Entangled voices: the complexities of collaborative authorship

David and Judith MacDougall were far from alone in developing reflexive and participatory ‘ways of doing’ ethnographic film-making during the 1970s and 1980s. Many other ethnographic film-makers in the English-speaking world were working in a similar manner during this period, including a number of those who had been active in the 1950s and 1960s, and whose work I describe in Chapters 3 and 4. Abandoning the aspiration to produce objective film records of the kind envisaged by Margaret Mead, they too developed collaborative authorial praxes of various kinds, thereby contributing to a great increase in both the quality and variety of English-language ethnographic film during these years.

As noted at the beginning of Chapter 5, this interest in collaborative film praxes had first arisen as a response to the questioning, from the 1970s onwards, of the right of ethnographers, be it in film or in text, to produce accounts of their subjects’ lives. To the extent that a collaborative praxis could be understood as a concern to gain the subjects’ consent to make these representations, it could also provide a degree of political and ethical legitimacy to the enterprise. At the same time, many film-makers hoped that by working with the subjects of the film, it would be possible to produce films that would in some sense be beneficial to them, thereby providing additional justification for their presumption of the right to place their subjects’ lives in the public domain through their film-making.

However, as described in the course of this chapter, after an initial period of enthusiasm, it soon became apparent that collaborative ethnographic film-making could be a more complex process than some of its advocates had anticipated. Gaining general consent to make a film was one thing, but arriving at agreement on exactly who or what should be in the film and how this should be presented was another. For although a film-maker might well be able to find certain areas of common interest with their subjects, the overlap was rarely total and disagreements could therefore arise. Moreover, it was often the case that in the communities where ethnographic film-makers worked, as with all human communities, there would be a range of different
interests, be it on the basis of gender or age, or in terms of political affiliation, economic interest or any number of other factors. Film-makers would sometimes find themselves obliged to navigate their way through entangled networks of relationships, making compromises at every turn and producing films that in the end spoke neither for themselves, nor for any particular group of their subjects. This meant, in effect, that they spoke for nobody.

Another reason for disillusionment was the realisation that there was no guarantee that ethnographic film-making – however participatory and reflexive, however collaborative – could bring about significant beneficial change for the subjects. Therefore to seek to legitimate the activity in ethical or political terms on these grounds was at best optimistic and at worst merely self-deluding. Besides, in historical circumstances in which audiovisual technology was becoming increasingly available to the members of the groups or communities with whom ethnographic film-makers worked, the idea that they needed outsiders to make films to bring about beneficial change for them was becoming, in the view of some, little more than a patronising anachronism.

As these complexities became progressively apparent, some film-makers began to feel that collaborative film-making, at least as a means of side-stepping the political and ethical implications of authorship, was actually a dead-end. Instead, they concluded that they would do better to assume more complete responsibility for the authoring of their films, since at least in that regard, their films would speak for somebody, if only for themselves. Rather than aspiring to do good with their films, they adopted the more modest goal of ensuring that their films did at least do no harm to their subjects.

Participatory film-making and academic collaboration: Timothy and Patsy Asch in Indonesia

One of the film-makers who most radically changed their general approach during the course of the 1970s was Timothy Asch, though he remained committed to working with anthropologists in the field and exploring with them the ways in which film could be of use to academic anthropology, particularly in teaching. In 1976, after completing the editing of the Yanomami films that he had made with Napoleon Chagnon, Asch took up a post at the Department of Anthropology at the Australia National University (ANU) in Canberra. Over the next few years, together with his wife Patsy Asch, he shot a series of films in various locations around Indonesia, each based on collaboration with an anthropologist from the ANU department: with James Fox on the island of Roti, and with two graduate students, E. Douglas Lewis on Flores, and Linda Connor on Bali.
The films that arose from these collaborations were very much more reflexive and participatory than the films that Asch had made with Chagnon. They were originally intended to be part of a broader comparative study of ritual performance in Indonesia, but these plans fell foul of a combination of bureaucratic delays and the Indonesian invasion of Timor, which held up the issuing of research permits even more than usual. While Timothy Asch did the shooting, the editing was carried out by Patsy Asch, who also acted as sound recordist and producer of the films. Regardless of the precise order in which their names might have appeared on the credits of any particular film, Timothy Asch was concerned that he, Patsy Asch and the consultant anthropologist should be seen as having produced the film as a collaborative team and therefore as having equal status as its authors.

Whereas the Yanomami films had been narrated exclusively by Chagnon, the films that the Asches made with Fox and with Lewis are narrated by leading subjects, albeit in a manner that is heavily mediated by the film-makers, and in conjunction with a certain degree of narration by the consultant anthropologists in each case. The principal film that the Asches made with Fox on Roti was *The Water of Words*, shot in 1977, though not released until 1983. This concerns the lontar palm, renowned for its juice, which is turned into various alcoholic beverages. It is primarily narrated by two Rotinese elders, each in a different manner: while one elder provides a commentary on practical aspects of lontar palm exploitation in the form of an intermittent subtitled interview, the other relates the mythical origins of the palm in the form of a voice-over dubbed into Dutch-accented English.²

A similar technique is used in *A Celebration of Origins*, the film that the Asches made with Lewis on Flores, shot in 1980, though not released until 1993. This film concerns an elaborate ritual in which the leading clan of Tana Wai Brama – a certain ‘ceremonial domain’ within the island – asserts its primacy as the original founder of this domain. As in *The Water of Words*, the voice-over narration is shared between the anthropologist and one of the principal protagonists, Pins Wai Brama, son of a leading ritual specialist of the clan. However, in this case, the protagonist developed his commentary in reaction to a viewing of the rushes some years later in Australia. As in the earlier film, the protagonist’s voice is dubbed into English and rendered in an accented voice, though with the original testimony just audible underneath. There is also a greater degree of reflexivity in this film in that Pins’s visit to Australia is shown in one of the early sequences of the film. Also, right at the end of the film, beneath the credits, there is a rostrum-camera pan over a still image of a Wai Brama community group apparently watching the material on a television, with Lewis at the back of the group.

