Beyond the ‘disappearing world’ – and back again

In a purely technical sense, the quality of the *Disappearing World* films was a match for most of the films considered in previous parts of this book. This can largely be attributed to the fact that many of those who worked on the strand were members of television crews who had honed their skills over many years. But this also had a major downside: television crews at that time were required to belong to a trade union and as a result, whatever their personal commitment and interest might have been, they were bound by a series of agreements between their unions and Granada Television management. These dealt with such matters as crewing numbers, overtime rates and meal breaks and often greatly constrained the way in which the crews could work on location. These production conditions therefore had a direct impact on the collective authorial praxis of the *Disappearing World* strand.

For most of the period that the strand was in production, the management and unions at Granada Television worked to a general agreement whereby a documentary crew would normally consist of a team of at least six people: the director-producer, a researcher, a cameraperson and assistant, and a sound recordist and assistant. If anything other than natural lighting was involved, an electrician and an assistant also had to be added to the crew. Similar norms were applied across all the commercial television channels and to BBC documentary productions also, though the precise conditions of their union agreements were somewhat different. But whatever the production company, the idea that a director could also shoot their own material, as recommended by Jean Rouch, or as much later would become a common occurrence in British television documentary too, was completely out of the question.¹

For the *Disappearing World* producers, these general agreements about crewing levels represented a major problem: not only would a large crew increase the budget to unsustainable levels on a foreign shoot, but the presence of so many outsiders in many of the small traditional communities in which they aimed to work could be unsettling. For a period, in the early
years of the strand, a special agreement was reached whereby the Disappearing World films could be shot with a ‘short’ crew of only four people: director-producer, researcher, cameraperson and sound recordist. But towards the end of the 1970s, these agreements unravelled, Disappearing World was discontinued and many of the directors in the Disappearing World production team left Granada Television. Although these industrial relations problems would later be resolved and the strand would start up again, by then the film-makers who had left the strand had begun producing films based on a similar format elsewhere in British television.

Beyond Disappearing World

Those who left Granada Television at the end of the 1970s included the original series producer, Brian Moser, who went to work for another regional broadcaster, ATV, shortly to become Central Television, which was based in Birmingham. With this company, Moser produced a number of films involving collaboration with academic anthropologists. The first was People of the Barrio (1980), a film based on the research of his wife, anthropologist Caroline Moser, in a shantytown in Guayaquil, Ecuador. This involved some nine months of pre-production research by Brian Moser himself and generally conformed to the Disappearing World one-by-four format. The research phase of the project was actually funded by Granada Television, but when the Disappearing World strand closed down, Moser took the project to ATV.

Later in his career, Moser would make a number of further films with academic anthropologists. These included A Small Family Business, based on the work of Stephen Hugh-Jones. This was shot in the Colombian Vaupés region, where they had worked together before in making War of the Gods, a film about missionary activity that had formed part of the very first series of Disappearing World in 1971. This new film was the first in a series about cocaine trafficking that was broadcast in 1985. This series also included God Gave Us the Leaf, a film about coca cultivation in the Bolivian Andes, for which Moser was advised by the Bolivian anthropologist, Mauricio Mamani, among others. Later still, in making Before Columbus, a series broadcast in 1992 to mark the 500th anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of the Americas by Europeans, Moser worked closely with the US anthropologist Stephan Schwartzman.

However, the most extensive recycling of the Disappearing World format in these years was by Chris Curling and Melissa Llewelyn-Davies, who also left Granada when the strand closed down, and who were appointed as the executive producers of a new strand based at BBC Bristol. Between 1982 and 1985, under the general title, Worlds Apart, they oversaw the broadcast
of eleven films based on the research of consultant anthropologists. Five of these conformed more or less to the standard one-by-four Disappearing World format and included The Panare: Scenes from the Frontier, broadcast in 1982, which was directed by Curling and based on my own field research in Venezuelan Amazonia.

The remaining six films were all about the Maasai of the Loita region in southern Kenya, close to the Tanzanian border, and were directed by Llewelyn-Davies, based on her own field research. Although these films still owed a great deal to the stylistic conventions and technical praxes typical of Disappearing World, they also broke new ground in the authorship of British television ethnographic film and for this reason, I consider them separately in the latter part of this chapter, in a section dedicated exclusively to Llewelyn-Davies’s Maasai films.

The early 1980s also saw the launching of a new terrestrial television channel in Britain, Channel 4, which was set up with a brief to produce innovative forms of programming. One of its first contributions to ethnographic film-making was People of the Islands, broadcast in 1982. This was directed by Hugh Brody and concerned various Inuit communities in the Canadian Arctic, on Baffin Island and some other smaller islands north of Hudson Bay. In authorial terms, it built upon the collaborative methodology that Brody had first developed with Mike Grigsby in making The Eskimos of Pond Inlet for the Disappearing World series, as described in Chapter 11. An additional innovative feature was that the film was part-funded by the Inuit community who were the subjects of the film.

Over the course of the ensuing decade, Channel 4 supported a number of documentary series that were ‘para-ethnographic’ in the sense defined in the Introduction to this part of the book. That is, although they were not based on academic ethnographic research, they nevertheless possessed a certain degree of ethnographicness as a result of having been made in the course of a prolonged period of immersive cohabitation with the subjects and also because they explored the multiple connections between practices, relations and ideas that underpinned the social worlds of those subjects.2

These para-ethnographic series took a variety of different forms. A particularly interesting example was Caught in a Web, a series in three parts, each a single television hour in duration, which compared and contrasted life in a traditional village in rural Dorset (or more strictly speaking a cluster of small hamlets) with life in Villes-sur-Auzon, a village of Haute Provence in France. The director was Toni de Bromhead, a film-maker trained at the NFTS where she had been greatly influenced by Colin Young and his ideas about Observational Cinema. Prior to attending the NFTS, de Bromhead had also studied social anthropology at the London School of Economics, where she had encountered the ethnographic literature on the Mediterranean
region. By special dispensation from the technicians’ union, she was allowed to direct and shoot *Caught in a Web* herself, supported only by a sound recordist, in the manner recommended by proponents of Observational Cinema. The series was commissioned not long after the launch of Channel 4 in 1982, though it was not actually broadcast until 1986.

