Colin Young: the principles of Observational Cinema

The third Author whose contribution to the praxis of ethnographic film-making we consider in this part of the book is very different from the other two. Colin Young was both the original intellectual architect and also the initial practical enabler of the approach to ethnographic film-making known as Observational Cinema, which since the 1970s has been one of the most influential in the English-speaking world. However, although he may have shot some ethnographic footage now and again, he has not been a practitioner in the active sense of Jean Rouch or Robert Gardner. Although, like them, he may be considered an Author in the sense defined by Roland Barthes, that is, the originator of a praxis that has served as a model to others, he has been an Author who has not produced any major works himself (figure 10.1).

Nor, in contrast to the other two Authors, did Young have any formal training in anthropology or indeed any other social science involving the practice of ethnography. Having studied moral philosophy as an undergraduate in his native Scotland, Young moved to California in the early 1950s where, after taking an MA in Theater Arts and spending a relatively brief period working in various practical capacities in the feature film industry, he became a teacher of screen studies at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). By 1965, when he was still only 38, he had risen to the position of full professor. As a result of this background, Young had a sophisticated knowledge of the history, theories and methods of cinema, and it was this, rather than practical experience of film-making or any knowledge of ethnography, that he brought to the original formulation of the principles of Observational Cinema.1

The first appearance in print of Young’s conception of Observational Cinema took the form of a manifesto-essay in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, the landmark volume edited by Paul Hockings first published in 1975. Central to this conception was the idea that ethnographic film-makers should refrain from directing their subjects while on location and instead merely follow them as they went about their business. Once back in the
edit suite, they should eschew excessive manipulation or embellishment of their material through cinematic devices such as montage, pedagogical voice-over narration, melodramatic narrative, extra-diegetic music or special effects. The overall aim should be to offer the audience direct access to the material presented, to see what the film-maker had seen, so that they could form their own conclusions about it.

This conception of Observational Cinema was based on a mode of observation that was in sharp contrast to the ‘instrumental observation’ that Margaret Mead had called for in the Introduction to the same landmark volume. Here Mead proposes that the camera should be considered an instrument like the telescope or the microscope and that it should be used in an entirely detached manner, from afar. Mead’s hope was that in this way, one could produce entirely objective accounts of human behaviour.\(^2\) The form of the observation that Young was proposing could hardly be more different. Whereas Mead was calling for a completely detached form of observation, Young was calling for one that was highly engaged. In order to work, he claimed, it had to be based ‘on an intimate, sympathetic relationship between the film-maker and the subject – not the eye of the aloof, detached observer but of someone watching as much as possible from the inside’. Moreover, he believed that the film-maker should not be afraid
to reveal their presence in their film. ‘Trying to conceal our act is defeatist’, he argued, since it meant ‘throwing away the most important advantage of the non-scripted, observational approach and lending support to the fiction that our work is objective’.

This participatory dimension to Observational Cinema as conceived by Young serves to distinguish it very clearly from the praxis of Robert Gardner while bringing it closer to that of Jean Rouch – but not through mere coincidence. Young had come to know Rouch during the latter’s visits to the USA in the 1960s and he was a great admirer of his films, particularly *Chronicle of a Summer*. In the concluding paragraphs of his manifesto-essay, Young identifies this film as a ‘watershed’ in documentary film-making specifically on account of its participatory praxis. But there were also a number of important differences between Rouch’s praxis and that of the practitioners of Observational Cinema, as I shall describe in this chapter.

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**The emergence of Observational Cinema as a mode of ethnographic film-making**

Although Young has never had any formal training as an anthropologist, he has spent a great deal of time and effort collaborating with anthropologists in the promotion of ethnographic film-making. Why he should have done so is something of a mystery – even seemingly to Young himself. But a key factor was his encounter, in the early 1960s, with the charismatic figure of Edmund Carpenter, pioneer visual anthropologist, innovative communications theorist and interlocutor of Marshall McLuhan, also known in anthropological circles for his ethnographic work with the Inuit and in Papua New Guinea. In 1966, Young was invited by Enrico Fulchignoni, a UNESCO functionary in Paris, and an associate of Jean Rouch, to collaborate with Carpenter on the production of a report on North American ethnographic films about the Pacific region. Young was then invited to present this report at a conference in Sydney later that same year. It was there that he became aware just how diverse the inhabitants of the world of ethnographic film-making were. The participants included Jean Rouch and Robert Gardner, both of whom he already knew, but others whom he did not, including Ian Dunlop and Roger Sandall, both then engaged in forms of ‘salvage’ ethnographic film-making among Australian Aborigines, as described in Chapter 3.

On his return from Australia, in the autumn of 1966, Young launched the Ethnographic Film Program at UCLA. This involved collaboration between a number of different departments, including most importantly Anthropology, but as the Chair of Theater Arts, Young was the main driving force behind it. The praxis of Observational Cinema would be developed in a dialectical fashion over the next few years through the intersection of...
Young’s ideas about cinema and the practical film-making experiences of the students and members of staff directly involved in the Ethnographic Film Program, or of independent film-makers who came to be associated with it.⁷

Among those whose practical film-making contributed at this very early stage to the working out of the praxis was Paul Hockings, then an associate professor in the Anthropology department. Hockings was involved in teaching the Ethnographic Film Program in its very first year, 1966–67, and in the summer vacation he teamed up with Mark McCarty, a colleague of Young in Theater Arts, to shoot a film on the west coast of Ireland. McCarty acted as the cameraman and Hockings as the sound recordist, with two students from the Ethnographic Film Program, Mike Hall (later a BBC sound recordist) and Alex Prisadsky (later an experimental film-maker), as their assistants. Young himself acted as the producer of the film, though he did not go on location. Originally conceived by McCarty as a film about life in an Irish bar, the project was transformed under Hockings’s influence into a general ethnographic account of the small village of Dunquin, on the Dingle Peninsula. The film that eventually arose from this project, The Village, was released in 1968 and had a running time of 70 minutes, distilled from fifteen hours of rushes.