It is in the films that the Asches made with Linda Connor on Bali that participatory and reflexive authorial strategies are most developed. All but one of these five films concern Jero Tapakan, a traditional healer who seeks
to help her clients through contacting the spirit world to establish whether their illnesses and misfortunes have a spiritual origin or are due to a failure to make appropriate ritual offerings. But she also diagnoses and treats more physical illnesses through massage therapy, and prescribes certain herbal remedies that she herself prepares.

In the first of the films about Jero, A Balinese Trance Seance, shot in 1978 and released the following year, she contacts the spirit of a dead boy on behalf of a group of his relatives in order to determine the cause of his death (figure 6.1, left). In the second film, The Medium is the Masseuse, also shot in 1978, but not released until 1983, she is shown providing massage and prescribing remedies to a series of clients. In both films, there are frequent reflexive references to the fact that a film is being made. In the first film, there is even a title card explaining that a break in the action is due to the fact that a film magazine is being changed. In the second film, Linda Connor, who acted as sound recordist, often appears in shot, and at one point there is a still image of Timothy Asch operating the camera.

These participatory and reflexive elements are even more pronounced in the short film, Jero on Jero, shot in 1980 and released the following year, in which Jero is filmed watching A Balinese Trance Seance on a television and discussing this with Connor (figure 6.1, right). There is also a rather fragmented biographical film, Stories from the Life of a Balinese Healer, shot on a number of different occasions and released in 1983, in which Jero recounts a series of episodes from her life, explaining that she first became interested in healing because of her own experiences of illness and trauma.

The Asches’ final Balinese work, Releasing the Spirits, was also shot in 1978 but not released until 1991. In this film, which concerns an elaborate cremation ceremony, the participatory and reflexive elements threaten to overwhelm the film completely as several different channels of exegesis compete for the attention of the audience. There is, on the one hand,
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commentary by four different Balinese participants, including Jero, sometimes shown in synch talking to Connor at a feedback session, sometimes offered in voice-over. At times, this commentary is so extensive that it is rendered as rolling titles over a black screen. Then there is also a voice-over commentary by Patsy Asch, partly reflexive, partly informative, as well as an intermittent off-screen debate between Timothy Asch and Connor about what actually happened during the course of the event as well as the reasons for making the film in the first place. It has to be said that these verbal and textual devices completely swamp the visual qualities of the film, and although apparently intended to elucidate what is clearly a complex ritual event, in fact they make it even more difficult to understand.

The anthropologists involved in the making of the Asches’ Indonesian films have all testified to the benefits for their own research of participating in these projects. There can also be no doubt about the descriptive ethnographic qualities of the films and their value as a teaching resource, particularly when viewed in conjunction with the accompanying textual publications. The need for the latter had been one of Timothy Asch’s long-standing concerns, which he was finally able to address in the form of a monograph about the Jero Tapakan films that he authored jointly with Linda Connor and Patsy Asch. However, in strictly filmic terms, as with Timothy Asch’s films about the Yanomami, these Indonesian films are arguably more significant for their methodological innovations than for their cinematographic merits. In a filmic sense, there is a certain restless and disjointed quality about these works while the technical standard of the cinematography is often disappointing, as Timothy Asch himself acknowledges in the Jero Tapakan monograph.

However, the authorial strategy of allowing the subjects themselves to narrate the films in which they appear, however mediated this may have been, and however imperfectly realised, was a genuinely original idea, at least in English-language ethnographic film-making. The same is true both of building an ethnographic film around a subject’s life history and of incorporating feedback processes directly into a film. These strategies may now seem almost self-evident, but in the 1970s and 1980s, as ethnographic film-makers were still exploring the possibilities that the recent development of portable synchronous sound had thrown up, the Asches’ films in Indonesia served to suggest several new ‘ways of doing’ ethnographic film.

Participatory film-making as political engagement: Ian Dunlop in Australia

Another leading film-maker to change his ‘way of doing’ ethnographic films during this period was Ian Dunlop, whose films about Aboriginal
people of Central Australia, shot in the years 1965–67, I considered in Chapter 3. In 1970, Dunlop started work on what would be a much lengthier series of films with the Yolngu Aboriginal community living at the former mission township of Yirrkala or on nearby clan homelands in northeast Arnhem Land, Australia.6

Dunlop went to Yirrkala commissioned by the Commonwealth Film Unit, the same agency of the Australian Federal Government for which he had been working when he made his films in Central Australia. His brief was to make a film about the social and ecological impact of the vast NABALCO bauxite mine that had recently started operations at Nhulunbuy, about 15 miles north of Yirrkala. He was firmly resolved to do this with the active participation of the Yolngu community but when he first arrived, he had no intention of making films about ritual and ceremonial life. However, he soon discovered that while the Yolngu were certainly very interested in the way in which his films could publicise the negative impact of the mine, they were even more interested in using film to record and preserve their traditional cultural activities so that these could then be transmitted to future generations. In fact, as Dunlop would later realise, the two concerns were merely different sides of the same coin for the Yolngu since their concern to preserve their traditional cultural forms was directly related to their concern to assert their rights over the land, which were threatened by the presence of the bauxite mine (figure 6.2, left).

Between 1970 and 1982, Dunlop visited Yirrkala on eight separate occasions and shot material on a broad variety of topics. The editing of this material was delayed by other commitments, but eventually, between 1979 and 1996, with the extensive assistance of Philippa ‘Pip’ Deveson, Dunlop cut twenty-two separate films from the footage shot in and around Yirrkala. In its final
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edited form, the total running time of this corpus of films, collectively dubbed the Yirrkala Film Project, is in excess of 20 hours, though the component films are of highly variable duration: the longest is almost 4 hours in its most extended form, while the shortest runs to a mere 15 minutes. Only a relatively small part of this important body of work is widely known about, though the recent making available of the complete project on DVD may help to remedy this situation.