As de Bromhead has described in an account published in 2014, her explicit concern was to find a means ‘to communicate anthropological concepts through film in a non-expository way’. While she appreciated the methods of Observational Cinema as a means of achieving an engagement with the subjects which could then be passed on to the viewer, she had doubts about its effectiveness in communicating more abstract analytical concepts about the principles embedded in social life. At the same time, she wanted to avoid heavy-handed explanatory commentary, so had turned to the idea of comparison between the two villages as a way of making audiences aware of these embedded principles without her having to identify them explicitly by verbal means.  

The two villages contrasted in *Caught in a Web* were chosen on entirely contingent pragmatic grounds: it happened that de Bromhead’s mother had grown up in Dorset and had later moved to Villes-sur-Auzon, so de Bromhead *fille* had a ready-made entrée to both villages. In cutting the films, de Bromhead wisely avoided the temptation to switch back and forth between the two communities in the course of a single programme. Instead, in the first two films, the first half deals with the Dorset village and the second with Villes. In the third film, each of the two communities is shown watching the material shot in the other and the subjects’ comments are then invited, mostly through interviews of varying formality, sometimes as individuals, but often in small groups. In effect, the subjects acted as the consultant ethnographers, reflecting on their own way life at the same time as they comment on the life of the other village.

Although they had been selected on an entirely fortuitous basis, the two villages presented in *Caught in a Web* offered a fascinating ethnographic contrast. The Dorset village is portrayed as being in a quasi-feudal situation: social life is dominated both economically and culturally by the families living in the manor houses while the village church plays an important part in the community, though more for social reasons than on account of personal religious conviction. By contrast, Villes is shown to be a staunchly republican community with a socialist tradition: the *mairie*, the town hall, is the centre of social life and there is a strong ethos of egalitarianism. Although some members of the community are practising Catholics, there is much anti-clerical sentiment, funerals are often entirely secular and the church building itself is in a state of decay.

What the two villages have in common, however, is a passion for hunting, though here too there are major differences. In Dorset, hunting takes various
forms that testify to class differences: working people hunt rabbits with the aid of ferrets while the elite engage in the traditional mounted foxhunt, or in pheasant shooting, with working people providing ancillary support in both cases as ‘beaters’. In the post-hunt feasting, social differences are reinforced in Dorset, with the elite and the working people eating and drinking separately, and with each group saying that they prefer it that way (figure 12.1). In Provence, by contrast, the principal prey is wild boar and it is an altogether more egalitarian affair, with social differences being actively minimised in the after-hunt feasting. But here too, there are exclusions, though on the basis of gender rather than class. For in Provence, hunting is an entirely masculine activity while in Dorset both men and women participate, albeit with certain restrictions on the use of guns by even the most elite women.

As de Bromhead readily acknowledges, *Caught in a Web* was not based on academic field research. She spent ten weeks in each community, which although very long for a television production, is still relatively short by academic standards and she confesses to doing no literature research prior to the shoot. She also acknowledges that if she had spent more time living in the two villages, particularly in Villes, she might have been able to draw a more fine-grained comparison that included a focus on gender as well as class differentiation. But regardless of these limitations, *Caught in a Web* represents a unique comparative project informed by an undoubted ethnographic sensibility.

Around this same time, Channel 4 also supported another major project that was very different in authorial terms, but which could also be said to possess ethnographic qualities on account of the way in which it was made – despite not involving the direct participation of an academic anthropologist. This was *Baka: People of the Rainforest*, first broadcast in 1987. The ethnographic
status of this film is perhaps more debatable than *Caught in a Web*: be that as it may, it was awarded an ethnographic film prize by the Royal Anthropological Institute the following year.

The director of *Baka*, Phil Agland, is a highly skilled and entirely self-taught cameraman whose academic background is in geography rather than anthropology. He first came to prominence in British television through *Korup*, a remarkable documentary about a rainforest on the frontier between Cameroon and Nigeria, which was the first natural history documentary to be screened on Channel 4 in November 1982. Following the critical accolades showered on *Korup*, Agland was then commissioned to make a film about the Baka, a hunting and gathering people who live in the rainforest of southeast Cameroon.

In order to make this film, Agland spent two years living with one small local group, along with the associate producer Lisa Silcock and the sound recordist Mike Harrison. During this time, although she was not a trained anthropologist either, Silcock achieved fluency in the Baka language. Before they began to shoot seriously, the entire team spent six months in preparatory research and in developing relationships of trust with the subjects. A number of anthropologists acted as advisers on the film, though none of them played an active role in the production itself.

*Baka* is a feature-length documentary, with a duration of two television hours, divided into four parts. It approaches Baka life primarily through the experiences of a single nuclear family, consisting of Likano, a man in his 40s and one of the oldest in the local group, his wife Deni, some twenty years his junior, and their two small sons, Yeye and Alime. Most of the film concerns the way in which the Baka make a living from the forest: it shows them hunting, fishing, gathering forest fruits and, very dramatically, extracting wild honey from hives some 40 metres above the forest floor (figure 12.2). There are also brief sequences of them working in their banana grove, said to be ‘unusual’ among the Baka in the voice-over commentary, and also in the cacao plantation of the Konabembe, a local Bantu group of permanently settled agriculturalists with whom the Baka have a trading relationship.

