The evolution of Observational Cinema: recent films of David and Judith MacDougall

As originally conceived by Colin Young and subsequently worked out in practice by David and Judith MacDougall and various other film-makers, the praxis of Observational Cinema in its classical form involved very much more than observation: not only was it a particular ‘way of seeing’, it was also a particular ‘way of doing’ ethnographic film-making. Central to this praxis, as described in earlier chapters, was a collaborative relationship with the subjects, the adoption of an ‘unprivileged’ perspective in both shooting and editing, and a low-key aesthetic based on the preservation during editing of the original sounds and rhythms of the way of life recorded.

In order to provide context and meaning, this praxis also typically featured the extensive use of conversational exchanges not only between subjects but also between subjects and film-makers. Although the overall aim was to provide the viewer with some sense of the film-makers’ original experience of the subjects’ world, this was often presented through relatively conventional but often almost invisible ‘restrained’ narrative tropes, inspired originally by the films of the French New Wave and Italian Neorealists. Taken together, these constituted the principal ingredients of a discreet but nevertheless considered form of participatory and reflexive ethnographic film-making praxis.

The precise balance between these various elements in the praxis of Observational Cinema has varied in accordance with both the subject matter and the social and political circumstances in which the films were made, not to mention the idiosyncratic inclinations and interests of individual film-makers. In the particular case of the MacDougalls, described in Chapter 5, when they moved from filming among the pastoralist peoples of East Africa in the late 1970s in order to take up posts with the Film Unit of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), the participatory element in their films became very much more pronounced as they and their Aboriginal subjects sought to develop more overtly collaborative ways of working with one another.
But after more than a decade making films with Aboriginal communities, the MacDougalls began to feel that this sharing of authorship involved so many compromises that the resulting films spoke neither for the subjects, nor for themselves as film-makers, but rather for some indeterminate third party, which, in effect, meant for nobody. They therefore resigned their posts at the AIAS in the late 1980s and though they remained based in Australia, they set themselves up as freelance ethnographic documentary film-makers.  

Since then, the MacDougalls have released a total of fifteen films between them. Apart from one solo film that David made in Sardinia and another that Judith made in China, all these films have been made in India. Moreover, the great majority of these Indian films have concerned the lives of children living in institutions of one kind or another. With one exception, these films about children have all been made by David working alone. When all these post-AIAS works are added together, they amount to almost half the MacDougalls’ total oeuvre to date. In terms of the sheer number of films, they come to slightly less than the nineteen films that they made in Africa and Australia. But in terms of running time, they actually exceed the total duration of all the African and Australian films put together: whereas the latter comes to close to twenty hours, the films that the MacDougalls have made since leaving the AIAS total slightly more than twenty-two hours.  

This substantial body of later work deserves a far more extended discussion than is possible here. What I offer in this chapter is no more than an outline account of how the MacDougalls’ work has evolved since the early 1990s. While they have continued to draw on key elements of Observational Cinema as it was practised in the 1970s and 1980s, they have reinterpreted and expanded this praxis through a constant process of experimentation and innovation. While some of their films have conformed quite closely to the classical model, others have departed from it to a significant degree.

**Continuities and ruptures**

Although the MacDougalls have stepped back from the explicit sharing of authorship that characterised their work with Aboriginal communities, their general praxis has remained participatory in other, more generic senses. They have continued to make their films from an unprivileged perspective, that is, they have continued to shoot from camera positions that reproduce the perspective of an immersed participant in the social interactions being recorded, without the use of exaggerated camera movements, special effects or cross-cutting montage. Informal conversations with the subjects, in various guises, have remained an important part of their practical repertoire, while
formal interviews and voice-over have remained a relative rarity. They have continued to adopt what David MacDougall once called a ‘stance of humility’ before the world of the subjects, being respectful of its physical rhythms, and allowing the story of the film to be taken off in unanticipated directions. And although they may no longer aim to share the authorship of their films, they have been concerned, at least in the work with Indian school-children, to train their subjects to make films for themselves. These training workshops have often taken place at the same time as they have been making their own films in particular schools.4

Another element of continuity has been the editorial structuring of the films in accordance with conventional narrative tropes, particularly ‘as if’ chronologies. In many of these later films, particular attention has been paid to the cutting of opening sequences, both immediately before and immediately after the main title. These sequences often involve scenes of people getting up or other early morning activities. Many films also conclude with classical valedictory devices: characters saying goodbye and leaving to go elsewhere, or going to bed, or wide shots of the landscape at dusk or after nightfall, and so on. A number of films end by returning visually or metaphorically to the beginning of the film.

However, notwithstanding these many continuities, there are also a number of ruptures with the praxis of MacDougalls’ earlier body of work. One of the most significant is that in all but two of the films of this later period, David and Judith have been working separately; previously, although David had made a number of films with other film-makers, and one alone, most of the MacDougalls’ films were shared endeavours. Since the 1990s, although they have actively assisted and advised one another at various stages of their respective productions, particularly at the editing stage, for the most part each has been directing their own films. Moreover, most of the films of this later period have been solo works by David. Judith has made two films of her own, and shared the direction of two others with David, but otherwise she has largely dedicated her professional life in recent years to teaching in many different parts of the world, including China, Singapore, Norway and Italy.

One of the two joint works is Photo Wallahs, shot in 1988–89 and released in 1991, and the first film that the MacDougalls made after leaving the AIAS. This film was mostly shot in Mussoorie, a small town in the Himalayas, about 175 miles by road north of New Delhi, which was a so-called ‘hill station’ at time of the British Raj, where the families of colonial administrators would take refuge from the summer heat. Today it continues to be a holiday destination, but for middle-class Indian families. The subtitle of the film is ‘an encounter with photography’, but in fact, the subject matter of the film would be more accurately described in the plural, as it consists of a series of encounters exploring the meaning of photography for a diverse range
of both practitioners and consumers in Mussoorie and the nearby town of Dehra Dun.