Howard Morphy, who acted as an anthropological consultant on several of the films, has suggested that one can subdivide the Yirrkala Film Project into three broadly overlapping categories: first, the films directly concerned with the impact of bauxite mining and the Yolngu response to this, as per the original brief; second, the films about everyday life, including sequences of Yolngu engaged in traditional crafts as well as in the artwork that they now produce for outsiders; finally, the films about ritual and ceremonial events. Throughout all three categories of film, even the first, the complex and multifaceted connections between land, clan membership, personal identity and metaphysical belief, and the confirmation of these relationships in ceremonial performance and material works of art are a constant, recurrent motif.

In authorial terms, there are certain continuities between Dunlop’s Yirrkala films and his earlier work in Central Australia. In contrast to a number of the other leading ethnographic film-makers of this period, Dunlop continued, for the most part, to work with a professional crew. There is also a continuing heavy emphasis on detailed documentation filming supported by extensive voice-over commentary performed by Dunlop himself. But in other respects, there are major differences: the earlier films were silent and, for a mixture of budgetary and aesthetic reasons discussed in Chapter 3, they were shot on 35 mm black and white stock. The Yirrkala films by contrast were shot in 16 mm, mostly in colour, and although still heavily narrated, they also have ambient soundtracks and depend crucially on synchronised subtitled speech by the subjects. In methodological terms, whereas the earlier films were shot and edited in such a way as to make their authorship invisible, these films are participatory and reflexive, with Dunlop himself occasionally appearing in shot. They are still very obviously authored by Dunlop, but this is a much more overtly shared authorship than was the case with his Central Australia films.

It is the films in the second of these categories that are arguably the most innovative within Dunlop’s personal oeuvre from an authorial point of view, particularly the filmic biographies of Narritjin Maymuru and Dundiwuy Wanambi, both of whom became artists of national renown over the period that Dunlop was working in Yirrkala. These biographical films include the much praised Conversations with Dundiwuy Wanambi, released in 1995, a very personal film that was based on the relationship between
Dunlop and the subject as it developed over the principal twelve-year period of filming. In this film, the individual life-experience of Dundiwuy is used as a sort of gauge against which to measure the great changes that had taken place at Yirrkala more generally in those years (figure 6.2, right).  

However, of all the many films that Dunlop made in Yirrkala, it was those about ritual and ceremonial life that were the most significant, both for Dunlop himself and for his Yolngu subjects, even though in terms of general film-making praxis they might be considered the most conservative. The best known of these films is Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka’wuy, shot in 1976 and, three years later, the first of Dunlop’s Yirrkala films to be released. The location of the film was one of a number ‘outstation’ settlements then being established by the Yolngu in their traditional clan homelands, at some distance from Yirrkala. This particular settlement was on the edge of Trial Bay, in the homeland of the Marrakulu clan. This was the clan to which Dundiwuy Wanambi belonged and it was he who encouraged Dunlop and his crew to come to Gurka’wuy. Initially, the aim was to film a djungguwan, a major ceremony combining the commemoration of the dead and the initiation of a new generation. But shortly after the crew arrived, a young child died unexpectedly, so at the invitation of the child’s father and the elders of the Madarrpa clan to which the child’s father belonged, Dunlop temporarily put the filming of the djungguwan to one side in order to follow the child’s funeral instead.

In narrative terms, Madarrpa Funeral is very straightforward, following the chronology of the unfolding event. But if the chronology is straightforward, the symbolic dimension of the event is not. In effect, the ceremony, and by extension the film, interweaves two complementary processes, one physical and material, the other metaphysical. The former involves the preparations for the disposal of the body at Gurka’wuy, including the painting of the coffin and the digging of the grave. In parallel with these highly material processes, the child’s spirit is guided on a symbolic journey, by means of an extended series of songs and dances, through the homelands of the various clans to which his own is affiliated, including particularly the homeland of his mother’s mother’s clan. Finally, the spirit arrives at the nest of the Crocodile ancestor of his father’s clan, located far to the south in the waters of Blue Mud Bay. When the spirit reaches this metaphysical destination, the two parallel processes are reconnected as the child’s body is physically buried in its coffin back at Gurka’wuy, and the film itself then draws to a close.

In many ways, in terms of its authorial praxis, Madarrpa Funeral represents a continuation of the classical documentation strategies that Dunlop had been practising a decade earlier in Central Australia. The events of the funeral are mostly covered in long unbroken takes, competently executed on a handheld Éclair NPR by the cinematographer, Dean Semler. The original footage has been subject to minimal reduction through editing:
Morphy reports that around three-quarters of the original material was used in the film, which is a remarkably low cutting ratio for a professional production, even for an ethnographic film. The soundtrack is dominated by Dunlop’s extremely detailed narration, which continues throughout the film, further supported by intertitles and graphics. Though the protagonists may have invited Dunlop to make the film and though their speech is subtitled, it is his voice that provides the dominant explanatory framework for the event.9

This heavy narration now seems rather ‘tired’, as Deveson and Dunlop themselves put it when commenting on the film some thirty years later. Though it was generally welcomed at the time for providing symbolic and sociological contexts, at least by some academic reviewers, it poses the dilemma that the Asches also confronted when cutting Releasing the Spirits, namely, how to provide sufficient context to make an event adequately meaningful for the viewer without burying the film in an avalanche of words. Notwithstanding the very extensive commentary in Madarrpa Funeral, there was still a degree of oversimplification due to the inevitable time constraints of the filmic medium: according to Morphy, there is a tendency for the narration to suggest that the meanings attributed to particular features of the funeral are unambiguous and widely accepted by the Yolngu, whereas, in reality, there was often a range of opinions about these meanings.10

At 87 minutes, Madarrpa Funeral is a long film, but it is relatively short compared to the epic Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy, which was the film project that had brought Dunlop and his colleagues to Trial Bay in the first place. This film, in its original edited version, ran to a very challenging 233 minutes, divided into five parts. Although shot on the same visit to Gurka’wuy as Madarrpa Funeral, it was not released until ten years later, in 1989. Owing to its sheer length, it is not as well known as the earlier film, but it is the most complex and sophisticated of Dunlop’s Yirrkala films, certainly of those dealing with ritual subjects. In stylistic terms, it is in many ways similar to Madarrpa Funeral in that the narrative structure largely follows that of the event itself, the takes are long and the editing is minimal, and it is regularly punctuated by what one reviewer has called an ‘essay-like’ narration performed by Dunlop, again supported by intertitles and graphics.11 There is, however, a somewhat stronger sense of the subjects’ participation than in Madarrpa Funeral. Dundiwuy Wanambi directly addresses the camera at various points in order to explain what is going on, while his paintings of ancestral beings serve as a sort of recurrent illustration of beliefs about these beings which in turn act as a key to understanding the ritual action.