In effect, this represented the first sustained attempt to put into practice the principles of Observational Cinema that were being developed through the Ethnographic Film Program. There was no script and Hockings and McCarty made no attempt to direct the subjects by telling them what to do or say, nor did they ask them to repeat an action or a comment in order to do a second take. Although they were happy to include reflexive moments such as when subjects reacted to the camera, or made comments about the film crew, they did not attempt to engage proactively in conversation with them while shooting, let alone conduct anything resembling a formal interview. Nor did they pursue any particular narrative storyline, or seek to build up any particular characters. In the final film, there was no voice-over commentary to explain everything and hold the film together. What there was, however, was an ‘as if’ chronology constructed in the edit suite. This presented various scenes of village life, in reality filmed over three months, as if they were taking place over a prolonged summer weekend and culminating in a highly conventional manner with the Dunquin village crew winning the canoe race at the annual Dingle Regatta (figure 10.2).⁸

Hockings and McCarty wanted to encourage their audience to become as immersed as possible in the life of the village and to make sense of it from the inside, in the manner of an anthropologist newly arrived in the field. It was precisely because they felt that it would have inhibited this process of first-hand discovery that they decided to do without a voice-over commentary. Yet although specifically intended to evoke the experience of
ethnographic fieldwork, when the film was first screened to an audience of anthropologists, it was greeted with catcalls and derision. It was only later, once the Observational Cinema approach had become more established, that it came to be recognised as a pioneering example of an approach to ethnographic film-making that required the audience to do its own looking rather than be guided by a narrator.⁹

Two other film-makers whose work was particularly important in contributing to the development of the distinctive praxis of Observational Cinema in its earliest phase were Herb Di Gioia and David Hancock. In his manifesto-essay, Young frequently alludes to their work and quotes extensively from notes that Hancock had written about their film-making experiences. Although Di Gioia and Hancock were not formally enrolled on the Ethnographic Film Program, they were students of Theatre Arts and came into contact with Young and the programme around the time of its third year, 1968–69. Shortly afterwards, in the early 1970s, they made a series of four films in rural Vermont, later distributed under the collective title, Vermont People. While Hancock did most of the shooting, and Di Gioia most of the sound recording, they thought of themselves as co-directors and cut the films together.

Three of these films consisted of portraits of single male characters, all of whom were in some sense marginal to mainstream local society, while the fourth followed the experiences of an idealistic young couple of incomers who had abandoned city life and were trying to make a living as smallholders. Neither Di Gioia nor Hancock had any formal qualifications as anthropologists, but their films have a pronounced ethnographic ‘feel’, no doubt derived from the fact that prior to shooting both had had strong personal connections with Vermont over many years, knew their subjects well and had shared their lives in one form or another. Their films also all explore, albeit in an

10.2 The ‘as if’ chronology of The Village (1968). In reality shot over three months, this film presents scenes of everyday life as if they were happening over a prolonged summer weekend, culminating in the victory of the rowing crew, right, in the Dingle Regatta.
informal, conversational manner, the connections between their subjects’ material practices and their general ideas about the world.

Of the four films, perhaps the most emblematic of the ‘way of doing’ ethnographic film-making that Di Gioia and Hancock were developing was Peter Murray (1975), a 50-minute film which follows a craftsman, the Peter Murray of the title, as he completes the making of one maplewood rocking chair and then begins another. After a preliminary title card indicating the date, September 1974, and the location of Murray’s workshop, the film begins in the midst of the action as he works on the woven back of the first chair. There is no voice-over, nor anything approaching a formal interview, but as he proceeds, Murray engages in casual conversation with the film-makers, though this is more of a monologue than a normal conversation in the sense that we never hear the film-makers’ voices. He speaks softly and his comments are punctuated by long silences. We learn from his remarks that having been through the Peace and Love experience in California, he has come to Vermont to reconnect with nature, and in particular with woodland, a world that he had loved as a boy. He explains that he sees the output of his labour, the rocking chairs, as almost coincidental to his primary purpose which is to bring out, with the blade of his knife, the ‘light’ that is inherent in any piece of wood. When he is engaged in this work, he loses all sense of time.

Prompted by these insights, we are then encouraged to share the subject’s communication with the pieces of wood that he is fashioning through a beautifully executed series of intimate and discreetly lit sequences that show him carving, planing, drilling, sawing, constructing. The pacing is leisurely, while beyond the sound of this manual labour, a profound sense of silence pervades the workshop. Everything is done by hand since to use power tools, Murray explains, can force the wood to become something that it is not, and as in the treatment of a woman, he suggests, this prevents any kind of exchange or understanding. The film ends with a lengthy shot showing him, roll-up cigarette in hand and framed by the back of the second chair, silently contemplating his creation (figure 10.3).

In that it was based on an intimate relationship between film-makers and subject, and in eschewing commentary and interview in favour of informal conversation, Peter Murray exemplified a number of key features of the emergent praxis of Observational Cinema. In other respects, however, it diverged from what would later become the most common orthodoxies. One of these concerns cinematographic technique: that is, Hancock makes extensive use of the zoom, which other film-makers working in this way tended to avoid. The other divergent aspect is more editorial: as I shall discuss in the section ‘Restrained narratives’ below, notwithstanding normative comments to the contrary in Colin Young’s manifesto-essay, in actual practice a recurrent feature of Observational Cinema films are often barely discernible
narrative topoi that beneath the surface provide shape and direction to the films made in this way. In this sense, *The Village* was very much in line with what would become the most prevalent model in Observational Cinema. *Peter Murray*, by contrast, in that it boldly both begins and ends in the middle of the process of building a chair, could be considered somewhat divergent.¹⁰

The film-makers whose work would have by far the most substantial impact on the development of the praxis of Observational Cinema were David MacDougall and Judith Henderson, who met during the first year of the Ethnographic Film Program and who later married, with Judith taking David’s family name. Apart from some introductory courses that David had taken when he was an undergraduate at Harvard, neither had any prior training as anthropologists. But through the Ethnographic Film Program, they not only encountered the work of the leading ethnographic film-makers of the time, but also met many of them in person when they came to a major ‘Colloquium on Ethnographic Film’ that took place at UCLA in April 1968. These leading figures included Jean Rouch who showed *Jaguar*, then only recently completed. Later, David would describe his attendance at this Colloquium as a transformative experience, particularly seeing *Jaguar* for the first time. ‘From that point on’, he has commented, ‘I felt ethnographic film could do anything.’¹¹

