘heraldic culture’, whereby claims were made through a process of symbolic, often performative displays of art or ritual, the precise significance of which was often difficult for an outsider to grasp. This posed a serious
practical problem of cross-cultural translation for the MacDougalls, namely, how could they provide the interpretative context necessary for audiences to understand what they were seeing without recourse to an awkward and alienating didactic voice-over commentary?\(^{12}\)

The MacDougalls also encountered a much greater sensitivity about the control of knowledge in Aboriginal society. In Turkana, the control of knowledge had certainly been an issue; indeed, one could think of *The Wedding Camels* as representing a prolonged struggle to control knowledge, or more exactly, to determine how many animals were being given and to whom. But in the last analysis, in Turkana it was recognised that everyone could in principle have access to that knowledge – the problem resided rather in getting hold of it. By contrast, in Australian Aboriginal society, the right to hold certain forms of knowledge can be restricted on the basis of gender, age and clan affiliation.

As the leading Australianist anthropologist Fred Myers puts it in a review of a number of the MacDougalls’ Australian films, among Aboriginal people ‘the authority to tell a story or provide an account is a matter of political concern’. Events taking place in public are constrained, in that participation is not equally open to all members of the community. Rather, as Myers explains, ‘the right to represent and the meaning of what is said are linked to specific social relations’. The control of the films being made about them was thus very important for the Aboriginal subjects for reasons that were internal to their own world: more precisely, the MacDougalls’ films came to be seen as a means whereby Aboriginal people could supplement the intensely political process of memorialising the dead as well as of asserting land claims vis-à-vis one another.\(^{13}\)

Control over filmic representations was also important to Aboriginal people in relation to the outside world. Even in the 1970s, Aboriginal people were much more aware than the Turkana of the way in which, in a mediatised world, the manner in which they were represented could impact on their political interests in a national context. Ironic though it was, as Myers points out, Aboriginal people were very alert to the fact that in order to assert their traditional rights, they had to do so through the technology of the world that threatened to deny them those rights. Moreover, although the Turkana often railed against the government, they did not carry the profound sense of historical injury that Aboriginal people felt after two hundred years of colonial subjugation. In these circumstances, the MacDougalls found that ‘there had to be a wholly different kind of unwritten contract between ourselves and Aboriginal people which determined why a film should be made at all, and, if it was to be made, what each of us expected to get out of it’.\(^{14}\)

In order to adapt to this particular conjunction of political and cultural circumstances, the MacDougalls continued to make films that were reflexive
in that they made no attempt to suppress any reference to the film-making process in the filmic text. At the same time, their films became much more participatory, involving the Aboriginal subjects much more directly in the process of making the films than had been the case with the Turkana. Even before the MacDougalls began to work for the AIAS, it was a general rule of the organisation that all films made under the AIAS banner should originate as a request from the Aboriginal community where the film-making would take place. In practice, the MacDougalls would only make a film if they could identify some common ground of interest with the subjects, even if the reasons for this interest were different. But once they had identified this common ground, the subjects would then be continuously involved in discussions as to what should or, equally importantly, what should not be filmed.

Compared to the Turkana, Aboriginal people often had very clear views regarding what a film should be about and how it should be made. In order to give them the opportunity to contribute these views, the MacDougalls would not only consult with their subjects while shooting but, inspired by Jean Rouch’s example in Africa back in the 1950s, they would also invite their subjects to join them in the edit suite (figure 5.4). Also in line with Rouch’s authorial praxis, it was a fundamental matter of principle for the MacDougalls that they would take the film back to the community where it had been made and hold a public screening there.
Over a period of twelve years, from 1975 to 1987, the MacDougalls made a total of eleven films for the AIAS in this participatory manner. A comprehensive review of all these works lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, I focus on three films that they made with members of the community of Aurukun on Cape York Peninsula, northern Queensland, released between 1980 and 1982, since these three films have attracted a particularly high degree of attention and comment, including by the MacDougalls themselves.15

Aurukun is a community whose origins lie in a Christian mission settlement established in the early twentieth century. Over the years, members of various different Aboriginal groups have come to live there, resulting in a community in which there is a considerable degree of social and cultural fragmentation, even to this day. At the time that the MacDougalls were working there, Aurukun numbered some 800 people, who between them spoke seven different Aboriginal languages, some of which were spoken by no more than a handful of people.