A particularly striking example of this is a scene in which Dundiwuy introduces the camera to a seemingly insignificant cluster of small rocks on the shore of Trial Bay and explains that this is the place where one group of his clan’s ancestral beings, the Water Goannas, came ashore.
rocks, he informs us, are the material remnants of the bubbles caused by
their breath. He then proceeds to draw with a stick in the sand, showing
how he represents this event in his bark paintings. He also stresses how
important these traces of ancestral presence are to him and that it is for
that reason that he has returned from Yirrkala to aid in the re-establishment
of his clan homeland.12

Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy is at one level merely an ethnographic film
about a ceremonial event. But, as with the MacDougalls’ film, Familiar Places,
discussed in Chapter 5, at the same time it acts as the visual embodiment
of a claim to the land based on ancestral presences. Moreover, the film
and the ceremonial event in combination serve as a means of transmitting
this claim across the generations through the simultaneous celebration of
the epic journeys of the ancestors over the land, the return to Gurka’wuy
for burial of the remains of a clan member who had recently died in
Yirrkala, and the initiation of a new generation of young boys. As such,
Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy stands as a strong counterclaim to the shameful
judgement of the Australian courts, delivered in 1971, that prior to the
arrival of Europeans, the country was terra nullius, without owners, thereby
legitimating the invasion of Aboriginal lands by, among many others, the
NABALCO bauxite mining enterprise on Yolngu land. In this way, although
Djungguwan at Gurka’wuy is clearly a film about mortuary practices and
beliefs about ancestors in primeval times, it is also an intensely political
film of immediate contemporary relevance, thereby fulfilling, in the most
powerful, even if in the most unexpected way, the brief that Dunlop was
given when he first set out to film in Yirrkala in 1970.13

Participatory film-making as political engagement:
Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling in Alaska

At around the same time as Dunlop was shooting his Yirrkala films, a more
explicitly theorised form of participatory film-making was taking place in
various Yup’ik communities in Alaska under the direction of Sarah Elder
and Leonard Kamerling. At that time, Elder was a schoolteacher in the
small Yup’ik community of Emmonak, close to the mouth of the Yukon
river. She had moved there in 1972, after studying anthropology at Sarah
Lawrence College in New York and then working for a period as an intern
with John Marshall and Timothy Asch in Boston. Her intention was to
use her position in the community to carry out participant-observation
field research as a prelude to making films there. Once in Alaska, she met
Kamerling, a film-maker from New York, who was engaged in making a
film further south in Tununak Bay.14
Over the next five years, Elder and Kamerling shot the material for eight films, which are now referred to collectively as the Alaska Native Heritage Film Project. The production of these films was based on a series of explicitly formulated rules that ceded a high degree of control to their Yup’ik subjects. Elder and Kamerling started from the principle the Yup’ik community should choose the topic of a film and also participate in that film. Anyone, at any time, could ask them to stop filming and if a subject changed their mind later about participating, they could ask for their image to be removed from the cut of the film. People were invited to speak in the language with which they were most comfortable, which in many cases was Yup’ik, and this speech was then subtitled on the basis of at least two independent translations.

In cutting the films, Elder and Kamerling had in mind the community as the first audience, themselves as the second audience and only then did they think in terms of other audiences. As the cuts proceeded, preliminary versions were shown to the host community and its approval sought. The final version was screened in the community and then multiple copies on VHS cassettes, a technology that had only recently become available, were distributed around the community. Both copyright and any royalties were shared with the community.

Initially, Elder had imagined that it would be possible to accommodate their film-making practice entirely to Yup’ik norms and dubbed this approach ‘community-determined’ film-making. However, she later came to realise that this resulted in films that were very ‘cumbersome’ and lacking in focus, particularly as her Yup’ik subjects were often very reluctant to cut anything out of the edits. She found herself obliged to admit that as film-makers who aimed to show their work, if not immediately, at least eventually to non-Yup’ik audiences, they needed to bring their own criteria to bear on the process of editing, at least to some degree. This led her to re-conceive their practice as ‘community-collaborative’, that is, as based on negotiation with the subjects to find an overlapping ‘creative space’ where both parties could realise their respective interests.

As with the Yolngu in their collaboration with Ian Dunlop, this common ground proved to be the Yup’ik’s desire to preserve a record of their traditional cultural activities for the future, even for generations unborn. In their lifetimes, the oldest generation had seen a radical transformation of their cultural life as a result of the impact, initially, of missionaries, and later of greater social and economic integration with the outside world. These older people were very keen that the traditional cultural activities that had survived the onslaught of new influences should be preserved on film before they too were lost. Although some middle-aged Yup’ik political leaders initially had reservations about Elder and Kamerling’s project, they deferred, in
accordance with traditional practice, to the views of their elders, and once the filming began, they too were fully supportive.