Although it was a joint work, this film represents something of a rupture with the MacDougalls’ earlier praxis in a number of more editorial senses. As in their earlier films, there are frequent conversational exchanges between the film-makers and subjects, and the general perspective of the film is unprivileged. But in contrast to most of this earlier work, *Photo Wallahs* generally eschews the long take and the development of action within a fixed frame. Instead it is constructed around a series of much shorter takes, with images juxtaposed through montage in order to make intellectual connections. The pattern of the characterisation is similar: rather than being built around a few strong central characters, as in the earlier films, there are a considerable number of relatively minor characters, whose ideas about photography are juxtaposed and contrasted one with another. As David MacDougall has put it, *Photo Wallahs* represents ‘a kind of scattering of images, with a certain kaleidoscopic feeling to it’.5

This film also represented a departure from the MacDougalls’ prior praxis in that, for the first time, they invited a third party to edit the film. This was Dai Vaughan, a highly experienced 16 mm editor who had previously worked with Brian Moser, Melissa Llewelyn-Davies and a number of other ethnographic and para-ethnographic film-makers in British television, as well as being an astute and thoughtful writer about documentary generally. The MacDougalls had admired his work for many years and invited him to collaborate with them because they believed that he would be stimulated by the ideas underlying the film. Vaughan’s participation was made possible by yet another feature that was unusual about this film within the MacDougall oeuvre, namely that it was first of their films to be financed by television, in this case, by the French channel, La Sept, though they also received funding from the Australian Film Commission.6

David MacDougall reports that in editing the film, they went through ‘at least ten different versions’ before they felt that they had worked out an effective structure. In that it is divided into a number of distinct parts, as with *To Live With Herds* and *The Wedding Camels*, released some twenty years earlier, there are certain echoes here too of the structure of *The Song of Ceylon*, the classic 1934 documentary directed by Basil Wright. Indeed, the first part of *Photo Wallahs*, in which middle-class tourists are shown coming up by cable car to a mountain look-out point and then dressing up and dancing in Bollywood costumes, has been explicitly associated by MacDougall with ‘Apparel of a God’, the last part of *The Song of Ceylon*, which features a performance by elaborately costumed dancers.7

The photographers who lie in wait for these fantasy Bollywood stars are the first of several different kinds of practitioner – the ‘photo wallahs’ of the title – who feature in the film. Others include traditional studio
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photographers, who work strictly with black and white, though some then tint their photographs by hand with watercolour paints (figure 14.1). Another group are the largely middle-aged members of an amateur photographers’ club who go round taking pictures of the countryside while debating just how artistic it is permissible for a photographer to be. Among the consumers of photography, we are introduced to a former Maharani who takes us through an album of photographs of herself and her family dressed for formal occasions or fancy dress parties as far back as the 1920s. An eminent writer reads a short story about his grandmother’s reaction to a photograph of herself as a child. Photographs are also shown being used to provide evidence of missing persons, the beauty of potential marriage partners, and even graves in a local cemetery. The film also considers moving images as represented by soap-opera-ish television religious dramas, and wedding videography. There is even a reflexive shot of David and Judith themselves, standing laden with all their equipment.

Lying behind these many particular cases, the film hints at some more general ethnographic issues. It suggests, for example, that the boundary between photography and religious iconography is much more porous in India than in the West: whereas in the West, great emphasis is laid on the indexical quality of a photographic image, so that any embellishment reduces its authenticity and hence its value, in India there is a tendency to think of a photograph as if it were a religious icon, which it is not merely legitimate but also desirable to embellish. Another issue that emerges from the film is that whereas still portraiture usually involves highly mannered deadpan poses, the shooting of moving images often provokes some kind of performance involving music and dance. But in both cases, in contrast to some parts of the world, being photographed appears to be generally regarded in Mussoorie as an entirely positive experience.

Dai Vaughan also acted as the editor of the next of the MacDougalls’ films, Tempus de Baristas. This was released in 1993 and was one of the few
films that David MacDougall had made without Judith up until that point. This film concerns a group of shepherds living around the town of Urzulei in the mountainous central heartland of Sardinia. MacDougall again had the budget to be able to invite Vaughan to cut this film because, as with *Photo Wallahs*, part of the funding came from television, though this time it came from the *Fine Cut* series of the BBC, then under the direction of André Singer, an anthropologist by training and for some years, the series producer of *Disappearing World*. However, most of the funding as well as the original initiative for the film came from the Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico (ISRE), a dependency of the regional government of Sardinia and situated in Nuoro, in the north of the island, where local Sardinian cultural traditions remain strongest. Under the enterprising director at that time, Paolo Piquereddu, the ISRE had been running an ethnographic film festival for many years, and had frequently screened the MacDougalls’ films. Piquereddu invited David to make a film based on the research that the ISRE itself had been carrying out among local shepherds (many of whom herd goats rather than sheep). As MacDougall did not speak the regional dialect of the shepherds, he was assisted by a local sound technician, Dante Olianas.

Although shepherds play a prominent part in the collective imaginary of Sardinia, and vie with miners and fishermen as the most heroic male exemplars of regional identity, their traditional way of life has long been under threat for a mixture of economic and cultural reasons. This is particularly true of shepherds who herd goats. There is no longer much demand for goat products, particularly their meat, and few young people want to take up shepherding on account of its extreme physical demands, including the requirement to spend most of the summer months living in isolated *cuile*, primitive shelters consisting of dry stone walls and brushwood roofs, situated high up in the mountains.

This threat to the shepherds’ traditional way of life is the central theme of *Tempus de Baristas*, the title of which, in the local dialect, means ‘time of barmen’. This is a reference to a phrase used by one of the leading characters in the film, a shepherd by the name of Miminu, who laments that at the present time, if one wants to make a decent living, it is much better to work in a bar than as a shepherd. Like many shepherds, this character, a seemingly popular and attractive man in his 40s, remains unmarried because young women are no more attracted to the traditional shepherding way of life than young men. Miminu is one of three main characters, the other two being Franchiscu, a grizzled shepherd in his 50s, and his lithe and handsome son, Pietro, who is only 17 and about to leave school. The main narrative tension of the film revolves around the question of whether Pietro will follow in his father’s footsteps. Although he is clearly attracted to the shepherding way of life in some ways, like other young people Pietro enjoys
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the social life of the town. He has also been offered the possibility of going on to further study elsewhere on the island (figure 14.2).