However, it was not only ethnographic film, strictly defined, that the MacDougalls were exposed to during their time at UCLA. They also encountered the work of the Italian Neorealists, the French New Wave, Yasujirō Ozu and Akira Kurosawa among fiction film-makers and, among documentarists, the work of the Direct Cinema group and Frederick Wiseman. In Young’s own teaching, he encouraged students to take a particular interest in the possibilities of cross-fertilisation between documentary and fiction film-making, as well as to think about the epistemological status of film.
It was in this context that he would show *Chronicle of a Summer*, both on account of the questions that it posed about the relationship between fact and fiction, and because it shared the film-making process with the audience to an unprecedented degree. Yet as David MacDougall recalls, Young was careful to stress that the principal merit of this display of the film-maker’s methods was not that it guaranteed some higher degree of objective truth but rather that it encouraged the audience to engage more critically with the film.\textsuperscript{12}

All these influences were brought to bear on the films that the MacDougalls would make during the 1970s and 1980s, first in East Africa among the Jie and Turkana pastoralists, and later in Australia with various Aboriginal communities. As described in Chapter 5, over the course of this period of twenty years, their praxis became progressively more reflexive and participatory, particularly after they moved to Australia, which required the development of a different kind of relationship with their subjects. But taken as a whole, these films are now widely regarded as the epitome of the praxis of Observational Cinema in what might be called its ‘classic’ phase. By analogy with Clifford Geertz’s suggestion, cited in the Introduction to this part of the book, that Raymond Firth’s writings represented at that time the best example of the Malinowskian mode of textual authorship, one could say that David and Judith MacDougall’s films in East Africa and Australia represent the most comprehensive exposition of the mode of ethnographic film authorship originally conceived by Colin Young.\textsuperscript{13}

**Ethnographic film-making as ‘conversation’**

The most significant difference between the praxis of Observational Cinema in this ‘classic’ phase and the praxes of both Jean Rouch and Robert Gardner concerns the role of language. As described in Chapter 9, language was of very little importance within Gardner’s praxis: his subjects say little or nothing in his films, while over the course of his career, his own use of language in the form of voice-over commentary gradually diminished until in his last major film, *Forest of Bliss*, it is entirely absent. At no point, in any of his films, does Gardner ever ask his subjects an interview question.

As for Rouch, as we saw in Chapter 8, while he certainly made use of language, this was very much dependent upon the genre in which he was working: in his African documentaries, his own voice predominates, both speaking about and speaking for the subjects, while in his ethnofictional films, the principal mode of language takes the form either of voice-over performed by the subjects, or of linguistic exchanges between them, both of which are always in French. Though it is surely his best-known film, *Chronicle of a Summer* is atypical of Rouch’s praxis as a whole in that the dominant
linguistic mode takes the form of exchanges between the film-makers and the subjects, or of exchanges between the subjects that have been directly provoked or set up by the film-makers. In Rouch’s films more generally, although a great deal of dialogue took place between him and his subjects both before and after a shoot, during the actual process of film-making itself it is typically entirely absent.

By contrast, linguistic exchanges between the subjects, in their own language, were absolutely central to Observational Cinema in its classic form. Voice-over narration, on the other hand, was relatively rare. In these regards, the praxis of Observational Cinema was similar to a certain degree to that of the Direct Cinema group, whose works also served to some extent as a model for the Observational Cinema film-makers. But there was also a major difference: while Direct Cinema film-makers worked to the general principle that they themselves should not speak unless spoken to, in Observational Cinema as it developed at UCLA, linguistic exchanges between the film-makers and subjects could be initiated by either party.

Linguistic exchanges along both these axes – between the subjects, and between the subjects and the film-makers – were subsumed in Observational Cinema discourse under the general notion of ‘conversation’. The centrality of this notion to the praxis of Observational Cinema was flagged in *Turkana Conversations*, the name that the MacDougalls gave to the trilogy of films that they made among the Turkana in the late 1970s. It was also flagged in the title, ‘MacDougall Conversations’, which Colin Young gave to the review of those same films that he published in *RAIN*, the Royal Anthropological Institute Newsletter in 1982. In this same review, Young cites a letter from David MacDougall, in which the latter explains that the name given to the Turkana trilogy had first come to him some years earlier when making a film about the Boran pastoralists of northern Kenya with James Blue, another independent film-maker associated with the UCLA group. Although they had finally settled on a more descriptive title, *Kenya Boran*, MacDougall and Blue had originally thought of calling it ‘Boran Conversations’. MacDougall also reports that, quite independently, Herb Di Gioia and David Hancock had originally intended to call their series, not *Vermont People*, but rather ‘Vermont Conversations’.

In making ‘conversation’ a central feature of their praxis, Observational Cinema film-makers were aiming to go beyond the praxis of those ethnographic film-makers of their own era who, while observing their subjects very carefully, and while often having a close relationship with them off-screen, excluded any on-screen reference to this relationship, verbal or non-verbal. This was the central thrust of an article by David MacDougall that immediately followed Colin Young’s manifesto-essay in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. The title of MacDougall’s article – ‘Beyond Observational Cinema’
– initially caused some confusion since it appeared to suggest that MacDougall was proposing a film-making praxis that sought to go beyond the praxis of Observational Cinema as laid out by Young in the immediately preceding article. In fact, however, MacDougall was not arguing for the need to go beyond the praxis laid out by Young, since this too actively embraced the possibility of revealing the relationship between film-makers and subjects on screen in a reflexive and conversational manner. Rather the praxis to which MacDougall was referring was the one underlying the work of film-makers such as John Marshall and Timothy Asch, and indeed the MacDougalls’ own first two films among the Jie, *Naui* and *Under the Men’s Tree*, in which there are certainly some references by the subjects to the presence of the film-makers, but nothing resembling a fully developed conversation between them.\(^{15}\)

In order to underline the fact that the relationship between subjects and film-makers would be central to the praxis that he was proposing, MacDougall suggested that it should be dubbed ‘Participatory Cinema’. But although this would arguably have offered a more accurate description of the praxis of Observational Cinema as it developed over the 1970s and 1980s, this name never caught on. Instead, ‘Observational Cinema’ came to stand for the participatory, conversational variant of the film-making praxis that both Young and MacDougall were proposing. As Lucien Castaing-Taylor would put it, many years later, what happened, in effect, was that ‘an observational approach’ came to be understood ‘not in contradistinction to participatory or “reflexive” propensities, but rather as their consummation’.\(^{16}\)