As a feminist, Elder had hoped their Yup’ik hosts would ask her to make films about domestic and family life, as this would have provided greater access to the experience of women. But what their hosts proposed instead were mostly films about male subsistence activities. This resulted in two notable films, *At the Time of Whaling* and *On the Spring Ice*, a film about walrus hunting. They also recorded a number of senior men telling traditional stories and legends: these were released as a trilogy of three short films under the direction of Katrina Waters in 1988. Two other films concerned more general aspects of contemporary Yup’ik life.¹⁵

Elder and Kamerling were able to involve women much more directly, both as performers and as interlocutors, in the most substantial work that they made with the Yup’ik. This was *Uksuum Cauyai – The Drums of Winter*, a highly accomplished 90-minute film constructed around the drumming, chanting and dancing that take place in connection with potlatch exchanges. These events, which feature prominently in the ethnographic literature of the region, involve the competitive giving away of goods to relatives, friends and even rivals, as a way of marking significant moments in an individual’s life cycle, from a first dance for a girl and a first hunt for a boy to a memorial for the recently deceased. These exchanges between the living are also conceived as a way of continuing exchanges with the dead since giving gifts to strangers is explicitly equated with giving gifts to one’s deceased relatives. Despite vigorous attempts to suppress them by missionaries and colonial authorities, the potlatch continues to be an important feature of indigenous life throughout the region (figure 6.3).¹⁶

In *The Drums of Winter*, potlatch performances are intercut with general shots of the Arctic environment and subsistence activities, as well as with a series of interviews, mostly very informal, in which older participants
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explain the significance of the potlatch as a form of exchange and how they experience the drumming and dancing, both as individuals and as a crucial aspect of their collective identity. At the other end of the age spectrum, a group of younger women describe their nervousness when they walked out to perform their First Dance. This contemporary material is intercut in a very effective way with archival images from missionary sources, and voiced extracts from missionary letters deploring the potlatch practices of the Yup’ik. These are in marked contrast with the powerful testimony of a contemporary Jesuit missionary who describes his own sense of being spiritually transported when he performed a memorial dance for a Yup’ik friend who had recently died.

The film ends on an uncertain note about the future: while the older people and the Jesuit missionary are confident that the potlatch ceremonies will continue, the younger women fear that they will die out because young men are not interested in performing. An ominous sign is that after the filming was completed, the kashim, the modest wood cabin serving as a dance house, steam bathhouse and spiritual centre, where much of the film was shot, was later demolished to make way for a new roadway.

As with all the films in the Alaska Native Heritage Film Project, the style is broadly observational, featuring long takes and a low-key aesthetic, and a complete absence of voice-over narration. Essential contextualising information is supplied through titles superimposed on synch images. The quality of the cinematography is exceptionally high, particularly in the lit scenes inside the kashim cabin. So too is the quality of the sound recording. Although the underlying methodology may have been highly participatory, the films themselves are only minimally reflexive: outside the context of interviews, there are only occasional references to the presence of the film-makers. In fact, even the interviews are more like oral testimonies than interviews in the sense that only on one occasion does one hear a question, and even that is posed by a local person rather than by the film-makers.

In her account of making these films, Sarah Elder acknowledges that the way of working that she and Leonard Kamerling developed with the Yup’ik was often difficult. Balancing their own interests with those of the subjects often proved to be ‘a real tightrope’. She admits that process could not be described as ‘efficient or neat or orderly’ – one expression of this being that eleven years elapsed between the shooting of *The Drums of Winter* in 1977 and its final release in 1988. But in compensation, she claims, the films that they made with this methodology have proved to be of interest to a range of different audiences, both internal and external to Yup’ik society. Across Alaska, they have been used in Native communities for a broad variety of purposes in schools, cultural programmes and for political advocacy. But they have also won all manner of awards at international film festivals. The peak of this external recognition came in 2006 when the National
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Film Registry nominated *The Drums of Winter* for preservation in the US Library of Congress. Here it joined a collection of the most celebrated Hollywood blockbusters and an extremely select collection of films classed as ‘ethnographic’, including *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, *Nanook of the North*, *Trance and Dance in Bali* and John Marshall’s film *The Hunters*.

**Reflexivity and adversarial film-making: John Marshall and the ‘Bushman myth’**

When John Marshall was finally able to return to southern Africa to film with the Ju/'hoansi in 1978, the work that he produced was also far more participatory and reflexive than his earlier films. Although these later films also had a strongly political cast, his objectives differed greatly from those of Ian Dunlop among the Yolngu or those of Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling among the Yup’ik. Whereas these latter film-makers had shared a common interest with their subjects in the documentation of traditional culture so that it could be passed on to future generations, Marshall’s objective was to work with the Ju/'hoansi to put their former hunting and gathering life behind them, and to establish themselves as farmers and cattle herders instead.

On the basis of his extensive first-hand experience, Marshall considered that the traditional hunting and gathering life of the Ju/'hoansi was extremely hard, or ‘thin’ as one of his principal subjects had put it. In practice, it was very difficult to make a living by hunting and gathering in the Kalahari and the Ju/'hoansi often went hungry. They were also beset with malaria and other illnesses. As Herero cattle herders encroached on one part of their lands, and another large part was assigned to a game reserve, their tenuous way of life became even less viable and they gravitated en masse to a government centre set up at Tjum!kui, a place where the Marshalls had set up camp in the 1950s. By 1978, when Marshall returned, the Ju’hoansi were living there on food handouts and makework jobs. Drunkenness, violence, hunger and tuberculosis were all common. Desperate to find an income, young Ju’hoansi men were signing up with the South African Defence Force to fight the SWAPO guerillas who were then still actively engaged in the struggle for Namibian independence.

Marshall chronicled these desperate circumstances in *N!ai, the Story of a !Kung Woman*, co-directed with Adrienne Mesmer and released in 1980. This is constructed around a biographical portrait of a woman whom Marshall had known since she was a child in the 1950s, and he uses this as a vehicle through which to chart the general decline of the Ju/'hoansi. In authorial terms, *N!ai* represented a radical departure from Marshall’s earlier work. During the twenty years in which he had been refused a visa by the
South African government, Marshall had worked on a number of general documentary productions and had moved far beyond the modest event-sequence films that he had developed with Timothy Asch in the 1960s. Among other projects, he had worked as a combat cinematographer during the civil war on Cyprus in 1964–65, while in 1967 he had collaborated with Fred Wiseman in making *Titicut Follies*, a searingly uncompromising observational portrait of an institution for the criminally insane in Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

*N!ai* was commissioned for US television and it bears the hallmarks of television documentaries of that era. Although it features a number of passages of observational shooting, including some disturbing sequences of Ju/'hoansi people arguing violently with one another, the film as a whole is structured around a series of formal to-camera pieces by the principal protagonist (figure 6.4, left). Partly in speech and partly in song, *N!ai* laments her difficult circumstances at Tjum!kui, though she attributes these not so much to troubles brought from outside but rather to the jealousy of her fellow Ju/hoansi who resent the fact that she gets paid generously for allowing herself to be photographed by tourists and other outsiders, including Marshall himself. The film is ostensibly (though not very convincingly) narrated by her too, with her commentary voiced by a voice-artist speaking English with an African accent. Although *N!ai* was participatory in the sense that it was clearly based on the close relationship between Marshall and a number of Ju/'hoansi whom he had known over a long period, there is very little evidence that the Ju/'hoansi had played any kind of role in the direction of the film.