In terms of subject matter, Tempus de Baristas is reminiscent in a number of ways of the MacDougalls’ films about East African pastoralists. As in the earlier films, an important secondary theme concerns the interference of the local state in the subjects’ way of life. Whereas in the East African cases, local administrators had been seeking to sedentarise the pastoralists, in Sardinia government agencies are seeking to restrict the activities of traditional shepherds in order to preserve the mountains as a supposedly ‘natural’ environment that will be attractive to tourists. Another theme reminiscent of the earlier work is scepticism about the benefits of a school education: the shepherds are aware that education can be highly advantageous for the individual but know full well that those who succeed educationally will not continue with the shepherding life. In the case of Pietro, the matter still hangs in the balance at the end of the film.

As far as its cinematographic praxis is concerned, Tempus de Baristas is certainly much more in tune with the MacDougalls’ East African work than with Photo Wallahs. The general perspective is unprivileged, the takes are generally long. Conversation is an important ingredient of the film, though more between the subjects themselves than between the subjects and the film-maker. Elegantly cut by Vaughan, the film proceeds by a series of clearly demarcated scenes, each carrying a weight of ethnographic significance beyond its manifest content. Although there is possibly some redundancy in the last third of the film, there are also many memorable scenes, superbly executed cinematographically by MacDougall. There is none more so than the penultimate scene of the film, which consists of a single long shot of Miminu slowly and laboriously climbing the mountainside. Over his shoulder, there is a large tree trunk with protruding roots, almost like a cross, destined, one supposes, to be used in the

14.2 Tempus de Baristas (1993). Left, Franchiscu with his goats and right, Miminu and Franchiscu’s son, Pietro. But will Pietro continue with the goat-herding life?
construction of his *cuile*, but at the same time symbolising both the resilience of the shepherds and also the heavy burden that their way of life imposes upon them.

After completing *Tempus de Baristas*, the MacDougalls returned on various occasions to make films in Dehra Dun, the small town close to Mussoorie where they had shot a number of sequences for *Photo Wallahs*. But for these later films, David and Judith each worked on their own. In 1997, David began shooting what would eventually become a series of five films about the Doon School, an elite private boarding school for boys. These films were released at various points between 2000 and 2004, and proved to be merely the first in an extended series of films about Indian children, which I shall discuss separately later in this chapter.

For her part, Judith made *Diya*, released in 2001, a film that explores the ‘life cycle’ of the humble earthenware oil lamp known as *diya*, which is essential to the celebration of Hindu festivals. Made in accordance with a broadly Observational Cinema praxis, this film focuses initially on the Lal family of potters, of modest circumstances, and follows them as they prepare a large consignment of *diya* to sell in the local market (figure 14.3, left). Although the family is proud of its craft, it is also very demanding work and depends critically upon the labour of the children. The latter part of the film moves to the house of the more prosperous Gaur family and shows them lighting the *diya* in celebration of Diwali, before finally putting them out on the street where they will break down into the earth from whence they came. In a postscript, Judith returns to the Lal household to discover, to her surprise, that the family has decided to give up on pottery and prioritise the children’s schooling, thereby bringing to an end an activity that had stretched back over seven generations.
Some years later, while she was teaching ethnographic film-making at the University of Yunnan, in Kunming, in southwest China, Judith made another film without David, this time in collaboration with the Chinese visual anthropologist, ‘Kathy’ Zhang Jinghong. This was *The Art of Regret*, released in 2007, which offers an insight into contemporary China through the way in which photographs are taken and used. This film was not based on extensive ethnographic research, and although it employs the same quadripartite narrative structure as *Photo Wallahs*, in terms of its general praxis it stands at quite a distance from Observational Cinema in its classical form. A combination of personal essay film and road movie, it is structured by a personal voice-over narration and makes abundant use of ‘talking heads’ of varying degrees of formality, some of which stand outside the temporal horizon of the film. In a more general editorial sense, it is also a somewhat more rough-hewn work than one normally associates with the MacDougalls’ films.

In terms of content, however, *The Art of Regret* makes a fascinating companion film to *Photo Wallahs*. In part, this is due to the very different social and historical milieu into which photographs are inserted in post-millennium urban China as compared to that of rural India almost twenty years before. In China, photography is being merged, not with religious iconography, but rather with a distinctively Chinese tradition of heroic imagery in the Soviet Realist style, associated particularly with the Communist Party and the Cultural Revolution, though this is also clearly being strongly challenged by modern cosmopolitan imagery influenced by contemporary Western popular arts. Also, photographs are not apparently used in the process of courtship as they are in India. On the other hand, highly idealised wedding photographs, studio portraits of extended family groups, as well as high-quality black and white photographs for the prospective memorialisation of the elderly are all big business in modern-day Kunming.

But what really differentiates the world represented in *The Art of Regret* from that of *Photo Wallahs* is the fact that in the interim between the two films, the digital revolution in photography had taken place. Whereas in *Photo Wallahs* we see traditional craftsmen assiduously tinting black and white photographs by hand by means of watercolour paints, in *The Art of Regret* all manner of embellishments are achieved in an instant on a computer. However, in many ways, the desired objective is the same, namely, to idealise a perceived inherent essence of the human subject that mere mimesis cannot achieve. Traditionally in China, as one young studio photographer explains, photography was known as ‘the art of regret’, for however much one tried, one never quite managed to capture the inner essence of the subject. Now, however, with the aid of digital technology, that regret could at least sometimes be assuaged, after the fact, with the aid of an ‘app’.
David MacDougall’s films with Indian children: The Doon School Quintet

These technological changes were also impacting directly on the MacDougalls’ own work as film-makers. For another major rupture between their early film-making praxis in Africa and Australia and their later work in India was the abandonment of 16 mm film in favour of digital video technology. Tempus de Baristas would prove to be the last film that they would shoot on 16 mm.