Probably the best known of the films that the MacDougalls made in Aurukun is Takeover. This is an 88-minute feature-length film, which documents the campaign by the Queensland State government in early 1978 to take over the management of Aurukun from the missionary organisations that had been running it since 1904. People in Aurukun were shocked by the cavalier way in which a decision had been taken to change the management of their community without any reference to them and, moreover, they had no wish to be governed directly by the notoriously right-wing Queensland government. What they mainly feared was that this take-over would put a stop to the then-active outstation movement, whereby members of the community were returning to live in the territories around Aurukun from whence their ancestors had originally come. Whereas the missionaries had supported this process, the people of Aurukun feared that the Queensland government would be strongly opposed because of the potentially vast deposits of bauxite that were already known to be lying under these territories.

Faced with this threat, the Aurukun Council appealed for help to the Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs of the Federal Government of Australia. Initially, the ministry was sympathetic and the minister himself, Ian Viner, was but one of many outsiders who came to Aurukun to give the community their support and assure them that nothing would happen without their consent (figure 5.5, left). In the end, however, far from Aurukun, a political deal was struck between the Federal and State governments whereby the community would be governed by a locally elected council, but one that would be subject to the authority of the Queensland government and then only on the basis of a 50-year lease. This outcome was hugely disappointing to the people of Aurukun, not only because they had come under the
control of the Queensland state after all, even if indirectly, but because, once again, they had not been party to the decision, and their rights to the land, which they regarded as ahistorical and inalienable, had only been recognised provisionally rather than in perpetuity. As Myers explains in his review of the film, more than being perceived as merely political blows, for the Aurukun community these latter two aspects of the result represented a profound cultural affront.16

The Aurukun community invited the MacDougalls to document this process. When the crisis first broke, they had already been resident in the community for some months, working on other projects. They chose to follow it entirely from within the community, referring to the decisions being taken elsewhere in the way they were made known to Aurukun people themselves, that is, primarily through radio news bulletins, and to a lesser extent the printed press. The main body of the film consists simply of following the twist and turns of events as they unfold, interspersing ongoing discussions within the community with much coming and going of outside media people and political figures, all ending up with the final deflating denouement.

Reinforcing this geographically local perspective, the film is narrated in English by Francis Yunkaporta, a leading member of the Aurukun community (figure 5.5, left). He appears at various points in the film to comment on the progress of events and was also later invited into the edit suite to comment on them retrospectively. In both these respects, *Takeover* is highly participatory in the sense that it adopts an Aboriginal point of view, both geographically and politically, while at the same time both literally and metaphorically representing the Aboriginal ‘voice’.
However, though Myers considers this film to be ‘an ethnographic construction of a high interpretive order’, it does not pose any complex issues of cross-cultural translation. Even if there are certain distinctively Aboriginal nuances to the way in which the events shown in the film are understood at a local level in Aurukun, their more general significance is only too readily understandable for a Western audience. In fact, in terms of the overall narrative shape, *Takeover* represents an even more typical example of the standard Western ‘crisis structure’ trope than the structures underlying *The Wedding Camels* and *A Wife Among Wives*. It is, moreover, a highly effective example of this trope and it was no doubt precisely for this reason that it was selected for so many international documentary festivals.

The other two films that the MacDougalls made in Aurukun posed more challenging issues of cross-cultural translation, which they sought to resolve in two somewhat different ways. One of these films, directed by Judith, is *The House-Opening* (1980), which concerns the ceremonial events that take place following a death and which are intended to enable the family of the deceased to move back into the family house. This was one of the first topics that people in Aurukun had suggested as a possible film subject to the MacDougalls since they were very proud of the ceremony and it had only very recently been developed. Under traditional circumstances, when Aboriginal people still lived in small structures constructed of tree bark and branches, houses would be burnt to the ground following a death, and the family would move away because it was feared that the spirit of the dead person would linger around the spot and might haunt the family, particularly young children. Now that the people of Aurukun lived in substantial, permanent houses, it had become too great a sacrifice to burn down the house of the deceased, so they had developed a new ceremony to reassure the spirit of the deceased person that they have not been forgotten, but then to drive it away. This new ceremony consisted of a highly syncretic blend of local Aboriginal traditions, Presbyterian Christianity and Torres Strait Islander forms of music and dancing.