Various scenes show the preparation and use of medicines made from forest plants, and also a curing ceremony. The film is punctuated with scenes of singing and dancing, which in the final part are related to a visit from a forest spirit, Jengi, who has been called upon to bring calm to the group following the outbreak of an argument between Likano and a younger man, Babu, who wants to marry his daughter by his first marriage. As part of the argument, Likano accuses Babu of using sorcery against him and Babu takes a life-threatening ‘truth drug’ to prove his innocence. But Jengi has the desired effect, the argument is forgotten and the film concludes with Deni giving birth to a sister for Yeye and Alime.
As far as the content is concerned then, *Baka* covers terrain that is very typical of the canon of ethnographic film. But in its technical praxis, *Baka* is quite different from most of the films conventionally considered to be ethnographic. For, in making this film, Agland simply extended the methods that he had developed so successfully in his earlier natural history films and applied them in an ecological setting that also included human beings. Alongside the sequences featuring the Baka themselves, there are also many that could have come straight out of a natural history film, showing, for example, worker bees inside a hive, or animals such as the pangolin, the hyrax and the utterly charming honey bear foraging at night.

The way in which the Baka are filmed has many of the same technical attributes: shots are usually taken from a single static position, with no pans or zooms, often on a long lens or from a ‘privileged’ perspective, that is one not available to the subjects, such as from the top of a tree. The subjects never acknowledge the camera and there are no interviews, formal or informal. Shots have often clearly been set up, particularly at night, when they are always immaculately lit. Later, in the edit suite, these shots have been constructed according to the norms of fictional cinema to suggest continuity or simultaneity when, to the eye of any experienced film-maker, it is clear that the shots concerned must have been taken at entirely different times or in a different order.

This process of editorial construction is sometimes remarkably elaborate. Thus at one point in the film, there is a sequence that cuts back and forth to suggest simultaneity between a number of sub-sequences, including an obviously set up shot of a forest cat gnawing at the carcass of an antelope, a group of women damming a river to fish and a man climbing a tree to gather honey. The latter process is being followed by a camera that is supposedly simultaneously in the canopy with the honey-gatherer and with

12.2 *Baka: People of the Rainforest* (1987). Left, shot from a platform above, Mewunga, in search of honey, climbs through the forest canopy on an emergent tree; right, a *nganga* curer uses the heat of a wood fire to cure a baby.
the eager children 40 metres below, one of whom looks up, beautifully back-lit, while playing the ngombi, a sort of four-stringed harp. In the midst of this construction, there are also cuts to close-ups of a particular species of bird that likes to feed on beeswax. This fictional ‘feel’ is further enhanced by the use of incidental music that is a subtly augmented version of the Baka’s own music, while the voice-over commentary is delivered in a smooth actorly manner by Sir Ian Holm in the UK version, and in the version made for US television by Denzel Washington. This commentary often directly endorses the many constructed simultaneities of the action.

But underlying all this cinematographic construction, the film remains based on a close participant-observation of Baka life carried out, over a prolonged period, within a relationship of trust developed between filmmakers and subjects. It was surely this that permitted the intimate style of camerawork through which the audience is invited to get to know the Baka, not as curious small people of the rainforest, as they had so often been presented in the past, but rather as human beings with many of the same preoccupations and characteristics as the audience might have. It was also no doubt this quality to which the jurors of the RAI were responding when they awarded Baka the Institute’s most prestigious ethnographic film prize in 1988.5

In addition to these series concerned with culturally exotic societies, British television in the 1980s regularly supported para-ethnographic series shot in Britain itself that were also based on the close participant-observation of small groups of people, often living in spatially confined institutions, over a relatively prolonged period. These series included Strangeways, an eight-part series broadcast in 1980 and directed for the BBC by Rex Bloomstein, which portrayed life in the broodingly ominous Victorian prison of the same name in Manchester. Two years later, the BBC also broadcast Police, produced by Roger Graef but shot and directed by Charles Stewart, who had worked as a cameraman on a number of Disappearing World films. Over nine 45-minute parts, this series followed the day-to-day activities of a Thames Valley police station in Reading. But these were merely the most celebrated of a large number of extended series that were broadcast around this time on British television, which dealt with everyday life in institutions such as schools, hospitals, naval ships and railway stations.6

Towards the end of the 1980s, a somewhat more interactive variant of this para-ethnographic genre of films about institutions emerged, exemplified particularly by the work of Molly Dineen, a documentarist who, like de Bromhead, had been trained in the Observational Cinema approach at the NFTS. In the classical ‘fly-on-the-wall’ variant, as exemplified by The Family, Paul Watson’s observational series from 1974, or by Roger Graef’s later series on the Reading police, there had been a director, accompanied by a technical crew, who had largely remained silent apart from interviews or
voice-over, or in certain exceptional situations, as at the very beginning of *The Family*, when Paul Watson is shown explaining the ‘ground rules’ of the filming to the assembled Wilkins family.\(^7\) By contrast, in accordance with the authorial strategies typically associated with Observational Cinema, Dineen often speaks in a conversational manner with her subjects from behind the camera that she herself is operating.

An early example of Dineen’s approach to filming British institutions was *The Heart of the Angel*, a short film broadcast in 1989, which provided a behind-the-scenes portrait of the staff of the Angel Islington, a station on the notoriously antiquated Northern Line of London’s underground railway system. However, Dineen then went on to offer a much more developed example of her approach in *The Ark*, a four-part series about London Zoo. Shot over a period of nine months in 1991, involving more than 100 hours of rushes, and then cut over the course of a year in collaboration with the editor Ted Roberts, it was not until 1993 that *The Ark* was finally broadcast.

At one level, *The Ark* could be construed as an intimately observed para-ethnographic account of human–animal interactions and the ideas about nature that sustain these interactions in an urban zoo. But this is only the background story: as one newspaper reviewer commented at the time, with only a slight degree of exaggeration, *The Ark* is as much about animals in a zoo as George Orwell’s novella, *Animal Farm* was about animals on a farm.\(^8\) For tying together all the many scenes of the zoo keepers and visitors maintaining and imagining relationships with animals, the series is underpinned by a storyline that captured the spirit of the times, namely, the reorganisation of London Zoo in accordance with the market-led neoliberal economics introduced into British life by successive Thatcher governments through the 1980s.