This change initially came about through necessity rather than by design. When David MacDougall was preparing his project at the Doon School in 1996, he again approached the BBC for support. But by then André Singer had been succeeded by a new series editor at Fine Cut who was unsympathetic to ethnographic film and turned down MacDougall’s proposal. This rebuff turned out to be ‘a liberation’, as MacDougall would later describe it, since it obliged him to shoot on digital video, as this was much cheaper than film. Using video, he was able to shoot the five films that would eventually make up The Doon School Quintet for a total production cost that amounted to no more than a tenth of the production budget of Tempus de Baristas.

Not only did this switch of medium permit MacDougall to increase the sheer quantity of films that he made, but it also allowed him to be more experimental, since he no longer needed to be preoccupied about what a commissioning editor might think about the results. Over the course of several visits to Dehra Dun between 1997 and 1999, he shot some 98 hours of material, supplemented by a limited amount of additional footage taken during later visits while the editing was proceeding. When he began shooting, MacDougall did not have a clear idea of how many films would emerge from the rushes: it was only gradually that he determined that they should together make up a quintet which, in total running time, amounts to just over eight hours, a cutting ratio of approximately 12:1.

The original idea for this project arose from a suggestion by the Indian anthropologist Sanjay Srivastava that MacDougall might like to make a film that would complement Srivastava’s own text-based ethnographic study of the Doon School in the early 1990s. Often referred to as ‘the Eton of India’, the Doon School is modelled on the most progressive variants of the British private school system and is renowned for having been attended by leading figures in many different walks of Indian public life: political, military, professional, also academic and literary. Founded in the 1930s, already in anticipation of political independence from Britain, the Doon School was committed to forging an Indian identity that stood above the many social, religious and regional differences within the country. Initially, MacDougall had been attracted to the idea of making a film that would explore the
school as a ‘site of diversity, an intersection of different cultural strands in Indian society’, but as the project developed, he began to think of it rather as a study of the way in which the school generated what was, in effect, ‘a carefully constructed island of cultural homogeneity in the lives of the diverse students who passed through it’.\(^{10}\)

As presented by MacDougall across the five films, this cultural homogeneity is only partially brought about through the explicitly verbal passing on of abstract ideas, moral precepts or cultural norms from teachers to pupils in the context of formal instruction. Just as important, perhaps even more so, is what he refers to as the ‘social aesthetics’ of the school. Here MacDougall is using the term ‘aesthetics’, not in its most conventional contemporary sense to refer to taste and the evaluation of beauty, but rather in its original eighteenth-century sense to refer to sensory experience conceived as a mode of apprehending the world that is both distinct from, and to some extent opposed to, the apprehension of the world through abstract, language-based ideas. Applied to the Doon School by MacDougall, this concern with ‘aesthetics’ entailed a close attention to the way in which features of the day-to-day social and physical environment of the school moulded the identities and beings of the pupils (figure 14.4).\(^{11}\)

Given that *The Doon School Quintet* is concerned with a school, at first sight it seems strange that over the five films there is relatively little material showing teaching taking place in a classroom. But this is entirely consistent with MacDougall’s emphasis on sensory ‘social aesthetics’. Instead of formal instruction, there is an abundance of material on such matters as the norms concerning the wearing of uniforms: in fact, clothes are a particular focus of interest as they are often directly concerned with issues of status and personal identity and the first film in the quintet begins and ends with a scene in the school laundry. Other subjects include the weighing, measuring and assessing of pupils; the taking of meals in the collective dining room

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14.4 *Doon School Chronicles* (2000). The first film of the quintet focuses on the way in which the environment of the school – physical as well as social – moulds the boys.
or the sharing of ‘tuck’ (i.e. sweets and potato crisps); the making of beds, dressing, washing, and generally ‘hanging out’ in the dormitories, of which there is a great deal; the playing of both informal games and more formal sports, particularly cricket and gymnastics, but also early morning physical exercises and military drills around the field; school morning assemblies in the gymnasium, involving non-denominational prayers, and the Founder’s Day celebration at the end of the year attended by parents, alumni and the great-and-the-good (who are often all one and the same).

There are also many shots of the general physical environment – the buildings, the main playing fields, the gardens, the school museum – as well as of everyday material objects, usually rather dog-eared. The latter often consist of stills rather than moving images and present such things as suitcases, lines of coat pegs, metal spoons and plates, ceiling fans, beds. Sound is also a very important ingredient of the films, particularly those that testify to the sheer frenetic energy and activity of teenage boys. MacDougall reports that as he moved about the school, he was constantly aware of noises of all kinds: shouting and calling, the sound of shoes resounding along corridors, a constant scuffling and the incessant tap-tapping of table tennis balls. This lively sonic environment is extensively but discretely reproduced in the films as well. In the exteriors, birdsong is particularly noticeable, also the rumour of traffic, one of the few examples of the outside world intruding upon the hermetic world of the school.

As the project developed, however, MacDougall came increasingly to think of ‘social aesthetics’, not as something that the school did to its pupils, but rather as something that the boys themselves played an active part in creating and reproducing. He felt that he was observing a kind of theatre in which the boys were both actors and audience. They were not, he realised, mere ‘ballast’ in an institution for the production of postcolonial subjects but rather active agents in their own transformation from children on the threshold of teenagerhood, each with his own individuality, into boys who, in the metaphor of the founding headmaster, would be like playing cards, all with the blue and grey uniform of the school on their backs, while on the front, on their faces, they would retain their own special individual character (figure 14.5).

In accordance with MacDougall’s developing interest in the boys’ agency in their own transformation, the focus of the quintet as a whole lies preponderantly with the boys. There are some occasional, relatively informal interviews with members of staff: with the headmaster in the first film and in later films, with the housemaster of Foot House, a ‘holding house’ for new boys, and particularly with the female Foot House Tutor, Minakshi Basu, who appears in three out of the five films, and whose voice within the quintet MacDougall equates with his own. But otherwise, the teachers are a remote and infrequent presence in the films. Also present are the
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various support staff required to maintain the elaborate infrastructure of
the school – kitchen workers, laundry staff, handymen, gardeners, sports
instructors, a venerable bell-ringer – but they too are mostly merely observed
rather than directly engaged.