The new ceremony also fulfilled another important function related to Aboriginal belief. Under traditional circumstances, deaths were often attributed to witchcraft, and when a man died one of the prime suspects would be his widow. In the ceremony shown in *The House-Opening*, in order to assure the husband’s family that she has not been responsible for his death, the widow first has to practise extreme avoidance with the family, not talking to them until she has assembled a generous quantity of food to offer them. In accepting this food, they acknowledge that she is not to blame for her husband’s death (figure 5.5, right). The husband’s family and the widow’s family then join together in a Christian service and perform their respective totemic dances for one another. Finally, the following day, the house of the deceased is reopened and the widow enters, accompanied by her husband’s
relatives. The latter carry a basket of smouldering ironwood tree leaves in order to drive away the husband’s spirit.

So that she could provide explanations for the complex symbolic processes going on in this ceremony, Judith invited the widow, Geraldine Kawangka, to join her in the edit suite and comment on the rushes. This commentary was recorded and then used as a narration on the soundtrack of the final version of the film. It mostly works very well: it serves not only to provide the contexts necessary to understand the many different component parts of the ceremony from a religious or sociological point of view, but also to communicate, through the trembling, hesitant voice of Geraldine, the emotional significance of what is happening. It also provides Geraldine with an opportunity to express her views about the importance of preserving the traditional elements of Aboriginal belief and practice that have been incorporated into the new ceremony.

There are, however, certain absences within her commentary: there is, for example, no explicit reference to the suspicion that falls on a widow following a death and it requires a viewer already very familiar with traditional Aboriginal ideas to pick up on the heavy innuendo in the passages in which, relatively early in the film, Geraldine discusses the tense nature of her relations with her husband’s relatives in the immediate post-mortem period. But with this relatively minor qualification, the strategy of inviting a leading protagonist to provide a commentary in the edit suite could be considered a very effective solution to the issues of cross-cultural translation posed by a multifaceted Aboriginal ceremony such as the one shown in this film. While providing the audience with the interpretative context that is necessary to understand what is going on, her voice seems to emerge from the world of the film itself rather than being imposed from outside in the manner of a conventional didactic commentary.17

The MacDougalls opted for a somewhat different strategy to solve the problems of cross-cultural translation posed by another of their Aurukun films, *Familiar Places*, also released in 1980. This film concerns a journey, seemingly of only a few days, made by an Aboriginal couple, Angus Namponan and his wife Chrissie, accompanied by their children, to visit their ancestral territories, a beautiful mixed landscape of sea estuaries and salt pans, some sixty miles south of Aurukun itself. The immediate purposes of the trip were twofold: to introduce the children to their ancestral clan territories and the spirits that inhabit them, and to map these territories in European terms as the basis for a claim to the land. This claim would not only keep out potential European intruders in search of bauxite, but would also defy the claims of other Aboriginal clans (figure 5.6).

In the film, Angus and Chrissie are accompanied by a young Australian ‘linguist anthropologist’, Peter Sutton, who is armed with a range of European devices for making visual records. These include a compass, a magnifying
glass, a still-camera, a collection of aerial photographs and, finally, a film crew, in the form of the MacDougalls. It transpires that the making of the film is an integral part of the process of mapping and laying a claim to the land by Angus and his family. It is thus entirely appropriate that, close to the beginning of the film, when Chrissie introduces her children to the ancestral spirits by rubbing water on them at the edge of an estuary, she then turns and does the same to Judith MacDougall as she records sound, before moving over and doing the same to David as he operates the camera.

Although the film is ostensibly about the journey of Angus and his family, it relies for its central narrative thread on the presence of Sutton and on his extended verbal commentary on the action of the film. This commentary is delivered in a very low-key manner, partly as informal snatches of conversation with the film-makers on location, partly, it would seem, in reaction to a viewing of the rushes. Sutton’s voice not only keeps us abreast of the chronology of the journey, but also provides, almost in passing as it were, an explanation of the significance of what the Aboriginal subjects are saying or doing.