Having been set up as a private philanthropic society in the early nineteenth century in order to promote zoological science and educate the public at the same time, by the last decade of the twentieth century the zoo had become heavily dependent on government subsidy. As this was about to be withdrawn, the zoo faced closure unless it radically cut its costs and found new sources of income. The dramatic arc running through all four parts of the *The Ark* is the process whereby the zoo is transformed from being primarily a scientific and educational institution into one that is, in effect, part of the leisure industry, in which the most important criterion is the number of people buying tickets at the gate.

As a result of this process, a third of the animals and a considerable number of keepers are ‘let go’, as the euphemism of the day had it, and the zoo management re-orientates its priorities to ensure that it places primary emphasis on the animals that the public really wants to see and on organising media events. But this leads to a counter-challenge by an alliance of keepers and council members that eventually results in the director of the zoo
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himself being ‘let go’ (figure 12.3). The intertwining of the many different strands of this story are very skilfully followed by Dineen, who seems to have won the confidence of those on all sides of the argument.

For many commentators, London Zoo as presented in The Ark acted as an extended metaphor for many British public institutions of the time, including particularly the BBC and the Reithian tradition of public service broadcasting that went with it. Indeed, at precisely the same time as The Ark was being made, British television was undergoing many of the same processes of organisational change as shown in this series. And as I shall discuss in Chapter 13, just like the less popular animals in London Zoo and the supposedly superfluous keepers, one of the casualties of these processes of change would be ethnographic film-making.

Melissa Llewelyn-Davies as ethnographic film author: the Maasai films

Among the many talented directors who made ethnographic or para-ethnographic films for British television during the ‘golden era’, one of the most innovative was Melissa Llewelyn-Davies. Although she made films on a broad range of subjects, from polo-playing by the English upper classes through to cultural change in Eastern Europe in the period of perestroika, the most distinctively original films within her body of work are those that she made about the Maasai of southern Kenya. These include two early Disappearing World films, Masai Women and Masai Manhood, broadcast in the 1970s, and the films that she made while based at BBC Bristol in the 1980s, The Women’s Olamal and the five films of Diary of a Maasai Village. They also include Memories and Dreams, produced right at the end of the ‘golden

12.3 The Ark (1993). Left, the Head Keeper bids goodbye to a bird of prey that has been in the zoo for twenty-five years. Right, the management team is advised by a public relations consultant to acknowledge criticisms.
era’ and broadcast as part of the BBC series *Fine Cut* in 1993. It is this cycle of nine films about the Maasai that will be my exclusive concern here.9

Prior to joining the production team at *Disappearing World*, Llewelyn-Davies had been a student of anthropology, first as an undergraduate at University College London in the late 1960s, when she had developed a particular interest in the newly emergent feminist approaches, and later as a postgraduate student at Harvard in the early 1970s. It was while she was at Harvard that she had begun fieldwork among the Maasai with the intention of producing a doctoral thesis. She later gave up the doctorate in favour of a film-making career, but not before she had immersed herself in Maasai society for a prolonged period and had developed a fluent command of their language. Although she also published a couple of academic articles, in effect it was primarily through her films that she presented the results of her doctoral fieldwork. It was also through her film-making that she developed and extended her understanding of Maasai life over the next twenty years.10

Although Llewelyn-Davies’s films about the Maasai are strongly marked by the authorial praxes and stylistic conventions typical of ethnographic film on British television, she was continually pushing the boundaries. As far as the one-by-four format is concerned, her most obvious break with the conventional model was when she moved to BBC Bristol in the late 1970s and persuaded the management there to support films that went far beyond the single television hour: two hours in the case of *Olamal*, just over four in the case of the full series of *Diary* films. The latter also represented a break with the convention of pursuing a single theme, since several major themes and a multitude of minor ones are interwoven through the length of the five films. Although her films conformed to the one-by-four model to the degree that they were based on the research of a single anthropologist in a single community, this was her own work, rather than that of a third party. This too was highly unusual in British television.11

However, although Llewelyn-Davies may not have been dependent on a consultant anthropologist in making her Maasai films, as a maker of ethnographic films for television she was necessarily dependent on others for their practical realisation. Her first two films about the Maasai, that is, those made for *Disappearing World*, were actually directed by Chris Curling: her role on these films was formally that of researcher and anthropological consultant. Curling is also jointly credited as the series producer of the *Olamal* and *Diary* films. At the time that these films were produced, Curling and Llewelyn-Davies were a married couple and shared much in common professionally as well. Although they subsequently went their separate ways, both professionally and personally, it remains the fact that Curling contributed greatly to the authoring of all these films.
Also, as Llewelyn-Davies herself has often commented, the final shape of her Maasai films was greatly influenced by the contribution of Dai Vaughan, the highly esteemed editor who cut all but the last film, *Memories and Dreams*, while the general look of the films was largely due to the highly skilled cinematographers who worked under her direction: the *Disappearing World* films were shot by Charles Stewart, while the *Olamal* and *Diary* films were shot by Dick Pope and Barry Ackroyd, both of whom went on to become leading feature film cinematographers. Pope also later shot the cinematographically magnificent *Memories and Dreams*.

Moreover, even a film-maker of the originality and determination of Llewelyn-Davies could not escape entirely from the stylistic constraints of making films for British television. In this regard, among the features of her Maasai films that most readily identify them as television productions is the use of voice-over commentary to deliver contextualising information as well as some low-key anthropological analyses. In all her Maasai films, Llewelyn-Davies performed her own voice-overs and although this has the merit of linking up the commentary voice with her voice as we hear it in interviews, the quality of these commentaries, both in scripting and delivery, is variable, as she herself has observed.12 Interestingly, over the complete cycle of nine films, the nature of her commentary changes significantly: in the later films, there is not only very much less commentary, but it tends to be more subjective and informal.