In terms of overall praxis, the first film, *Doon School Chronicles*, is signifi-
cantly different from all the others. Despite the chronological reference in
the title, of all the films in the quintet, it is the one that narratively speaking
is the least structured by chronology. Instead, it is constructed around a
series of ten parts, each dealing with a different aspect of life in the institution,
introduced by an epigraph featuring some sort of precept about the school’s
ethos, as originally formulated by A. E. Foot, the school’s first headmaster,
or some distinguished alumnus.

As in the classical Observational Cinema praxis, informal conversations
are of central importance in *Doon School Chronicles*, both between the
subjects and between the subjects and film-maker. These conversations
reveal the remarkable intellectual sophistication of the boys, many of whom
are impressively articulate. There are also some more formal interviews with
two particular boys, Rohan and Veer that, contrary to the classical Obser-
vational praxis, stand outside the temporal horizon of the film in the sense
that the film returns to these interviews on several separate occasions. The
13-year-old Rohan, whom MacDougall describes as ‘an amateur sociologist’,
provides intelligent social analysis of the school and of his fellow pupils
recurrently through the film; Veer, who is 16, is equally acute in his social
commentary but only appears in the latter part of the film. He is an actor
and theatre director, and has found a way of winning respect among his
peers even though he is not interested in sports, which is normal way to
achieve esteem at the Doon School. Two other boys are also picked out as
leading characters, but they feature less prominently.

14.5 Later films in the Doon School quintet focus more on the boys’
own agency. Left, an argument breaks out in *The New Boys* (2003);
Doon School Chronicles differs from the other films in the quintet in a number of other ways too. MacDougall himself has described it as ‘a web in which the other films are suspended’. That is, it offers a general portrait of the school as an institution, thereby providing a contextualising framework for the other films. In the latter, the centre of gravity has shifted: the main focus is no longer on how the institution operates as such but rather on the way in which the boys deal with the experience of living in the school on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, whereas Doon School Chronicles is concerned with the school population as a whole, the four subsequent films are about boys who have only just arrived at the school, typically aged around 12. MacDougall then follows these boys as they try to forge both a personal identity and a sense of community with other boys from all over the Indian subcontinent, all within the physical conditions of the Doon School which are not only quite spartan but also afford almost no personal privacy.

In effect, these four films constitute two similar pairs, with the first film in each pair offering a portrait of a particular cohort of newly arrived boys, followed in the second film by a more focused portrait of an individual boy from within that cohort. Thus, the second film in the quintet, With Morning Hearts, shot in 1997–98, follows a cohort of some thirty 12-year-olds as they pass through Foot House while the third film, Karam in Jaipur, takes the eponymous Karam Rai Mehra, who had featured centrally in With Morning Hearts, and follows him in the early weeks of his life in Jaipur, one of the senior houses, the following year. Similarly, the fourth film, The New Boys, follows the 1998–99 Foot House cohort while in the fifth and final film, The Age of Reason, the focus is on one particular boy within that cohort, Abhishek Shukla, though not as he moves into a senior house, but in the course of that same year.

In practical film-making terms, this last film is rather different from all MacDougall’s previous films. While the relationship between subjects and film-makers had always been readily acknowledged in his earlier work with Judith and had sometimes even been of central importance – as in Lorang’s Way, for example – this relationship was typically presented in a low-key and discreet manner, and was subordinate to the more general purposes of the film. By contrast, in The Age of Reason, the relationship between MacDougall and the principal subject is not merely foregrounded, but defines the parameters of the film. Thus the film begins when the newly arrived Abhishek, a Nepali and therefore something of an outsider to the other boys, just like MacDougall himself, attaches himself to MacDougall, ‘a little like my shadow’, as MacDougall puts it. The film ends when Abhishek becomes more integrated with the other boys and prefers to spend his time with them rather than with MacDougall. As the film unfolds, the evolution of this relationship is commented upon by MacDougall.
in voice-over narration at various key points, a device which although not entirely unprecedented, is certainly very unusual within his work as a whole.  

As he is represented in *The Age of Reason*, Abhishek epitomises, in a particularly impressive manner, a set of personal and intellectual qualities that MacDougall came to appreciate in the boys passing through Foot House. An important key to reading the film is offered close to the beginning, just after we have been introduced to Abhishek, in the form of an intertitle card with an extended quotation from the late-seventeenth-century philosopher, John Locke. This asserts that children already have a fully formed sense of themselves and are as independent and free in their thinking ‘as any of you grown Men’.  

As MacDougall came to see it, far from involving the refinement and expansion of the sensibilities established in childhood, the boys’ progress through the Doon School involved a paring back and limiting of the ‘high point of proficiency and competence’ reached in the period immediately prior to adolescence, as exemplified particularly by Abhishek. This was a point of view that was clearly completely at odds with the pious epigraphs that punctuate *Doon School Chronicles*, and even with the views of the boys themselves, at least as expressed in the concluding sequences of *With Morning Hearts*, in which they look forward to expanding their horizons in the senior houses, even if they also express their fears, particularly of being bullied by older boys.  

It was also not a point of view that MacDougall had brought with him to the Doon School and it had not been his original intention to pay quite so much attention to 12-year-olds. In fact, he had first come upon Foot House entirely by chance, when sheltering from the rain. He had initially formed the idea that it would be interesting to make a film about the Doon School as perceived by the newcomers in Foot House, thereby paralleling his own discovery of the school and that of his eventual audience as well. But as the filming progressed, what had begun as an exploration of the ethnographic particularity of Foot House within the Doon School opened up into a much wider and more fundamental preoccupation with the way in which childhood is thought of generally, not just in the Doon School but universally, in the literature of the social sciences and psychology as well as in popular culture.  

In effect, the experience of working in Foot House led MacDougall to question the conventional models that he himself had previously unthinkingly shared, whereby child development is primarily understood in terms of progress and improvement, and in which children are often perceived as merely the passive recipients of socialisation. MacDougall came to believe instead that adulthood did not necessarily constitute a refinement of childhood, but rather that ‘children might actually write the agenda for adults,'
and that adult society might more properly be regarded as a paring down of children’s discoveries’.