Although the ‘conversations’ between film-makers and subjects in Observational Cinema could certainly entail the asking of questions by the film-makers, they did not take the form of interviews, at least certainly not interviews of the kind that is the standard fare of television current affairs documentaries, that is, a one-way interrogation of the subject by the interviewer shot in a different way to the main body of the film, usually in special conditions of lighting and camera placement, and which stands outside the temporal world of the main action of the film. Rather, the ‘conversation’ between film-maker and subjects in Observational Cinema could be initiated by either party and, all importantly, would arise – or at least would appear to arise – in the normal ebb and flow of the events being represented in the film. Also, given that these ‘conversations’ were often taking place in languages other than English, extensive use was made of subtitles. Indeed, the skilful use of subtitles was one of the defining features of Observational Cinema in its classic phase, and another feature that served to distinguish it from the praxis of Jean Rouch.\(^{17}\)

While both Young and MacDougall allude specifically to *Chronicle of a Summer* as an example of good practice in their contributions to *Principles of*
Visual Anthropology, the way in which the relationship between film-makers and subjects is handled in Observational Cinema is very different from the way in which it was handled by Rouch and Morin. In general, in Observational Cinema this relationship is managed in a very much more low-key manner. Although the film-makers may be frequently acknowledged, and may even fleetingly appear, they never take centre stage in quite the way that Rouch and Morin frequently do in *Chronicle*. Also, the questions asked by Observational Cinema film-makers are generally very much more discreet. There is nothing even close to the forensic, almost psychoanalytical questioning of the subjects of the kind in which Morin engages in *Chronicle*. Nor is much use made of all the other direct or indirect interrogatory linguistic devices employed by Rouch and Morin: in Observational Cinema in its classic form there are no postprandial focus groups, no on-screen feedback sessions, no vox pops, no soliloquies.

What there is, however, is the device that one might call the ‘proxy conversation’, which is used both in *Chronicle* and by Observational Cinema film-makers and which represents a kind of hybrid of the conversation between subjects and the conversation between subjects and film-makers. This form of conversation does not arise of its own accord, but comes about when a particular subject is asked by the film-makers to raise a given topic with another in the hope that this will provoke some sort of revelatory statement. David MacDougall provides a good example of the use of this device during the shooting of *Kenya Boran*. In this case, the film-makers asked one of the subjects to raise the delicate issue of the Kenyan government’s promotion of birth control during the course of a typical conversation between Boran men as they drank tea. Just as the film-makers had anticipated, this provoked a very strong reaction on the part of one of the senior men present who, in passionately rejecting the very idea of birth control, laid out with great clarity how the traditional pastoralist life of the Boran depended on men having many wives and a great number of children.18

It is important to stress, however, that for all their apparent spontaneity, the conversations of Observational Cinema, of whatever kind – between subjects, between subjects and film-makers, or proxy conversations – remained a device that could be manipulated for narrative purposes. That is, they were not necessarily situated in the final film in exactly the same place where, chronologically speaking, they had occurred in reality in relation to the rest of the action represented in the film. Rather, they would be placed where it best suited the narrative development of the film. But once a conversation had been used in the final edit, in sharp contrast to the television interview, it would typically never be returned to again, certainly not in synch, though very occasionally the soundtrack of the original conversation might be used as voice-over commentary elsewhere in the film.
Another feature of Observational Cinema in its classic form that serves to distinguish it very clearly from the praxes of both Rouch and Gardner is the concern with the experience of everyday life. Central to this engagement with everyday life was the representation of domestic spaces, which de facto tend to be predominantly female. Although still less prominent than the public spaces typically dominated by men, these private domestic spaces are generally given much more attention in Observational Cinema films than in the ethnographic works of either Rouch or Gardner, the majority of which were primarily focused on ritual or ceremonial events, or failing that, on hunting or warfare, all of which tend to be male-dominated activities in the traditional societies where they worked.

In the praxis of Observational Cinema, on the other hand, even when the subject matter is a major ceremonial or political event, the principal focus of attention of the film is not so much on the public performance of the event itself, as on the way in which this event is construed and emplaced within the ideas and relations of the everyday life of both women and men. Thus, for example, in *The Wedding Camels*, the second film in the *Turkana Conversations* trilogy, the actual wedding ceremony takes up no more than three minutes of the 103-minute film: the rest of the film is almost entirely dedicated to the incessant haggling over bridewealth and the implications of these negotiations for both the domestic well-being of women and the public renown of men. As the MacDougalls attempt to follow these negotiations, the public debates of men are recurrently balanced with scenes of the everyday life of women and children in the family compounds.

We might contrast this with, say, *Les Maîtres fous*. Having watched this film, one would be excused for thinking that there were no women present at all at the *hauka* ceremony which constitutes its central subject matter since the action is almost exclusively focused on the male mediums possessed by spirits. It is really only from the production stills that one becomes aware that, in the background, witnessing the event, there are a considerable number of women.

This concern to communicate a sense of everyday life-experience involved a configuration of the relationships between subjects, film-maker and viewer that was significantly different from the typical alignment of these relationships in the films of Rouch and Gardner. For everything that reaches the viewer of the works of Rouch and Gardner has always been heavily filtered through their sensibilities as film-makers. By contrast, an important feature of Observational Cinema praxis in its classic form consisted, in effect, of an invitation to the audience to consider the film-maker’s own experience of the life of the subjects as a sort of open channel through which they too...
could have an experience of that life. As Young once put it, the aim was to achieve an increase in the ‘congruency between the subject as experienced by the film-makers and the film as experienced by the audience’. However, there was no pretence that this strategy resulted in an account of the subjects’ life that was in any sense objective, or indicative of some definitive truth, nor even descriptively comprehensive: in none of these senses was this strategy ‘a recipe for enlightenment’, to use David MacDougall’s phrase, rather it was merely ‘a point of reference for communication’.19

This strategy had a number of practical consequences. First, it was necessary for the film-makers to share with the audience a sense of the nature of their relationship with the subjects, which in the ideal case should be close and intimate. An Observational Cinema film should never be based on the conceit of the ‘fly-on-the-wall’, as if the film had been made by a disembodied recording angel: it should be reflexive, freely incorporating not only conversations, but also any other manifestations of the relationship between subjects and film-makers in the form of look or gesture. It also required the film-makers to share with the audience a sense of the physical experience of participating in the subjects’ life. What this meant in practical cinematographic terms was the preservation of what MacDougall would later call the ‘distinctive spatial and temporal configurations’ of the circumstances of filming. This meant that special lenses, extreme angles, slow- or fast-motion or any other special effects, even zooms and pans, anything that suggested some form of cinematographic manipulation, were all to be avoided. It also meant including the inconsequential, the banal and the reiterative in the final edit as well as the moments of greater or more lasting significance.