But the feature that most marks these films out as television productions is the extensive use of ‘talking head’ interviews. These are typically seeded throughout the length of the films, providing not only information and cultural context but also, due to the intimate way in which they are shot and conducted, a strong emotional texture as well. The interviews in the pre-title sequence of *The Women’s Olamal* represent a particularly effective example of Llewelyn-Davies’s technique. This sequence involves interviews with two women of different generations who have been beautifully shot, in a particularly intimate manner, in low light and framed in an interior doorway of their houses. Although they appear to be dressed in all their finery, their answers are simple and informal. These interviews establish, very poignantly, the inflexible nexus that connects cattle-ownership, fertility and a woman’s well-being in Maasai society.

Among the Maasai, these subjects explain, a woman owns nothing. Her husband will give her some cattle to look after when she moves to his house after marriage, but this herd is merely held in trust to be passed on to her sons; if her husband dies and she has had no sons, she will be chased away by the sons of his other wives. If she has had daughters, she may go and live with them, though she will be dependent on the charity of her daughters’ husbands. But if she has no children at all, she will have nowhere to go. A barren woman is therefore ‘very bad … like a wilderness’, and her
Part III: Television as meta-author

12.4 The Women’s Olamal (1984). Left, Kisaru explains that if a Maasai woman is childless, she will have no means of support in later life; right, when male elders threaten to withhold the olamal fertility blessing, some women become hysterical and have to be restrained.

Life is full of suffering: as one of several wives, she will only occasionally see her husband and there is often therefore no one to cook for, no one with whom to share the night.

The establishment of these painful interconnections in the pre-title sequence provides a key to reading the whole film: they not only explain why Maasai women are so keen to hold an olamal, which consists primarily of a ceremonial blessing to ensure their fertility, but they also prepare the viewer for the later hysterical behaviour of some of the women when it transpires that the ceremony may not take place after all (figure 12.4).

In part, the interviews in Llewelyn-Davies’s films work very well because Maasai women, in common with the women who appear in the MacDougalls’ Turkana films, prove themselves to be the most remarkable natural philosophers, capable of combining, in the most eloquent way, such diverse matters as sociological insight into their own society, reflections on the nature of God, and the expression of personal views and sentiments. But equally important are Llewelyn-Davies’s long-standing relationship with her subjects, her obvious fluency in their language and her intimate knowledge of their society. This combination of factors enables her not only to frame succinct questions that generate interesting answers, but also to ask more difficult, sometimes even importunate questions, in a manner that seemingly does not offend, nor even surprise her subjects. Almost invariably, they respond to the questions with an air of patience and a concern that Llewelyn-Davies should fully understand the answer. Among these interlocutors, there is none more solicitous and precise in her answers than Nolpeyeiya, who is older than Llewelyn-Davies and talks to her as mother to daughter, and who regularly appears in the films over the full twenty-year period.

Yet although the relationship between Llewelyn-Davies and her principal subjects may have remained constant, the nature of the films themselves
changed considerably, particularly with regard to the way in which they are structured narratively.

The early Disappearing World films offer what might be described as predominantly normative accounts of Maasai gender relations within highly conventional narrative structures adapted to the requirements of commercial television. Thus Masai Women is constructed in accordance with the normal stages of the female life cycle in Maasai society: after setting the general scene of life in a Maasai village, Part One deals with a woman's adolescent life, culminating in the circumcision ritual that will mark her transition into full womanhood and legitimate fertility. In making way for the commercial break, this part is rounded off with some further chanting and dancing. Part Two then opens with a wedding party and the life of young wives becomes the focus of attention. Their subservience to the authority of their husbands – leavened by the possibility of affairs with young unmarried men of the warrior age grade – and the relationships among co-wives are then considered before Part Two also culminates in a ceremonial performance, this time of young men leaving the warrior age grade to become junior elders. However, this dramatic performance is presented as if seen through the eyes of the warriors’ mothers, thereby completing, by proxy as it were, the stages of the typical female life cycle.

The other Disappearing World film, Masai Manhood, which concerns an equally dramatic male age grade ceremony, was not originally conceived as a film but rather was ‘cobbled together’, in Llewelyn-Davies’s phrase, from footage shot opportunistically. It is a less complex film narratively speaking than Masai Women, but it too is divided into two parts, each culminating in a ceremonial event.

The Women’s Olamal is a very different film from the first two, both in the way that it presents Maasai gender relations and in terms of its narrative structure. Although the subject matter of the film is again a ceremonial event, the first two-thirds of the 115-minute film are dedicated not to the olamal itself, but rather to the events leading up to it, as suggested by the subtitle to the film: The organisation of a Maasai fertility ceremony. Contrary to what one might expect from this rather dry phrase, suggestive of an academic thesis, this ‘organisation’ primarily consists of an intense argument between women and men about whether the event will take place at all. For although the women are desperate for the olamal to happen for the reasons explained in the pre-title interviews, the senior men responsible for dispensing the blessing are reluctant to perform their role because a murder has taken place among a neighbouring group of Maasai. According to customary belief, to perform the olamal at such a time would not only be inauspicious, but also ineffective.

Narratively speaking, the first two-thirds of the film take the form of a classic ‘crisis structure’. (Given that this film was made for the BBC, there
was happily no need for a commercial break halfway through.) As the women marshal their arguments in formal debate, first among themselves – in a manner highly reminiscent of the male orators of Woodhead and Turton’s Mursi films – and then in their verbal confrontations with the senior men, they show themselves to be highly accomplished public speakers, with developed rhetorical skills. But when their verbal arguments prove to be of no avail, some of the older women threaten to curse the senior men while some of the younger ones fall to the ground, shouting out and writhing in a disturbing hysterical manner. As a curse is believed by the Maasai to carry a serious threat of death for those to whom it is directed and furthermore, can be issued, even unintentionally, by people in an emotionally disturbed condition, the men capitulate and agree to the hold the olamal after all. The final third of the film is then structured around the performance of the ceremony itself. But although this offers a magnificent visual spectacle, in dramatic terms and arguably in ethnographic terms also, it is somewhat anti-climactic after the intense scenes that had come before.