It was this ‘refractory idea’, as he called it, that led MacDougall to dedicate four out of his five Doon School films to the world of the 12-year-old boys of Foot House. It would also be central to all his subsequent film work with Indian children, despite the very great differences in the institutional contexts in which these later films would be made.

**David MacDougall’s films with Indian children: the Rishi Valley films**

After seven years dedicated to shooting and editing the Doon School films, David MacDougall returned to India in 2004 to make another series of films about a school, though one that was very different from the Doon School. This was the Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh in South India. Although its pupils are also mainly drawn from the Indian professional classes and it is also a boarding school, Rishi Valley is a progressive, co-educational institution originally founded in 1934 by the twentieth-century Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti whose ideas still underpin the school ethos and its pedagogy. In the course of five years, from 2004 to 2008, MacDougall shot seven films at this school, though here I consider only the three most substantial works, *Some Alien Creatures*, *Schoolscapes* and *Awareness*.

Although the two schools are very different, the general cinematographic praxis underlying two of these three films is broadly similar to that of the Doon School films, particularly the three central films of the quintet. This is especially true of the first of the Rishi Valley films, *Some Alien Creatures* – shot over three months in 2004 and released the following year – which was made by David MacDougall working alone. It is also true, albeit to a slightly lesser extent, of the third Rishi Valley film, *Awareness*, which was shot over two months in 2006, though not released until 2010. This latter film was jointly made by David and Judith MacDougall, and as such, was the first and, to date, the only film on which they have shared both technical and directorial roles since *Photo Wallahs* was released in 1991. The second film in the Rishi Valley trilogy, *Schoolscapes*, was shot over two months in early 2005 and released in 2007. This was a solo work by David and is very different in practical terms both to the Doon School films and to the other two films in the Rishi Valley trilogy. For this reason, I shall deal with it separately.

As in the later Doon School films, the central focus of *Some Alien Creatures* and *Awareness* is on the pupils and the day-to-day experience of their lives as boarders at the school. Again, there are many extended scenes of mundane
everyday activities, such as getting up, washing and dressing or generally messing about and relaxing in the dormitories. The pupils are shown playing football or other more informal games, exploring the grounds, playing music or dancing, eating in the dining hall, sharing their ‘illegal grub’ (sweets and crisps), attending assemblies, sometimes studying or reading quietly. In both these films, there is some sort of Open Day, attended by parents in *Awareness*, with the same painful emotional awkwardnesses as shown in the Doon School films when the moment for the parents’ departure approaches.

Within these broad similarities, there are also some differences. Considered as a whole, the average age of the leading subjects of the Rishi Valley films appears to be slightly older than that of the Doon School subjects, though again the focus is primarily on the younger members of the school population. By far the greatest difference relates to the fact that as Rishi Valley is co-educational, a large proportion of the subjects are girls, particularly in *Awareness*, which was the film made jointly with Judith who, by virtue of her gender, was able to shoot scenes of the girls relaxing in their dormitories that complemented the similar scenes that David was shooting in the boys’ dormitories. We discover, however, that although boys and girls may share certain geographical spaces within the school, they lead largely separate lives: not for nothing is the first film of the trilogy called *Some Alien Creatures*, a title based on a comment by one boy regarding the way in which boys are perceived by the girls (figure 14.6, top).

As another boy explains later in the same film, although the school encourages boys to have girls as friends, it does not encourage boys to have girlfriends. The closest the Rishi Valley films come to any emotional engagement between the two genders is the exchange of friendship bands, the making of which is a recurrent leitmotif. Otherwise the co-educational nature of the school is mainly flagged by scenes of formal instruction in the theory of sexual reproduction, either in the form of biology classes or sexual hygiene seminars.

Although there is perhaps a slightly greater preponderance of classroom scenes in the Rishi Valley films than in *The Doon School Quintet*, there are absolutely no interviews with the teachers, or with any other adults. Nor is there any systematic formal exposition of the pedagogical principles derived from the teachings of Krishnamurti on which the school is based. There is certainly nothing akin to the intertitle epigraphs expounding the school philosophy that run through *Doon School Chronicles*. In fact, the only specific mention of Krishnamurti is in a conversation towards the end of *Some Alien Creatures*, when a boy who is one of MacDougall’s principal interlocutors briefly remarks on the impact of the philosopher’s ideas on the school. He suggests that it is on account of Krishnamurti’s influence that pupils are encouraged to be highly independent while at the same time being sensitive to other people’s feelings.
There are, on the other hand, various scenes showing activities around the school, which, one surmises, might owe something to Krishnamurti’s ideas, such as, for example, the collective meditation at sunset with which *Awareness* concludes. The same might apply to the prevalence in both films of shots of the natural world in and around the school, and of the pupils’ frequent engagement with it. Also, the very title of *Awareness* would appear to be a reference to a key Krishnamurtian concept, one that he used to refer to a state of mind in which one looks at things in the world unencumbered by any prior judgements or knowledge about them. Under these conditions, Krishnamurti proposed, one could achieve a state of ‘awareness’
in which the distinction between observer and observed disappears, and all that remains is an intense, all-engaging attention. But these connections between Krishnamurti’s ideas and what one sees on the screen in these two films in the Rishi Valley trilogy remain oblique and unspecified.\textsuperscript{18}

By contrast, there is a very direct connection between Krishnamurtian ideas and what one sees in \textit{Schoolscapes}. In terms of cinematographic praxis, \textit{Schoolscapes} is quite unlike the other two films in the Rishi Valley trilogy, let alone the Doon School films. Its 77-minute duration is made up of precisely forty shots, the great majority of which are between one and five minutes long. These have mostly been taken from a single static position, though there are a few instances of panning, and one example of the use of the zoom. They are also mostly relatively wide-angle shots, though there are a few close-ups, while other shots have clearly been taken on the end of the zoom, with some foreshortening of the image as a result. Many shots are taken from low down, either looking up at the subject, or because the subject is sitting down anyway. Each shot thus constitutes a short scene in itself, and is separated from the neighbouring shot-scenes by fades down and up from black, and with no carrying across of sound from one shot-scene to the next (figure 14.6, bottom).\textsuperscript{19}