The sense of the film-maker’s presence as a witness could be particularly well achieved by shooting long takes that allowed events to play themselves out within the take at the speed and in the form in which they had occurred in reality. But it could also be suggested by relatively short takes singling out for close observation particular actions or physical details that had attracted the film-maker’s attention. Although the juxtaposition of shots in the final edited film could also be significant, in general, what was more important in the praxis of Observational Cinema in its classic form was the nature of what happened within the course of the individual shot. It is this, MacDougall has argued, rather than the length of the shots per se, that is most critical to communicating the sense of witnessing an event.20

**The unprivileged perspective**

MacDougall sought to encapsulate these various practical entailments of filming everyday life in what he called an ‘unprivileged camera style’, a term that he first used in an article published in 1982 in RAIN, immediately
following Young’s review of *Turkana Conversations*. Although he referred to the camera when first giving a name to this ‘style’, in practice it had as much to do with editing as with cinematography. Indeed, given the way in which MacDougall later developed the notion, rather than call it a ‘camera style’, it would be more appropriate in my view to refer to it as an ‘unprivileged perspective’.

As with many aspects of Observational Cinema praxis, the notion of the unprivileged perspective was one that arose not from theoretical first principles, but through practical experimentation. It first came to the MacDougalls as they were editing the material that would eventually become *To Live with Herds*, their much-lauded film about the Jie. As they set about this task, they found themselves confronted with a problem: for reasons that they could not explain, the cut just did not seem to be working. After struggling with it for a while, they eventually realised that there was a conflict between the manner in which they were attempting to structure the material in the edit suite and what they had been trying to achieve while shooting, namely, to communicate a sense of everyday life in a Jie compound. In order to achieve this latter objective, they had mostly covered daily goings-on within the compound from a single static camera position, without using zooms or pans, and had made sure to incorporate both any acknowledgements of their presence and also inconsequential ‘low energy level’ events such as ‘one would witness in ordinary experience [rather] than choose as film subjects’. However, on occasion, in order to get a better view of some technical process, or to show all those involved in a conversation, they had moved their camera position from one side of the compound to another.

But once in the edit suite, they found that cutting back and forth between these two camera positions involved ‘a contradiction in premises’: on the one hand, they were trying to communicate a sense of ‘being there’ in the Jie compound, while on the other, in cutting back and forth, they were adopting the perspective of an external observer who could flit magically from one place to another, unconstrained by the social and physical constraints of the situation. They eventually concluded that in editing any one particular event in the Jie compound, they had to commit to either one or the other perspective, even if this meant cutting some material that might be valuable in itself.

In referring to this perspective as ‘unprivileged’, MacDougall aimed to distinguish it from the ‘privileged camera angle’, the term used in the screen studies literature on the Hollywood movie to describe a camera position that offers a perspective to the audience that is not available to the subjects. This may be for straightforward physical reasons (for example, the camera is positioned on the other side of a door as the subjects enter a room) or for social reasons (because it implies a knowledge of events...
or circumstances of which the subjects are not aware). However, in his later writings, MacDougall would develop this notion of the unprivileged perspective in a more editorial sense, going far beyond the limited issue of camera positioning.

MacDougall developed the concept in two directions in particular. The first was in relation to the quality of the knowledge of the world that an Observational Cinema praxis can deliver. On this matter, there is a subtle difference of emphasis in the writings of MacDougall and Young. While it is true that in his manifesto-essay Young extols the virtues of an Observational Cinema praxis as a means of allowing the viewer ‘to have a sense of experiencing the event’, he also mixes these references to experience with references to the superior quality and even quantity of information that an Observational Cinema praxis can generate. Thus he rails against ‘manipulative classical melodrama and didactic educational films’ because they both restrict ‘the flow of information’ and therefore do not allow the viewer to make their own analysis. The implication is that the Observational Cinema film-maker should aim to lay out the world as comprehensively and as impartially as possible – even while recognising that complete objectivity is a chimera – so that the viewer can then construe its meaning for themselves.

By contrast, in MacDougall’s writing the emphasis is not so much on laying out the world in an impartial way, as on sharing with the viewer the experience of both film-makers and subjects that their knowledge of the world is partial and incomplete, and in this sense is ‘unprivileged’. This sense of uncertainty and doubt is particularly characteristic of the MacDougalls’ films about the Turkana, and especially true of The Wedding Camels. It was on account of this quality that this film was characterised by Peter Loizos as ‘an exercise in sustained ambiguity’, while MacDougall himself has described it as a film ‘about what one can and cannot know’.22

The other direction in which MacDougall developed the concept of an unprivileged perspective was in relation to nature of the story told in an Observational Cinema film. As part of his general argument in favour of a participatory form of cinema, MacDougall proposes, in an article first published in 1991, that Observational Cinema film-makers should acknowledge that ‘the subject’s story is often more important than the film-maker’s’. This ‘stance of humility’, as he terms it in a memorable phrase, had been prefigured in Young’s manifesto-essay when he argued that directors should never ask for an action to be repeated, since this might lead the subjects to start ‘acting for him instead of for themselves’. But MacDougall develops this concept further in arguing that Observational Cinema film-makers should, as a matter of course, make a point of being open to categories of meaning that might transcend their own analyses. In practice, what this meant was actively allowing the subjects to take the story of the film off
in directions that the film-maker had not anticipated when they first started shooting.23

**Restrained narratives**

Even though an unprivileged perspective became both cinematographically and editorially a central principle of the praxis of Observational Cinema in its classic form, this did not mean that the structuring of the material in the editing suite from a privileged, external perspective was entirely abandoned. Observational Cinema films continued to be structured editorially, but very discreetly. In his manifesto-essay, Colin Young cites with approval the practice of the French New Wave feature film directors, who, having studied classic Hollywood cinema in order to identify the conventions whereby it achieved its effects, then used those same conventions themselves but in a more low-key way, leaving much more to the imagination of the audience. ‘They were not so much unconventional as restrained’, Young comments. ‘They left us space to fill and we participated.’ In his view, this was the goal towards which Observational Cinema film-makers should also be striving.24