Although *N!ai* herself expresses great regret in the English-voiced commentary for the freedoms of the old way of life – supported visually by extracts from the earlier films with newly enhanced soundtracks – Marshall had concluded by this time that a return to hunting and gathering was...
simply not sustainable. Not only had the territories available to the Ju/'hoansi been drastically reduced, but many young people who had grown up in Tjum!kui had no idea how to hunt or gather. Very few Ju/'hoansi of any age were interested in returning to a life that had been too ‘thin’ anyway.

To find a way out of this dilemma, in 1982, together with Claire Ritchie, a British social anthropologist, Marshall set up a foundation to promote agriculture and cattle herding among the Ju/'hoansi. This was initially funded by a donation from Marshall’s father, Laurence, but later attracted other major donors who would eventually contribute millions of dollars. But in attempting to achieve this seemingly simple humanitarian solution, Marshall and Ritchie soon came up against a number of obstacles. These included White farmers who wanted to employ the Ju/'hoansi as labourers, Herero cattle herders who wanted the Ju'/hoansi lands and waterholes, and, most intractable of all, a set of ideas about the Ju/'hoansi that Marshall would come to describe as the ‘Bushman myth’.

In effect, after returning to the Ju'/hoansi in 1978, Marshall dedicated the rest of his life both as an individual and as a film-maker to combating this ‘myth’ which, despite its insubstantial foundation, has had very real material consequences for the Ju/'hoansi. In the past, the ‘myth’ had taken various forms but by the 1970s, it consisted of a highly idealised conception of the Ju/'hoansi as noble hunter-gatherers who lived in perfect harmony with the environment. Poignantly, this iteration of the ‘myth’ was informed, at least in part, by Marshall’s own films from the 1950s. But since then it had been much enhanced and elaborated in popular mass media, as exemplified particularly by the feature film, *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, first released in 1980, which became a huge box-office success around the world.\(^{17}\)

In the course of the 1980s, Marshall made a number of films that were more in the nature of activist films than ethnographic works. Although he directed these films, he largely handed over the shooting to others and began to appear in front of the lens, playing a leading role in the campaigns to develop Ju'/hoansi farming and herding. Some of these films were shot in video, since this was much cheaper and allowed the extended filming of political meetings. But in the early 1990s, Marshall began working on a major film project that would combine the material shot for these activist films with his earlier work from the 1950s as well as with a large quantity of archival material from other sources. Eventually, this would result in *A Kalahari Family*, a five-part, six-hour series made for television, completed in 2002.\(^{18}\)

This series charts the experiences of one particular Ju/'hoansi family over fifty years, starting from the time that they first met the Marshalls in 1950. The first film in the series is based on material from the Marshalls’ expeditions in the 1950s, but all the remaining films – co-directed by Claire Ritchie – concern Marshall’s very personal twenty-year campaign to combat
the ‘Bushman myth’. As these films describe, it was not only the international development agencies and the SWAPO government that came to power after Namibian independence in 1990 that bought into this myth, but so too did the people who came to control the foundation that he and Ritchie had set up to promote Ju/'hoansi agriculture and cattle-herding. All these third parties, in their different ways, believed that the Ju’/hoansi should continue to live a ‘traditional’ hunting and gathering life within government-sponsored game conservancies, where they would supposedly derive an income from providing services of various kinds to visiting big game hunters, as well as from tourists and film-makers who would be charged for photographing the Ju/'hoansi themselves.

According to the evidence presented in _A Kalahari Family_, the income that the Ju/'hoansi derive from these sources has never been more than pitiful. Meanwhile, little or no money has been invested in Ju/'hoansi farming and herding activities, which in any case have been blighted by attacks from elephants and lions, both protected on game conservation principles (figure 6.4, right). At the same time, however, large sums have been spent on outside development consultants, managers and scientific experts who have been flown in from far and wide to produce large numbers of reports. The final part of the series, entitled _Death by Myth_, offers a truly devastating critique of the pieties of ‘sustainable development’, showing very powerfully how degrading it is for the Ju’/hoansi to live in squalor, dependent on handouts, only to be obliged to dress up from time to time in traditional costume and pretend that they still spend their time hunting and gathering for the edification of European tourists and film-makers. The six-hour series ends on a sombre note: after more than two decades and the investment of large amounts of money, the circumstances of the family who are the centre of the film remain extremely precarious. If anything, they seem to be worse off than they were in 1978 when Marshall first returned to the Ju/'hoansi.19

_A Kalahari Family_ is undoubtedly a masterpiece of television documentary. It succeeds in drawing together a vast body of material, very diverse in nature, and welds it together into a powerful, engaging narrative that amounts to a damming indictment of the way in which the Ju/'hoansi have been treated by agencies supposedly concerned with their welfare. Technically, it is of the highest standard: particularly impressive is the colour grading and post-synching of the sound that gives Marshall’s 1950s footage a new lease of life in the first part of the series. But in authorial terms, _A Kalahari Family_ is, generally speaking, even further from the norms of ethnographic film-making as I have defined these for the purposes of this book than was _N!ai_. Stylistically, it is heavily narrated, in part by a professional voice, in part by Marshall himself and, as in _N!ai_, in part, but not at all convincingly, by voice artists supposedly speaking the words of the Ju/'hoansi subjects.
in African-accented English. There are some powerful observational scenes, but interviews, formal and informal, predominate. The camera rarely lingers, the average length of shots is short. To the practised eye, there are innumerable shots that have been set up to ensure continuity or provide editorial ‘cover’: all manner of Jeeps putatively driven by Marshall speed past waiting cameras in clouds of dust. Specially composed string ensemble music, artfully based on Ju/'hoansi melodies, stir the audience’s emotions at appropriate points.