In making \textit{Schoolscapes} in this way, MacDougall was quite consciously conducting an experiment. The aim of this experiment was to see if it was possible to use the moving image camera to achieve that state of engaged attention that Krishnamurti describes as ‘awareness’. In order to carry out the experiment, MacDougall adopted a cinematographic praxis inspired by the Lumière brothers who, in the earliest days of cinema, had managed to excite their audiences simply by producing a series of ‘views’ of the world, shooting from a single static position and running the film for as long as the stock allowed, which in their case usually meant for less than a minute.\textsuperscript{20}

In terms of substantive content, on the other hand, \textit{Schoolscapes} is not dissimilar to the other Rishi Valley films. Each shot-scene provides a vignette of some aspect of life at the school, with particular emphasis on the mundane everyday activities such as getting up, washing and eating, leisure activities and so on, just as one sees in the other films. There are also some scenes of formal instruction, but in music and dance rather than in classrooms. In the only shot of a classroom, one of the shortest in the film, the pupils’ desks are empty. There is some casual conversation in some scenes, and one scene in which a boy gives an extended response to an interview question from MacDougall, though this ends before the boy has completed what he has to say. These scenes are the exceptions that prove the more general rule that there is very little dialogue in the film, be it between the subjects themselves or between the film-maker and the subjects.

Some recurrent images show support staff at work, doing such things as washing blankets, sluicing down the school dairy and making chapattis, and
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there is some narrative development in the progress of these activities, as the film returns to them more than once. Like many of MacDougall’s films about schools, this one begins first thing in the morning, with the pupils getting up, and ends with a night-time scene, showing a boy leaving the school by bus, presumably for the vacation. But otherwise there is no strong narrative thread running through the film. Nor is there any form of exterior commentary on the film, be it in the form of narration, or in the form of titles other than the opening titles and the end credits.

Schoolscapes is exquisitely executed cinematographically, every shot-scene being carefully and superbly crafted. Whether it is equally successful in enabling one to enter a state of ‘awareness’, which was MacDougall’s original experimental objective, I am less certain, but I leave it to those who are better versed in Krishnamurti’s ideas to make a more informed judgement. Where I am more confident is in relation to Schoolscapes specifically as an ethnographic film: in that it involves no sustained exploration of the interconnection between practices, ideas and relations, its ethnographicness is much less marked than is the case with MacDougall’s other films about Indian schools.

DAVID MACDOUGALL’S FILMS WITH INDIAN CHILDREN: GANDHI’S CHILDREN

Much more substantial as a work of ethnographic cinema in my view is Gandhi’s Children, a film that David MacDougall shot in 2005 – the same year as he shot Schoolscapes – but which was not released until 2008. This film concerns the Prayas Children’s Home for Boys, an institution situated at Jahangirpuri on the northern outskirts of New Delhi. This serves as both a shelter for boys who are homeless or displaced, and as a sort of reformatory for boys who have been caught engaged in criminal acts of various kinds, mostly petty theft. At 185 minutes, it is the longest film that MacDougall has made to date, and also, in my view, the strongest of his Indian films, possibly of his entire oeuvre, be it ethnographically, cinematographically or politically. It is also, among his Indian school films, the one that conforms most closely to the classical Observational Cinema praxis.

The film is divided into 12 distinct chapters, mostly between 10 and 20 minutes long, though two or three are somewhat longer, up to 30 minutes. Many of these chapters begin at dawn or end at night, giving the impression that they represent a chronologically ordered sequence of episodes rather than being a series of thematically defined segments, as had been the case with the chapters of Doon School Chronicles.

The film as a whole is framed by two particularly striking sequences. It begins with a highly cinematic opening sequence placed around the main
titles that sets the tone for the film as whole. This cuts back and forth between the harsh polluted exterior beyond the forbidding fortress that is the home, and the boys still slumbering innocently in their beds, some intertwined in one another's arms. As the boys rise and perform their ablutions, the film keeps returning to the exterior, to show sewage belching from a pumping station adjacent to the home and a bird eating a rat, while on the soundtrack there is an incessant cawing of crows, the grinding of machinery or, within the home, a dispiriting cacophony of sounds echoing around the large and empty central atrium.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the film, there is something approaching a happy ending, as some of the boys are shown leaving to go back to their family homes, clearly in high spirits. But the final images remind us that they are the lucky ones, for we then see a series of other boys looking out wistfully from behind the barred windows of the home and we are reminded that it is a gaol as well as a refuge (figure 14.7).

Within this general framework of chapters, the film proceeds initially by introducing us to daily life in the institution in a largely observational mode. We discover the revolting hygienic conditions in which the boys are obliged to wash and exercise bodily functions; we see them queueing for their meagre rations, which they eat from metal trays on the floor; we see them lined up in their uniforms praying fervently, apparently in a Christian manner, for their own well-being and that of Mother India. We see them playing cricket in the yard, and playing board games and dancing in the dormitory.

We are also introduced to the harsh social relations in the home: older boys direct the younger ones in cleaning out the latrines and slap them about the face for supposed misdemeanours, though we also see moving examples of support and mutual solidarity. Through the voice of one boy, Ritesh, we learn that the boys in the school belong to two groups: courtwalas, who have been brought to the home because they have committed criminal offences, and homewalas, who are homeless or lost. Ritesh also explains the fagging system, whereby the older boys, who are heads of dormitories, oblige the younger boys to do things for them, such as wash their clothes, which we then see them doing.

We are also shown a group of newly arrived boys being registered by an elegant administrator. As they are questioned about their background, dwarfed by the large office chair in which they are required to sit, often emaciated and in rags, we begin to learn about the variety of circumstances that have led them to end up at the Prayas Home. Some boys are homeless because their parents have died, others have simply been abandoned or have got lost entirely by accident, others have run away from home because they were being beaten. Others had been brought to Delhi by relatives, or have even made their own way there, in order to work for miniscule wages
in some sort of cottage industry operation, only for this to be raided and closed down by the police because it contravened child labour laws.