As I described in Chapter 5, the narrative structures around which the films that the MacDougalls made in East Africa and Australia are very much like this. Although the narrative tropes on which these films are based are relatively conventional, they are so subtly deployed that one can often be barely aware of them. All their major African films are subdivided into thematically defined ‘acts’ in the manner of a stage play, a device originally inspired by *Song of Ceylon*, the classic film directed by Basil Wright and released in 1934. While this device is relatively obvious in the first film, *To Live with Herds*, it is more submerged in the others. Although the theatrical act device disappears in the MacDougalls’ best-known Australian films, these continue to be structured by highly conventional narrative tropes: a ‘crisis structure’ in the case of *Takeover*, the unfolding of a ritual event in the case of *The House-Opening*, and a journey in the case of *Familiar Places*. As we shall see when we consider their more recent work in Chapter 14, the films they have made since the early 1990s continue to have these conventional but restrained, almost invisible, narrative structures.

Indeed, such is the degree of restraint in the MacDougalls’ films that some viewers do not detect the narrative structures at all. These viewers would appear to have included even Jean Rouch, who on first seeing *To Live with Herds* famously declared, ‘This is not a film!’ Whether it was the apparent absence of a readily identifiable narrative structure, or rather the focus on the everyday of the life of the Jie that led him to make this remark, or, as is most likely, some combination of the two, is not clear. But whatever
the precise reason for it, the remark clearly testifies to a fundamental difference in praxis between the Observational Cinema film-makers and Jean Rouch, despite the great respect that the former had for the work of the latter and vice versa.25

Observational Cinema moves beyond the USA

In 1970, Colin Young left Los Angeles and returned to Britain to become the first Director of the newly created National Film School at Beaconsfield, about thirty miles west of London. Around the same time, his principal ally in the Anthropology department, Paul Hockings, left to take up a post with the MGM film production company, advising on a major anthropology series about human evolution. Without their involvement, the Ethnographic Film Program back at UCLA died a slow death. The Masters programme towards which they had been working never happened. However, from his new position at what would soon become the National Film and Television School (NFTS), Young continued to promote ethnographic film, and to keep in contact with his former associates in the USA. Shortly after he arrived at the NFTS, David and Judith MacDougall came to seek his advice on the final cut of To Live with Herds. Some years later, in 1980, they returned as ‘film-makers-in-residence’ for six months while they used the NFTS facilities to cut the last of their Turkana Conversations trilogy to be edited: A Wife Among Wives.

Another means by which Young kept his US links going was by persuading Norman Miller, the producer of the American Universities Field Staff (AUFS) series, Faces of Change, to produce it through the NFTS. This series entered production in 1972 and involved a number of people associated with the UCLA Ethnographic Film Program: James Blue and David MacDougall shot a series of four films in Kenya with the Boran pastoralists, advised by the Manchester anthropologist Paul Baxter, while Herb Di Gioia and David Hancock shot a series of four films in Afghanistan with the Harvard anthropologist, Louis Dupree. The best known of the latter is Naim and Jabar, released in 1974, which concerns the relationship between two teenage boys as they are growing up in rural Afghanistan in the years before the Russia’s invasion in 1979.26

It was also during his early years at the NFTS that Young wrote the manifesto-essay on Observational Cinema that appears in Principles of Visual Anthropology. This volume was edited by Paul Hockings, and arose from a major international conference held in Chicago in 1973. Young was unable to attend the conference himself, but through the persistence of Hockings, was persuaded to produce his contribution some six months later. Eventually published in 1975, this volume played an important role in the establishment of the academic sub-discipline of Visual Anthropology with the result that
both Young’s manifesto-essay and David MacDougall’s counterpoint contribution, ‘Beyond Observational Cinema’ became standard reference texts on visual anthropology programmes across the world.

Around the same time, Young started to use NFTS resources to encourage ethnographic film-making in the Observational Cinema manner outside the USA. He became a regular participant in ethnographic film festivals across Europe but also went further afield, taking part in a conference at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) in Canberra in May 1978. This was organised by the MacDougalls, who had recently moved to Australia to take up positions in the AIAS Film Unit.

But Young’s most systematic project to promote ethnographic film-making following his return to the UK was the training programme that he developed at the NFTS in conjunction with the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI). This programme, which was funded by the Leverhulme Trust and which ran from 1984 to 1987, represented a reprise of the UCLA programme in that it was based on a similar principle of bringing together film students and anthropologists so that they would learn from one another. Ultimately, however, the aim was to train the anthropologists to make their own films, without the need for technical assistance from professional film-makers. Although Young played a major role in enabling this programme, it was actually directed on a day-to-day basis by Herb Di Gioia, whom Young had by then appointed to run the documentary department of the NFTS.

Along with the ethnomusicologist John Baily, I was fortunate enough to be selected for the first round of this programme myself and over two years, I received a thorough training as a director-cameraman grounded in the Observational Cinema ‘way of doing’ ethnographic film-making. The programme was very generously funded and even allowed for the making, each year, of an extended 16 mm film in whichever part of the world the participating anthropologists had some previous ethnographic research experience. In my own particular case, this allowed me to make three films in Venezuela in collaboration with Georges Drion, who was attending the NFTS as a conventional film student. In the first year, we made *Reclaiming the Forest*, which concerned indigenous gold-miners on the Gran Sabana in the southeast of the country, while in the second year, we were able to spin out the budget to shoot *Cuyagua*, a two-part film about religious ceremonies in a community of African descent on the Caribbean coast. Although ostensibly Catholic, these ceremonies included powerful elements of African music and dance (figure 10.4).

Although a number of the films produced by the RAI/NFTS programme were later screened at international ethnographic film festivals around the world, undoubtedly the most significant legacy of the programme was the impact that it had on the teaching of visual anthropology in UK academic
institutions. When I was appointed to direct the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester in 1987, shortly after completing the programme at the NFTS, I was able to place training in Observational Cinema methods at the heart of our MA programme. It remains so to this day, more than thirty years later and after more than 400 students have passed through the programme. My colleagues on the RAI/NFTS programme were similarly able to promote the Observational Cinema approach in their own subsequent academic careers.