While *The Women’s Olamal* is organised around a cumulative series of events, the five films of *Diary of a Maasai Village* are ostensibly structured simply by the passage of time over a given seven-week period in July and August 1983. Rather than focusing on specific events or stories, Llewellyn-Davies intended merely to follow the Maasai of a particular village as they lived out their daily lives in all their multifaceted complexity, covering incidents both great and small, significant and trivial, in a manner that she explicitly conceived of as being like a soap opera. The village in question was the same one in which the all earlier films had been shot, and which, by this time, Llewelyn-Davies had known for more than ten years. This village had been built up around a prophet, or laibon, by the name of Simel, a now-elderly man with thirteen living wives and more than sixty children. Eleven of his married sons remained in his village with their respective families and, of course, large herds of cattle (figure 12.5, left). Though these were much reduced compared to former times, largely due to the effects of disease, the villagers remained entirely dependent on them in the traditional Maasai way and did not practice agriculture in any form.

In an opening passage of voice-over commentary in the first film, reiterated somewhat more briefly in the others, Llewelyn-Davies explains her objectives. Her general aim, she says, is simply to describe how the Maasai of Simel’s village were living ‘at a particular moment in their history’. Among the many scenes of domestic life, this also entails showing how these Maasai were coming to terms, in a matter-of-fact daily sort of way, with social change arising directly or indirectly from their progressive incorporation into the modern nation state of Kenya. This was a new theme in Llewelyn-Davies’s work: previously the ‘outside world’ had barely been mentioned. In another contrast to her earlier work, Llewelyn-Davies explains that she
has made a particular effort to concentrate on the experience of Maasai men. In fact, these two changes of emphasis are related since it is the men who have most contact with the world outside the village.

The opening commentary also explains that in adopting a diaristic narrative structure, Llewelyn-Davies had wanted to avoid the positing of an opposition between supposedly unchanging traditional Maasai culture and what she refers to as ‘development’. At face value, this last statement might not seem particularly significant, but there is an important agenda underlying it. Although Llewelyn-Davies does not make this explicit, in East Africa, as any viewer familiar with the MacDougalls’ work or the Woodhead-Turton films will surely be aware, ‘development’ is often merely a euphemism for change imposed on pastoralist societies by national governments. By means of a diaristic narrative, Llewelyn-Davies appears to have been seeking to distance herself from the intense political polemic surrounding pastoralism in the region so that she could focus instead on the reality of everyday experience for the Maasai, or as she puts it ‘to give their present, room to breathe’.

Many different themes are interwoven over the course of the five films, some of which are encountered in the earlier films, some of which are new. We hear how men can achieve a sort of immortality through acquiring many wives, many children and many cattle. A group of young warriors gets into trouble because they have illicitly eaten one of the laibon’s goats and have to pay a fine, which they try to extort from a local shopkeeper from a different ethnic group. One young woman gives birth and another gets married: as she approaches her husband’s village, she is insulted in the customary way, as we saw in Masai Women. At one point, in a scene reminiscent of the famous scene in To Live with Herds, a uniformed administrator harangues a group of Maasai for not sending their children to school. Also reminiscent

12.5 Diary of a Maasai Village (1985). Left, Simel, the laibon prophet and leader of the village, who has thirteen wives and more than sixty children. Right, Miisa, one of Simel’s sons, undergoes the ibaa ceremony, promoting him to a more senior level of elderhood.
of the MacDougalls' film is a particularly interesting sequence when a group of Maasai go to Ngong, a town on the outskirts of Nairobi to sell their cattle. There is much coming and going between villages and many shots of day-to-day livestock management. There is also complex episode of divination involving stones, a great deal of daily gossip, and much else besides.

As in normal life in reality, there are many loose ends, that is, events and situations that are not resolved, at least not within the films. However, running through all five films and holding them together is a recurrent storyline concerning one of the laibon's sons, Rerenko, who has been unjustly imprisoned in Nairobi, supposedly for cattle theft. Here he has been subject to regular beatings and fed such a poor diet that his relatives are seriously worried about his health. Various delegations of male relatives go to the city to secure his release, but in vain. Cattle are sold at Ngong to pay for a lawyer, but the lawyer pockets the money and still Rerenko languishes in prison. It is not until Llewelyn-Davies herself provides a 'loan' to bail him out that Rerenko is finally released, thereby providing a 'happy ending' in the fifth film.

This film also provides a happy ending of a different kind as another of the laibon's sons, Miisia, who has just taken a fourth wife, goes through a ceremony promoting him to a more senior level of elderhood (figure 12.5, right). Notwithstanding the introductory disclaimer of any polemical intent back in the first film, Miisia represents a reassuring figure of the continuity of tradition, holding at bay 'development' which in these films has been represented primarily by the irascible administrator threatening to beat any fathers who refuse to send their sons to school and by Rerenko's terrible experience of imprisonment in Nairobi.

The intervention by Llewelyn-Davies in the release of Rerenko is merely the most instrumental of many reflexive moments in the Diary films. From the earliest films in her Maasai cycle, the viewer had been made aware of Llewelyn-Davies's presence through her voice, be it in the commentary or in the interview questions. She even appeared briefly in front of the lens in both Masai Women and Masai Manhood. But in the Diary films, this reflexivity becomes more marked, in line with the general zeitgeist of ethnographic film in the 1980s, as described in Chapter 5. All five films include numerous references by the subjects to the fact that a film is being made, a feature that had been rare in the earlier films.