The early part of the narrative is somewhat diffuse but midway through the film, it becomes more focused with the arrival of a new character. This is the dramatically named Jack Spear, Angus’s uncle and the oldest living member of their clan. First, Jack Spear tells a story, half-sung, half-spoken about two Dreamtime sisters who sang to one another across the nearby salt estuary, but who angered the Shark ancestor spirit who resided there and drowned as a result. Jack Spear then guides the whole party around the area, pointing out where people camped in his youth and where they drew water, telling a story about how he had to hide from his enemies in a shelter in the forest. Finally, in the climax to the film, he takes us to an old burial ground where many hundreds of his relatives were cremated.
following an epidemic of whooping cough many years ago. Here he relates a further story about spear fights between rival clans, including the detail that his ‘eldest father’ was speared as he stoked a cremation pyre.

In his review of the film, Myers suggests that *Familiar Places* is ‘the most intellectually complex’ of the MacDougalls’ Aurukun works. But if this is so, it is surely primarily on account of Sutton’s commentary which, notwithstanding its informality, is exegetical as well as informational. In the simplest sense, without Sutton’s commentary, it would be often impossible to understand what Jack Spear is saying, even though his speech is clearly subtitled, since his remarks are mostly so fragmentary or elliptical that we rely on Sutton to tell us what he actually means. But more than that, Sutton also offers us generalisations and abstractions on the basis of these comments. Thus, for example, when Jack Spear informs him that a particular waterhole was secret, Sutton then explains to the camera, very casually, that traditionally the people of his group distinguished between three different types of waterhole and that the most secret kind was known only to old men. He then continues to an even more abstract observation to the effect that major waterholes were considered to have been left by the First People and that in Aboriginal thinking, this conception of places and resources being *left* from primeval times is more important than the notion of some original process of creation.

Stylistically speaking, in being so casually and simply delivered, Sutton’s commentary is far from the ponderous didactic voice-overs that the MacDougalls were seeking to avoid. Yet, in its own downbeat way, it is fulfilling the same explanatory function as a conventional didactic commentary, or the combination of title cards and auto-ethnographic exegesis in the MacDougalls’ Turkana films. Although he is an outsider to Aboriginal society and is often providing an abstract analysis rather than describing his personal sentiments, Sutton’s ontological position in relation to the film is not dissimilar to that of Geraldine Kawangka in relation to *The House-Opening*: he is both inside the film and outside it at the same time, both playing a part in it and commenting upon it after the fact. As such, as an authorial strategy, it works very well.

In his own discussion of *Familiar Places*, David MacDougall argues that although Sutton appears ‘to be in charge of the story as well as the expedition’, there are many other verbal discourses going on in this film, that is, between Sutton and the Aboriginal protagonists, between the Aborigines themselves, between the film-makers and the protagonists, as well as with a series of imagined audiences, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. There is also a more visual discourse going on in the sense that the making of the film itself acts as a vehicle whereby the protagonists can make a direct claim to be the owners of the landscape represented in the film. As such, MacDougall suggests, Sutton’s voice is not the definitive authoritative voice in the film,
but merely one part of ‘a complex cultural drama’. But while this might be true, it requires Sutton’s voice to draw the threads of the various discourses together and make sense of them.

Many years later, in an interview recorded in 2007, when reflecting on the films that he and Judith had made with Aboriginal people, David MacDougall commented that although they had struggled with the issue for ‘over a dozen years and a dozen films’, he felt that they had never quite solved the problem of how one made the meanings of the often highly coded statements and actions of Aboriginal people accessible to non-Aboriginal audiences. But in my view, *The House-Opening and Familiar Places*, albeit in different ways, demonstrate that even if it does not represent a solution that one would want to use in all circumstances and for all purposes, the strategy of inviting the film subjects themselves to provide an interpretative but low-key commentary, be it on location or in the edit suite, can be a very effective method for making semiotically dense statements and actions understandable to third-party audiences without recourse either to an alienating didactic voice-over, or to formal interviews. For this reason, though they were released more than thirty years ago, the MacDougalls’ Aurukun films remain of abiding interest as examples of ethnographic film authorship.

Notes

1 Probably the most energetic advocate of this form of reflexivity has been Jay Ruby. But as of 2000, he was unable to identify a single example in the century-long history of ethnographic film-making that had entirely satisfied his requirements (Ruby 2000), 156–7.