The diversification of Observational Cinema

As a result of these various initiatives, the general influence of Observational Cinema has spread far beyond the immediate circle of those who had been involved in the Ethnographic Film Program at UCLA and, along with Direct Cinema and various other interpretations of the cinéma-vérité approach contributed in a major way to the general zeitgeist in ethnographic filmmaking in the English-speaking world in the 1980s. Making a particularly important contribution to this general ferment of related approaches was Celso and Cora, a film released in 1983. This highly acclaimed account of the everyday lives of a young couple living in an impoverished barrio in Manila was directed and shot by the Australian film-maker, Gary Kildea. In many ways, this film exemplifies the praxis of Observational Cinema in its original form with a determination and rigour that even goes beyond the work the Ethnographic Film Program’s original participants.

Prior to making Celso and Cora, Kildea had spent a year at the NFTS in 1974–75. By this time, he was already an experienced film-maker, having worked since 1970 in Papua New Guinea, where he made a number of...
films in collaboration with another leading Australian documentarist, Dennis O’Rourke. However, prior to *Celso and Cora*, Kildea was probably most known for *Trobriand Cricket*, released in 1974, which he made in conjunction with Jerry Leach, an anthropologist then at the University of Cambridge. As suggested by the subtitle, *an ingenious response to colonialism*, this film concerns the adaptation of the game of cricket to the norms of Trobriand competitive ceremonial performance. In terms of its praxis, *Trobriand Cricket* had been quite unlike *Celso and Cora*, combining the very different agendas of its two makers: while the first part involves voice-over commentary, interviews, even archival footage, and is a reflection of the pedagogical concerns of Leach, the second part of film reflects Kildea’s already developing interest in an observational mode of film-making.

Kildea applied to study at the NFTS because he wanted at that stage in his career to become a fictional feature film-maker. However, while he was there, as he himself has put it, Colin Young ‘gently’ made sure that he was introduced to ‘the best that Observational Cinema of the day could offer’, and this prepared the way for his ‘eventual return to the fold’ of documentary. But of all the influences to which Young introduced Kildea while he was at the NFTS, the one that he himself believes had the most fundamental impact on his career was that of the Japanese feature film director, Yasujirō Ozu. The subtitling of *Celso of Cora* as *A Manila Story*, is a direct *hommage* to Ozu’s classic film, *Tokyo Story*, released in 1953.28

*Celso and Cora* shows the eponymous couple struggling over a three-month period to make ends meet as cigarette vendors on the street while trying to support themselves and two small children. As in the works of the MacDougalls, conversation plays a central role in the film, both between the two principal subjects as well as between the film-makers and the subjects. A photograph of the film-makers with the subjects, placed right at the beginning of the film and accompanied by some brief remarks in voice-over by Kildea explaining the circumstances of film-making, serves to give the viewers a sense of to whom the subjects are talking. These conversations were greatly facilitated by the fact that the Filipina sound recordist, Rowena Katalinekasan-Gonzalez, spoke Tagalog, the lingua franca of the Philippines spoken by Celso and Cora, while Kildea himself had some familiarity with it too. This circumstance, coupled with the remarkable loquacity of Celso and Cora, and their total lack of self-consciousness, gives these conversations a fluency and energy that are rare even in the MacDougalls’ films.

Also as in the ideal-typical Observational Cinema film, the action of *Celso and Cora* concerns everyday life, including domestic spaces as much as life on the streets, with Cora playing just as prominent a role in the film as Celso, except in the latter part of the film, following a bust-up, when she takes off with one of the children and goes to live with her mother.
There is one ritual event in the film, by the graveside of Cora’s late father, but this is passed over rapidly. The camera is radically unprivileged, always adopting the perspective of someone deeply immersed in the action: this was taken to the extent of rejecting a striking shot taken from the driver’s cab of a train passing through the barrio, because, Kildea reasoned, this was a perspective that was not available to the subjects and as such, it was therefore not appropriate to include it in the film. More generally, there is a strong point-of-view feel to many of the shots, notably those that follow the protagonists as they walk through the narrow alleyways of the barrio. Most of the shots in the film are in fact long and well executed sequence-shots. Most strikingly of all, these are separated from one another by short sections of grey leader, as if to reject the artificiality of continuity editing.  

Yet, at the same time, despite this refusal to use conventional editorial devices at the level of the individual sequence-shot, there is still a ‘restrained’ though highly conventional narrative topos underlying the progression of the film. The presence of this narrative structure is signalled in Kildea’s opening remarks, albeit in a somewhat coded manner, when he explains: ‘this story has been constructed from fragments of [the subjects’] lives, taken over a three-month period’. This allusion to the construction of fragments refers to the fact that the course of the events shown in the film has been manipulated in such a way as to produce a very familiar narrative arc: that is, the film builds to a climactic argument between Celso and Cora but shortly before the end there is is a reconciliation and the film returns to the situation in which the family had been shown at the beginning of the film. This, in its circularity, and entirely intentionally, provides a sense of narrative closure (figure 10.5). In that it involves this marked contrast between the overt demonstration of the absence of manipulation of the filmic text at the level of the shot or sequence and the more covert presence
of an underlying narrative that is restrained but nevertheless constructed, *Celso and Cora* is entirely typical of the praxis of Observational Cinema.

In his subsequent work, Kildea has moved away from the particularly rigorous interpretation of the principles of Observational Cinema that *Celso and Cora* represents.\(^3\) Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 5, the MacDougalls’ film-making praxis has also changed over the years, becoming more participatory as they moved the main location of their filming from Africa to Australia. Since then, after they left the AIAS in the late 1980s and began making films elsewhere, mostly in India, the MacDougalls’ work has changed again, in some senses moving even further away from the principles of Observational Cinema as they were originally formulated, though in other senses returning to them, as I discuss at some length in Chapter 14.

For our part, at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, we continue to instruct our students in the principles of Observational Cinema at the initial stages of their training, since we believe that it remains a highly effective mode of film authorship for a range of ethnographic purposes, with many points of overlap with ethnographic practice more generally, particularly in its emphasis on everyday experience and the importance of immersive, first-hand fieldwork. But over time, it has become clear to us that Observational Cinema also has its limitations and that some ethnographic topics or situations call out for a different approach. Accordingly, in the later stages of the training offered on our MA programme, we introduce the students to alternative approaches and encourage them to think how these may be combined with the principles of Observational Cinema, or if the circumstances require it, even adopted in preference to the latter.