More significant, given that they are so central to Llewelyn-Davies's authorial praxis, is a subtle change in the balance of the interviews. In the earlier films, these had been very one-sided in the sense that the interlocutors commented only on Maasai life. But now the interviews become more of a conversational exchange. Thus, at one point, a young woman states as a matter of general principle that women are less intelligent than men. When Llewelyn-Davies gently demurs, the woman counters by saying that
Llewelyn-Davies’s husband, Chris Curling, who was also present at the shoot, is clearly more than intelligent than she is. When Llewelyn-Davies again demurs, the interlocutor insists that Curling really is the more intelligent.

In this interview, as with a number of others, the interlocutors end with a series of requests for food and fuel. Llewelyn-Davies’s relationship with the Maasai was already long-standing by this point and one imagines that many such conversations would have taken place before, both on- and off-camera. What is significant is that now these conversations are retained within the film rather than being consigned to the proverbial ‘cutting room floor’.

This more reflexive dimension is further developed in the last work of Llewelyn-Davies’s Maasai cycle, *Memories and Dreams*, released in 1993, some eight years after the *Diary* films. Her motivation for making this film was highly personal. Feeling that she was now reaching middle age and having recently been through some testing personal experiences, including separation from her husband, she was in the process of reviewing of her own life trajectory and wanted to compare this with what the Maasai women whom she had known over twenty years thought about the way in which their own lives had turned out.

From a stylistic perspective, a feature that was unprecedented in Llewelyn-Davies’s Maasai films are extracts from the earlier films, presented with a vignette-like sepia effect around the edge of the frame to indicate that they refer to the past. In what had by then become a familiar trope in ethnographic film-making, the film opens with a scene in which the Maasai are shown looking at this earlier material on a monitor and commenting on how they looked and behaved in those distant bygone days.

But otherwise, *Memories and Dreams* represents, in many ways, simply a further extension of authorial strategies that Llewelyn-Davies had been developing in her earlier BBC Bristol films. Though it is considerably shorter at 90 minutes, the narrative structure is, if anything, even more diffuse than that of the *Diary* films. There is still some voice-over commentary, but it is limited to some orientating remarks right at the beginning of the film. Rather, the film is built up through a series of scenes of everyday life, punctuated with interviews, which as in the *Diary* films, are more two-sided and conversational than the interviews in her earliest work. In one memorable exchange, a woman asks Llewelyn-Davies about her recent marital separation and whether she will have any further children, or be offered a new husband. When the answer to both is in the negative, the woman compares this with the Maasai way of dealing with marital separation, which is for the woman to leave her children behind and return to her own village, where a man would soon come to seek her as a wife and with whom she would then have further children. But although this general trend towards greater reflexivity is continued, this does not extend to Llewelyn-Davies actually appearing in shot.
In making this film, Llewelyn-Davies made a most interesting ethnographic discovery, but one that she would later regret not making clearer within the film itself, even though it is alluded to in the title. This discovery was that her Maasai interlocutors did not normally think of themselves as the heroic protagonists of their own life history, as Europeans tend to do. Rather they thought of themselves as belonging decisively to their particular age grade and sought to be, as best they could, good representatives of that grade. To think of oneself at an earlier age was therefore regarded as a childish attempt to recapture something that was definitively over.

As a result, Llewelyn-Davies found it difficult to get her interlocutors to recount their memories in a biographical manner. The best way, she discovered, was to ask them to recount a dream, in which case, what she might be offered would be something ‘halfway between a memory and a dream’. In the absence of the recounting of substantial memories of the past by the subjects themselves, the footage from the earlier films comes to stand for the past instead. However, as Llewelyn-Davies herself recognises, the status of this archival material remains uncertain, since it is not clear whether it is supposed to represent the subjects’ memories directly or to be merely some kind of objective statement about how Maasai life was in earlier times.14

Given the Maasai subjects’ reluctance to engage in protracted autobiographical reflection, Memories and Dreams perforce became less the exploration of individual life histories that Llewelyn-Davies had originally intended and more an account of how life had turned out for the Maasai as a collectivity over the previous twenty years. The balance of this account is at best ambiguous. In the first part of the film, there is a return to themes of female experience that were also explored in the earlier films, central to which is the importance for women of having children, both for sustaining them in life and as a legacy that they will leave behind when they die. There is also much discussion of the challenges of marriage, the solidarity between co-wives and the pleasures of the seemingly almost-universal practice among women of taking lovers.

But in comparison to the earlier work, Llewelyn-Davies is more disposed to confront head-on some of the aspects of traditional Maasai life that are less attractive to European audiences. Her interlocutors recount, for example, how they learn to endure the beatings that they receive from their husbands. The issue of female circumcision is again considered, as it was in Masai Women, but at considerably greater length: the interlocutors again insist that it is a truly happy occasion for a young girl as she passes into womanhood. But this time Llewelyn-Davies juxtaposes these statements with the wailing that she recorded in 1974 but did not then dare use.15

Yet punctuating this fundamentally celebratory, even if warts-and-all, portrait of traditional Maasai life, there are recurrent references to decline.
Beyond the ‘disappearing world’ – and back again

The cattle are dying of tick-borne diseases, present-day warriors are puny compared to those of a generation ago, girls are being initiated too young, and people are losing confidence in the old ways. But if traditional Maasai life has its hardships, particularly for women, the alternatives presented by the film of life outside the Maasai world are hardly appealing. About a quarter of the way into the film, there is an abrupt and almost shocking cut to Loise, a young Maasai woman who has run away from her village after her husband – who is none other than Miisia, the junior elder whom we had encountered in a more charming incarnation in earlier films – began beating her with a piece of wood. Loise has abandoned the beads and ear adornments traditionally worn by Maasai women, her head is no longer shaven and her hair is roughly cut in a standard ‘modern’ way (figure 12.6). Prior to her flight, she had been one of Miisia’s five wives and her co-wives say that they miss her and hope that one day she will return. Miisia, meanwhile, threatens angrily to bring her back by force. But Loise was childless, and we know only too well from The Women’s Olamal what a bleak future would have awaited her if she had remained at home. Instead she has taken up with a poor man, Samwell, also Maasai, but who has no cattle. They have converted to Christianity and together eke out a meagre living on the outskirts of a small town.

