In this last part of the book, over the course of three chapters, I consider a number of recent examples of English-language ethnographic filmmaking. These films have mostly been produced in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, though I also discuss a number of films produced in the last decade of the twentieth. As with the whole of the book, it is a partial selection, in both senses of the term. That is, I make no claim that it is either a representative or a comprehensive sample of the English-language ethnographic films that have been produced since the millennium. It is rather a selection of films that seem to me to have had a significant impact or which provide potentially interesting models for the future direction of the genre – given the particular ideas advanced in this book about the nature of contemporary ethnographic practice and the way in which it may be realised through film.

These three chapters correspond, more or less, to the three modes of authorial praxis that I consider in Chapters 8–10, albeit in reverse order. In Chapter 14, I examine how David and Judith MacDougall have developed the practice of Observational Cinema; in Chapter 15, I explore in what ways certain film-makers of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) at Harvard have taken on the legacy of Robert Gardner, while in the final chapter, Chapter 16, I consider a number of films that draw on the participatory praxis that informed Jean Rouch’s concept of shared anthropology.

Central to all three chapters is the argument that has been a guiding thread through the book as a whole, namely, that in order to make films that are ethnographic in anything more than a descriptive sense, it is necessary to go beyond observation and to explore the connections between the practices, ideas and relations that underpin and constitute the social worlds represented in those films. This, I have suggested, often requires some recourse to language, be it in a literal sense in the form of verbal discourse or in a more metaphorical cinematographic narrative form.

This argument is somewhat at odds with a set of views that in recent years have become almost an orthodoxy in certain spheres of ethnographic...
film-making. For if it is true that once upon a time, ethnographic film-makers had to struggle against a certain ‘iconophobia’ within the academic discipline of anthropology, now the wheel appears to have gone full circle, and it has become necessary to combat a deep-seated ‘logophobia’ that has taken root instead. The principal reason for the current antipathy to the use of language in ethnographic film-making appears to be the belief that language is inimical to the evocation of sensorial experience, a goal that has recently become a matter of great importance to ethnographers generally. The medium of film offers the possibility of evoking sensorial experience with a density and a corporeality that goes far beyond anything that may be achieved through text. Therefore, it is suggested, to burden a film with language is to undermine its greatest potential contribution to the practice of ethnography.

There is no doubt that when one introduces language into a film, there is a risk that this will undermine its sensorial qualities. A film smothered with voice-over commentary, or dominated by ‘talking heads’ delivering facts and figures can all-too-readily become ‘a radio programme with pictures’, as my tutor at the NFTS, Herb di Gioia, used to put it, growling. But if more than a century of ethnographic endeavour has proved anything, it is surely that even the most private, even the most subjective forms of experience are informed and moulded by the social and cultural environments in which they take place. Thus the mere evocation of experience, however exquisitely achieved, is not in itself of any more than descriptive ethnographic significance.

Given that language is often the most effective way to communicate the nature of the social and cultural environments in which experience takes place, it is of vital importance that ethnographic film-makers, rejecting both iconophobia and logophobia, confront the challenge of how to reconcile the analytical and contextualising qualities of language with the distinctive sensorial and experiential qualities of cinematic images. But in doing so, they should always bear in mind Robert Flaherty’s remark that ‘you can’t say as much in a film as you can in writing, but what you can say, you can say with great conviction’.1 Better then to say only a little, but with great conviction, rather than sink your film under a heavy layer of language in the vain hope of saying everything.

Note

1 Cited in Ruby (2000), 86. The remark was originally made in 1949 in a talk for BBC radio.