All this was anticipated by Colin Young who closes his original manifesto-essay with the comment that any intellectual discipline ‘will outgrow its early enthusiasms and change its methodologies’, adding that it is a ‘waste of time’ to argue for a single method since there may be any number of different ways to achieve one’s goals.\(^3\) By virtue of a powerful imagination and a determination to overcome institutional obstacles, Colin Young created the springboard in 1960s UCLA for a mode of documentary film authorship whose influence has expanded across the world of ethnographic cinema, like ripples across a pond, transforming itself as it goes.

**Notes**

1 This chapter draws extensively on a series of conversations that I have had with Colin Young over thirty years. These are presented at greater length in a recent article (Henley 2018).
Part II: Authors

4 Young (1995), 112.

5 Around the time that Young first met Edmund Carpenter, he was the head of the Anthropology Department at San Fernando Valley State College (later the State University of California at Northridge). Previously he had been at the University of Toronto, which is where he had met Marshall McLuhan. For a good account of Carpenter’s extraordinarily diverse intellectual history, see Prins and Bishop (2001–2). Carpenter died in 2011.

6 The UNESCO report presented at Sydney was published as Young with Carpenter (1966). This was later incorporated into a more general catalogue on ethnographic films about the Pacific region edited by Jean Rouch and Monique Salzmann (1970).

7 There is some uncertainty about when the term Observational Cinema first came to be used of the praxis emerging from the Ethnographic Film Program. According to some of those involved, it was already in circulation in the 1960s while the Ethnographic Film Program was active. The first use of the term in print, on the other hand, is often said to be in an article published in 1972 by Roger Sandall. But although Sandall cites the MacDougalls’ early work, *To Live with Herds*, as an example of what he considers to be ‘observational cinema’ (without capitalisation), more generally his conception of this praxis excludes any of the more reflexive and participatory elements that are integral to Colin Young’s presentation of Observational Cinema in his manifesto-essay (see Sandall 1972).

8 Both Hockings (1988) and McCarty (1995) have written amusing accounts about the making of this film. For a definition of an ‘as if’ chronology, see p. 104 of this book.

9 See Hockings (1988), 154–5, for a vivid description of the first public screening, which took place at the American Association of Anthropologists meeting in Seattle in December 1968. For a more extended discussion of *The Village*, see Henley (2018), 203–5.

10 The other three films of the *Vermont People* series were *Duwayne Massure* (1971), *Chester Grimes* (1972), and *Peter and Jane Flint* (1975). Tragically, the partnership between Di Gioia and Hancock was brought to a premature end by Hancock’s death at the age of 30 in 1976. See Grimshaw and Ravetz (2009), 53–78 for a more thorough analysis of their work.


13 This is not, however, a universal view. In their book *Observational Cinema*, Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz suggest that on account of their more reflexive and participatory elements, not only the MacDougalls’ Australian films, but even their Turkana trilogy might be considered ‘a critique of the genre’ and for this reason, they do not discuss them in any detail (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009), 79.

14 See Young (1982a), 5–6.

15 The work of John Marshall and Timothy Asch is described in Chapter 4, while the MacDougalls’ early films among the Jie are described in Chapter 5, pp. 156–7. David MacDougall has explained in a personal communication that the unfortunate conjunction of titles in *Principles of Visual Anthropology* arose because at the time that the volume was in press, he himself was away in the field in Africa, Colin Young was in the UK, and Paul Hockings, the editor, was in Chicago. As a result, it was only after the volume had been published that the potential for confusion became apparent.

16 Taylor (1998), 3. Writing more recently about this praxis, David MacDougall has commented, “‘Observational’ … has always seemed to me a curious word to apply to it. Whatever form documentary takes, it is generally a more interactive process than the word implies … if I was observing, I was also being observed. ‘Participant-observation’, long a watchword of anthropologists in the field, would seem to be the better term. But we are stuck with ‘observational cinema’, so let it stand’ (MacDougall 2019), 119.

310
17 See MacDougall (1998d).
18 MacDougall (1995a), 127.
19 Young (1982b), 63; MacDougall (1998e), 205. See also MacDougall (2019), 2.
21 This article was later republished in a collection of MacDougall’s essays. All the quotations in the following paragraphs are from this republication (MacDougall 1998e), passim.
23 Young (1995), 102, 105; MacDougall (1998e), 156.
24 Young (1995), 103.
26 *Naïm and Jabar* is distributed by DER, along with the three shorter films that Di Goia and Hancock made in Afghanistan. See www.der.org/films/faces-of-change-afghan.html. See Chapter 5, footnote 5, p. 173 for further details about Blue and MacDougall’s film on the Kenya Boran.
27 Later Professor of Ethnomusicology at Goldsmiths, University of London, John Baily went on to make a series of films on Afghan music, his specialist interest and to encourage his doctoral students to do likewise (see Baily 2017). The other participants in the programme were Marcus Banks, who as professor and head of the School of Social Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at Oxford developed a visual anthropology Masters programme there and also wrote an important textbook on visual methods of social research (Banks and Zeitlyn 2015), and Felicia Hughes-Freeland, who set up a practice-based visual anthropology programme at the University of Wales at Swansea and now continues to be actively involved in the field as a research associate of the School of Oriental and African Studies. As a sort of further extension to the RAI scheme, Anna Grimshaw, later Professor of Visual Culture at Emory University, Atlanta and co-author of a major study of Observational Cinema (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009), but then a newly appointed lecturer at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, attended the NFTS for a period in the academic year 1991–92. However, she was funded by the Granada Centre and the University of Manchester rather than through the RAI scheme.
28 Gary Kildea, personal communication, August 2018. For a more extended account of Kildea’s career, see Crawford (2004) and Kildea (2007).
30 See Kildea’s comments in Kildea and Willson (1986), 15–16.
31 A comprehensive review of Kildea’s later films is unfortunately not possible here, but in Chapter 16, I consider at some length *Koriam’s Law and the Dead Who Govern*, a film that he made in conjunction with Andrea Simon and which was released in 2005, see pp. 466–70.
32 Young (1995), 113.