Memories and Dreams is undoubtedly a masterpiece, not only superbly directed, but also magnificently shot and edited. Looking back at it from a vantage point of more than twenty years, it now seems truly remarkable that British television could once have made possible such a work. But although it represents on the surface a wholehearted paean to the beauty and complexity of traditional Maasai life, it also carries an undertow of melancholy and nostalgia – on the part of both Llewelyn-Davies and her subjects – partly at personal level for people who featured in the earlier

12.6 Memories and Dreams (1993). Left, Miisia’s senior wife says she misses her co-wife, right, who has run off to town as she could no longer tolerate the beatings from her husband. As a childless woman, her future prospects in Maasai society were very bleak.
films and who have since died, but also, more generally, for a world that is on the wane. The integrity of Maasai life is shown to be fracturing as some Maasai, like Loise and Samwell, reject tradition completely while even those who remain in the countryside find themselves obliged to hoe the land like ‘those who wear trousers’.

In effect, by the end of her cycle of Maasai films, which also coincided with the end of the ‘golden era’ in ethnographic film on British television, Llewelyn-Davies had come round to the theme of externally induced change that had been central to the early series of the *Disappearing World* strand but which had then been displaced by the more internally oriented themes of the films in the 1974 series, including *Masai Women* and *Masai Manhood*. In practical authorial terms, *Memories and Dreams* and *The Last of the Cuiva* may be very different. But both are concerned with the historical process that in the dry language of social science could be termed the profound dislocation caused in traditional societies by rapid social and cultural change. What both these films show, in their different ways, is what this process means in terms of the intimate personal experiences of those caught up in it.

**Notes**

1 When agreements struck in relation to working conditions in Britain were applied in the locations where ethnographic films were typically shot, a great many absurdities arose. A single illustrative example will have to suffice here: in 1983, when Leslie Woodhead was shooting a *Disappearing World* film in China, he wanted to film inside a factory, but as there was no electrician on the crew, he had to ask for the lights in the factory to be turned off. Naturally, the factory manager was completely mystified.

2 See p. 316.

3 de Bromhead (2014), 61–121.

4 I am very grateful to Phil Agland for commenting on earlier drafts of this section (personal communications, September 2014 and December 2018). As he informed me, prior to shooting he consulted the Baka specialists Robert Dodd and Serge Bahuchet, and while on location, he and his colleagues were visited by Robert Brisson, a French missionary ethnologist who had worked with the Baka over many decades. Bahuchet also came to look at the material in the edit suite. But none of these consultants had the degree of engagement that was typical of anthropologists working with the *Disappearing World* strand.

5 After an absence of twenty-five years, Agland returned to make another film in the same Baka community, with many of the original protagonists. Released in 2013, *Baka: A Cry from the Rainforest* shows that though this community is living in much the same place in the forest, their circumstances have greatly deteriorated. Their hunting and foraging territories have been circumscribed by conservation reserves while the little game that remains outside these reserves has been frightened off by logging activities. Now dependent on working for the sedentary local Bantu population, many Baka have become addicted to a highly alcoholic liquor distilled from bananas which the Bantu give them in lieu of payment. Shot in the same intimate manner, the ethnographicness of this new film is even greater than the original film. It includes less natural history footage and is narrated by Agland himself in a sensitive
and discreet manner. In June 2015, a jury that I myself chaired had no hesitation in awarding this new film the same prestigious RAI film prize that the first film had won back in 1988. At the time of writing (January 2019), Agland is preparing to make another film with the Baka but this time for cinema release.

6 In addition to these para-ethnographic observational series, in the latter part of the 1980s British television also supported a number of more discursive series based explicitly on anthropological concepts. Although ethnographic material could be used in these series to illustrate these concepts, this was mostly secondary to the analytical purposes of the programmes. The most ethnographically substantial of these series was *Native Land*, a six-part series, directed by Tim Raynor and broadcast by Channel 4 in 1989, in which the anthropologist Nigel Barley travelled around England ‘to try to pin down some general idea of the contemporary English identity’ (Barley 1989, i). Somewhat earlier in the decade, in 1986, Central Television broadcast *Strangers Abroad*, which was more historical and biographical than ethnographic and which consisted of six parts, each one dedicated to the work of a leading early anthropologist. This series was directed by André Singer, formerly of *Disappearing World*, and was made shortly after he left Granada Television.

7 *The Family* is described in the Introduction to this part of the book, p. 316.

8 Lawson (1993).

9 In this section, I draw on earlier analyses of Melissa Llewelyn-Davies’s work by Peter Loizos (1993), 115–38, 198–205, and Anna Grimshaw (2001), 149–71, as well as on an interview conducted with Llewelyn-Davies by Grimshaw (1995). I am also very grateful to Llewelyn-Davies herself for commenting on an earlier draft of this section.

10 For the academic publications, see Llewelyn-Davies (1978; 1981).

11 The only other cases of which I am aware are those of Hugh Brody, André Singer and Michael Yorke.


13 On the subject of her appearance in front of the lens, Llewelyn-Davies comments in her interview with Anna Grimshaw: ‘I want people to see what I see; I don’t think I really want them to see me seeing it. And once you see a white person in a film about black people … you kind of latch onto the white person, you start thinking about them, I think. We always used to make the attempt, but then it would end up on the cutting room floor’ (Grimshaw 1995), 59.


15 Llewelyn-Davies has given various reasons for this change of heart. These include the fact that as a young film-maker, she felt that she should protect the Maasai from all negative criticism, while with greater experience, she came to the view that she should not try to second-guess audience reactions and should put what she saw on the screen as a way of communicating her fascination with the Maasai way of life (Grimshaw 1995), 36–8, 60–1.