Indeed, as a television documentary, A Kalahari Family often seems closer to investigative journalism than to a documentary dedicated to social or cultural matters: indeed, there is even a scene in which Marshall ‘doorsteps’ a White farmer, only to discover that he is not at home. There is also a marked polemical quality to the films. One cannot help but suspect that the failure of the Ju/'hoansi to be productive farmers is not entirely due to the depredations of elephants and the delusions of development administrators, as the films imply, and that it may also have something to do with the difficulties of changing from hunting and gathering to a farming economy within a matter of a few years. But other than the occasional brief comment to this effect by the various administrators of the Ju/'hoansi foundation, this aspect of the problem is not examined, or certainly not in any depth.

A Kalahari Family is abundantly reflexive in that Marshall’s presence predominates, either on the screen or on the soundtrack. But, as in N!ai, although the Ju/'hoansi are Marshall’s (almost) constant companions and therefore clearly participated in the making of the film in that sense, there is no evidence that they played a significant role in actually directing it. Indeed, by the last film of the series, as Jake Homiak has observed, it is not exactly clear for whom Marshall is speaking, if anyone, other than for himself.20 In the first four films of the series, Marshall is engaged in a recurrent dialogue with the group of Ju/'hoansi whom he has known since the 1950s, though it is evident that there are other Ju/'hoansi with very different views about how to deal with the new circumstances of life. But in the last film, it seems that even some of his closest Ju/'hoansi associates are no longer prepared to go along with his ideas, a fact which, to his great credit, Marshall does not attempt to hide.

None of this should necessarily be considered a criticism of the series as a film-making concept: clearly Marshall felt that the interests of the Ju/'hoansi were best served at the turn of the millennium by a series of campaigning films that would be seen by millions rather than by more narrowly ethnographic works that could never reach such wide audiences. He had a strong and critical view to impart, sincerely held and based on vast experience. Moreover, he was prepared to articulate this view even if he could not carry all his Ju/'hoansi collaborators with him and even if it
involved criticising the very foundation that he and Claire Ritchie had set up. Surely no one could deny that *A Kalahari Family* is a most powerful example of sustained adversarial film-making on behalf of an indigenous people. But there is equally little doubt that it is primarily Marshall’s voice that is speaking through these films.

**The limits of participation and reflexivity**

The sharing of authorship through the adoption of participatory and reflexive praxes from the 1970s onwards greatly enriched the genre of ethnographic film. Facilitated by the development of portable synchronous sound and subtitled speech, these ‘ways of doing’ ethnographic film resulted in a large number of films which, in a broad variety of ways, afforded a much stronger voice to the subjects, in both a metaphorical and literal sense. However, the experience of the MacDougalls in making *Takeover* and of John Marshall in his long struggle to secure a viable economic future for his Ju/'hoansi subjects serve as a salutary reminder of the very limited power of documentary film – of any kind, not just ethnographic documentary – to combat powerful vested interests, however admirably participatory, or however conscientiously reflexive that film-making might be.

Moreover, a commitment to a collaborative praxis does not necessarily avoid conflicts of interest with members of the group or community with whom the film is made. John Marshall’s gradual falling-out with even his closest Ju/'hoansi collaborators offers one sobering example of this. Another is provided by the reaction of the Aurukun Aboriginal community to Judith MacDougall’s film, *The House-Opening*. As described in Chapter 5, this film concerns a ceremony to cleanse a recently deceased man’s house of the pollution of death and was narrated by his widow, Geraldine Kawanka. But when the MacDougalls screened the film back in Aurukun, they discovered to their surprise that not everyone in the community appreciated it. For Aurukun, now as much as then, is a highly divided community, riven by political factions. At the time the film was made, Geraldine was a leading member of one of these factions, and as chair of the community council she was also personally very powerful. The making of the film was therefore seen by her opponents as reinforcing her position. But given the nature of their relationship with the community as a whole, it was simply not possible for the MacDougalls to allow these conflicts to emerge in their films, nor to position themselves in relation to them.

In an interview given in 1994, David MacDougall commented that he felt, in retrospect, that the participatory mode of film-making that he and Judith had developed in Australia had been merely a transitional strategy,
appropriate to a particular historical moment, but no longer valid once Aboriginal film-makers had begun producing their own material.

In a sense it was a kind of idealisation, perhaps, of a notion of solidarity between Aboriginal people and sympathetic Whites. My view of it now is that it was a kind of film-making that rather confused the issues. In those films one never really knows quite who’s speaking for whom, and whose interests are being expressed. It is not clear what in the film is coming from us and what is coming from them … it’s a slightly uncomfortable marriage of interests that masks a lot of issues.21

In the late 1980s, after more than a decade working as film-makers for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, the MacDougalls resigned and set themselves up as freelance film-makers. As I describe in Chapter 14, they then began to make films that in authorial terms represented in some respects a reversion to the ‘way of doing’ ethnographic film that they had practised in Africa in the 1970s.

Under certain historical circumstances, such as those in which Ian Dunlop was working in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s, and Sarah Elder and Leonard Kamerling in Alaska at around the same time, it may well be possible to identify a common ‘creative space’, in Elder’s phrase, where the interests of film-makers and subjects meet, which, in both these particular cases, was a common interest in making a cultural record for future generations. However, even in these cases, in which the film-makers thought of themselves, in good faith, as making the films not only with the subjects but also for the subjects, they also intended to address audiences beyond the communities in which they were made. In order to do so, it was necessary both to shoot and cut the films in ways that made communication with those audiences not merely possible but also effective, or, to put it another way, to author the films in accordance with the conventions of documentary cinema which, by definition, were alien to the communities with whom the films were made. Hence Elder realised that she and Kamerling were engaged not in ‘community-determined’ but rather ‘community-collaborative’ film-making.