3 David MacDougall, personal communication, March 2017. Unfortunately, this film, eventually given the title of *Imbalu: Ritual of Manhood of the Gisu of Uganda*, was not edited for twenty years, by which time the original negative had been lost, and it had to be cut from a scratched and faded workprint. Nevertheless, when it was finally released in 1990, it received favourable reviews. See MacDougall (2007), 126.

4 The subdivision of the film into five parts was inspired by Basil Wright’s classic 1934 documentary, *The Song of Ceylon* (see pp. 50–2) as well as by the narrative devices that Jean-Luc Godard was using in his fiction films at the time (Grimshaw and Papastergiadis 1995), 29.

5 In the interim between the Jie and Turkana projects, David MacDougall shot *Kenya Boran* (1974), and a number of shorter films about the Boran, a pastoralist people of the Marsabit District of northern Kenya, close to the border with Ethiopia. These were based on the research of the Manchester anthropologist, Paul Baxter and were co-directed by James Blue, a film-maker indirectly associated with the UCLA programme. However, these films were made for the American Universities Field Staff (AUFFS) series, *Faces of Change* and as MacDougall was only a ‘hired hand’, he did not have final editorial control over the films. Although he and Blue did a first cut of *Kenya Boran* that conformed to the principles of Observational Cinema, this was later substantially re-cut by Norman Miller, the AUFFS series producer, in the didactic, commentary-led manner that the MacDougalls were seeking to get away from in their own work. See https://store.der.org/blue-james-c752.aspx.
6 On the ‘unprivileged’ camera style, see MacDougall (1998e) and also the more extended discussion in Chapter 10, pp. 300–3.


8 I stress the word ‘overtly’ here since David MacDougall has commented that he himself thinks of The Wedding Camels as being more reflexive than A Wife Among Wives on the grounds it was ‘the film in which we made the greatest effort to try to create a sense of indeterminacy about knowledge, about the situation one finds oneself in the field, trying to make sense of complex events, and not necessarily being able to do it’ (Grimshaw and Papastergiadis 1995, 36). However, while one might be aware as a viewer that there is this indeterminacy about the process of enquiry in The Wedding Camels, the process of enquiry itself is not so directly and openly referred to as in A Wife Among Wives.

9 ‘Polygyny’ is the technical term used by anthropologists to describe one of the two possible kinds of heterosexual polygamy, that is, the one in which a man may marry two or more wives. The other kind, in which a woman may marry two or more men is known as ‘polyandry’.

10 An early example of this trope, and perhaps even the first usage, is Waiting for Fidel (1974), directed by Michael Rubbo for the National Film Board of Canada, in which three Canadians of differing political persuasions go to Havana in the – unrequited – hope of being granted an audience with Fidel Castro. In an ethnographic context, perhaps the most celebrated example is Waiting for Harry (1980), directed by Kim McKenzie. In this case, a group of Anbara Aboriginal people conducting a funeral ceremony await the arrival of the eponymous Harry, a relative of the deceased, without whom the ceremony cannot be concluded. Happily, in this case, the waited-for person does finally arrive.

11 In 1989, after the MacDougalls had left the organisation, the AIAS became the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

12 See MacDougall (1992a).

13 Myers (1988), 207.


15 The MacDougalls also made a fourth film in Aurukun, Three Horsemen (1982), about Aboriginal stockmen of three different generations. The other films that they made for the AIAS were: Good-bye Old Man (1977), about a Tiwi pukumani or bereavement ceremony on Melville Island, off the coast of Arnhem Land, northwest Australia, and To Get That Country (1978), an account of two political meetings related to the mining of uranium on Aboriginal land on the Arnhem Land mainland; four films focusing on part-Aboriginal people in rural New South Wales, of which the most substantial is Sunny and the Dark Horse (1986); and finally, Link-Up Diary (1987), which follows the activities of a Canberra NGO that aims to reunite Aboriginal families broken up under the adoption policies of the New South Wales State government between 1900 and 1969.


17 When the MacDougalls returned to screen the film back to the community, they were surprised to discover that the use of Geraldine’s voice raised certain political issues. I return to these in the concluding section of Chapter 6, pp. 193–4.


20 MacFarlane (2007).