The general conclusion that one can draw from the varied experiences of collaborative film-making by English-language ethnographic film-makers from the 1970s to the 1990s that we have considered in this chapter is that, ultimately, it is necessary to come to terms with what Clifford Geertz, in relation to ethnographic writing, called ‘the un-get-roundable fact’ that all ethnographic accounts, be they in form of films or texts, involve ‘the representation of one sort of life in the categories of another’.22 The ‘un-get-roundable’ fact in the case of ethnographic documentary film-making is that films have to be authored in such a way as to make them accessible to audiences beyond the community in which they were made. This applies
not only in situations where the cultural differences between the subjects and the audiences are great, but even in situations where they are small or non-existent. This authorship may be tempered by the participation of the subjects in the conception and realisation of a film, and there may be a way in which a film based on such participation can be ‘for them’ in a real and genuine way. But in the last analysis, there is no getting around the simple if banal proposition that any ethnographic documentary is aimed, eventually if not immediately, at broader audiences, and that to communicate with those audiences, films need to be authored in such a way that those audiences will understand and appreciate them.

Notes
1 This section draws on the contributions by James Fox and E. Douglas Lewis to the festschrift dedicated to Timothy Asch’s work, which was edited by Lewis and published ten years after Asch’s tragically premature death in 1994 (see Fox 2004; Lewis 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). There is some inconsistency in the sources about the exact release dates of Asch’s films: here I have followed those given in the Appendix of the festschrift, on pp. 286–7.
2 Lewis (2004c), 280, n. 1 reports that the dubbing voice belongs to E. M. Pono, listed in the film’s credits as the ‘transcriber’ of the Rotinese narration. In addition to this film, Fox made another, shorter film on Roti with the Asches, The Spear and the Sword, released in 1988, which concerns the bridewealth negotiations between two Rotinese families.
3 The title of the second film is clearly a play on the famous catch-phrase ‘the medium is the message’, first coined by the media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, in the early 1960s, and later reworked in the title of The Medium is the Massage, the book that he wrote with the graphic designer Quentin Fiore (McLuhan and Fiore 1967).
4 See Connor, Asch and Asch (1986). Neither Fox nor Lewis has published dedicated accompanying texts, but they have both produced publications that are complementary to the films (Fox 1977, Lewis 1988). Both Fox and Lewis also collaborated with the Asches in shooting material on other topics, but this footage remains unedited.
5 Asch (1986), 49–53.
6 This account of Dunlop’s work in Yirrkala draws primarily on Deveson with Dunlop (2012), Morphy (2007), 330–7, and Morphy (2012). I am also very grateful to Pip Deveson for reviewing and commenting upon this section. Shortly before he began work at Yirrkala, Dunlop also directed Towards Baruya Manhood, a series of nine films made in collaboration with the French anthropologist, Maurice Godelier. Shot in 1969 and released in 1972, and with a total running time of 465 minutes, these films concern the male initiation ceremony of the Baruya of the eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. In terms of general praxis, these films are in much the same vein as his earlier documentation films in Central Australia in that they offer a heavily narrated descriptive account of the ceremony. Although they were shot on 16 mm colour film and have synchronous sound, Dunlop found, to his great disappointment, that neither Godelier’s command of the language, nor that of the consultant linguist was sufficiently precise for him to be able to subtitle the films (see Deveson with Dunlop 2012), 57. A shorter version of the film in French, a mere 202 minutes, was released in 1976 under the title Planète Baruya.
7 Conversations with Dundiyuy Wanambi was awarded the Royal Anthropological Institute Film Prize in 1996. The judges commended particularly the editing by Pip Deveson.
8 Howard Morphy has published a companion text that offers a detailed exegesis of the complex symbolism of the songs, dances and paintings that feature in this film,
as well as an account of the general process of making the film (Morphy 1984). Some years later, he also published a more general theoretical reflection on the interpretation of ritual symbolism that is primarily based on this film (Morphy 1994).

9 See Morphy (1994), 142. Dean Semler later went on to win an Oscar for Best Cinematography for his work on Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* (1990).

10 See Deveson with Dunlop (2012), 73; Morphy (1994).

11 See Myers (1993) for a detailed review.

12 This scene is reproduced as a video extract in Deveson with Dunlop (2012), 68.

13 In 2006, Film Australia re-released the film in a slightly shorter 199-minute version on a 2-disc DVD, accompanied by two other films about the *djungguwan*, one of which was shot in 1966 by Roger Sandall, the other in 2002 by Trevor Graham. See filmaustraliaceremony.com.au/s2.htm.

14 This account of the work of Elder and Kamerling is drawn from two main sources, Elder (1995) and Miller (2007).

15 For a comprehensive listing of the films made by Elder, Kamerling and Waters with the Yu’pik, see https://store.der.org/elder-sarah-c685.aspx.


17 In *Nlai* there is a farcical sequence following the multiple takes required to shoot just one scene of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. On the ‘Bushman myth’, the definitive work is by Robert Gordon and Stuart Douglas (2000), the first edition of which directly influenced John Marshall (see 1993), 4. See also Gordon (2003), Van Vuuren (2013).

18 Among the film-makers who worked with Marshall during this period were Ross McElwee and John Bishop (Bishop 2007). Marshall shared much of the editing of *A Kalahari Family* with Sandeep Bhusan Ray, and was advised and assisted by a number of anthropologists, including Megan Bieseke, Robert Gordon and Marjorie Shostak. See https://store.der.org/marshall-john-c331.aspx.

19 Wiessner (2003) provides detailed data that support Marshall’s general conclusions while a film shot in 2007 and released in 2010, *Bitter Roots*, directed by Adrian Strong, who worked as an agronomist with Marshall in the 1980s, and also featuring Claire Ritchie, shows that seven years after filming for *A Kalahari Family* had been completed, both the vulnerable situation of the Ju/'hoansi family at the centre of the film and the tension between wildlife conservation and the promotion of Ju/'hoansi farming remained entirely unchanged.

20 See Homiak (2003), 132.


22 Geertz (1988), 144.