Gradually, however, this observational mode of the film gives way to a more conversational ‘talking heads’ mode, and individual boys or groups of boys then expand on these life histories. One boy tells how he travelled round the country sleeping on trains, going as far as Mumbai, over 500 miles away. Another group talk about their criminal activities, about how they were caught and often severely beaten by police. However, in contrast to the conversation-interviews of *Doon School Chronicles*, these conversations...
do not stand outside the temporal horizon of the film, but are sewn directly into it, in the manner of the classical Observational Cinema praxis. That is, they occur only once and seemingly arise within the general chronologically ordered sequence of events as represented in the film.

As with the Rishi Valley films, the centre of gravity of Gandhi’s Children remains unequivocally with the children. Apart from a few brief exchanges with the Sikh doctor and with one of the administrators, there is no conversational engagement with any adult in the film. Although the Prayas Home website stresses the importance of the education and training that it offers to the boys, there are only a couple of brief classroom scenes, neither at all edifying, and an equally brief and dialogue-free scene of boys in what appears to be some kind of clothes-making training workshop. Nor does education and training crop up in the children’s testimonies, except in passing. Throughout the film, the camera remains resolutely at a child’s eye level in any social interaction.

All this is very much in accordance with the ‘refractory idea’ that had impressed itself upon MacDougall as he was shooting the Doon School films many years earlier, namely that ‘children might actually write the agenda for adults’, and that, as a consequence, one should attend carefully to their view of the world rather than impose adult preconceptions upon them. Echoing the quotation from John Locke that featured at the start of The Age of Reason, this film begins with a quotation from M. K. Gandhi that makes a complementary point while also accounting for the title of the film: ‘the greatest lessons in life, if we would but stoop and humble ourselves … we would learn from the so-called ignorant children’.

But although there are certainly elements of continuity, Gandhi’s Children represents, to my mind, both a more engaging and an ethnographically richer film than any of MacDougall’s earlier films about Indian children. This is primarily because the young subjects of Gandhi’s Children have had a direct and challenging experience of life outside the home, which infuses what they have to say with a particular weight. The matter-of-fact and dignified way in which they talk about the most harrowing of experiences outside the home and the sheer resilience that they have shown in surviving them are truly remarkable. So too is their ability to deal with the draconian regime within the home.

By contrast, the children who feature in the Doon and Rishi Valley school films are undoubtedly formidably intelligent and well read, while their perception of human relations and their moral judgements may be much more refined than most adults are generally prepared to acknowledge in children. Yet their thoughts and commentaries rarely stray beyond the narrow world of the school in which they live. If they do talk about what is happening in the world outside, it is mostly in relation to such trivial
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matters as professional cricket, the English football league or Michael Jackson. This difference is reflected in the sphere of action of the films themselves, which in the earlier films remains entirely restricted to the school grounds. In Gandhi’s Children, on the other hand, the camera moves outside the gates of the Prayas Home to explore the surrounding streets, as if to emphasise the connection between this exterior world and the interior world of the institution.

Indeed, whereas in the earlier films, the separation of the schools from the outside world is mostly taken entirely for granted and simply not discussed, in Gandhi’s Children the boundary between inside and outside remains both highly permeable and deeply contested. Although many of the children in the home have been ‘rescued’ from a life of homelessness, poor diets and exploitation, most of them, the film suggests, would prefer that life to being locked up in the Prayas Home.

The many ambiguities of this situation are encapsulated in a scene early in the film when a large group of boys are brought to the home after the police closed down the embroidery factory where they were working. It transpires that these boys had been recruited and brought to Delhi from poor rural villages in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But the boys themselves, who appear to be relatively well-dressed and in reasonably good health, are far from pleased with their ‘rescue’. They explain that they kept only a small part of what they earned in the factory as pocket money and the rest was sent back home to their families to enable them to buy food. If they are now obliged to return home themselves, it will be to suffer hunger with the rest of their families. Only if a family is rich, one boy explains, can they afford to keep a child at home. ‘If they’re poor, how can they educate him?’ These boys simply cannot understand why the government is stopping them from working and locking them up in the Prayas Home instead.

Gandhi’s Children has often been referred to as a ‘masterpiece’ in reviews and appreciations, though certain features of the film have been subject to some adverse comment. First, there is the sheer length of the film: at over three hours, it will surely not be viewed as often as it deserves, at least not in its entirety. Although every life history dealt with in the film is undoubtedly unique and interesting, it is certainly arguable that the film could have offered the same degree of insight into the general issues raised by the Prayas Home while exploring the circumstances of a smaller number of boys.

Second, and more importantly, some viewers have raised questions about the way in which the film enters into the most intimate personal physical spaces of the boys as they shower and use the squat toilets, not once, but at various different points in the film. While these truly disgusting facilities are evidently a powerful component of the experience of everyday life at the Prayas Home, some critics have asked whether it is acceptable from an
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ethical perspective to expose the dignity of the subjects of an ethnographic film to such a degree.

However, MacDougall has defended the inclusion of these scenes on the grounds that they featured prominently in the material shot by the five boys participating in the video workshop that he was running at the Prayas Home alongside his own shoot. As he wanted Gandhi’s Children to be as faithful as possible to their experiences, he did not want to back away from that reality merely on account of his own ethnocentric prejudices or the sensitivities of the eventual audience. He also took particular care not to focus on individuals in those scenes.22

Whatever one’s views on these last matters, it is surely undeniable that in exploring the many ambiguous and complex issues surrounding the work of the Prayas Home with a combination of sensitivity and great cinematographic skill, Gandhi’s Children is an ethnographic film of the highest quality that has resonances that reach far beyond the particular situation that it portrays. For not only are we encouraged to reflect upon the circumstances of the children in the Prayas Home, but also more generally about the difficulties and complexities of providing the conditions for a happy and secure childhood in circumstances of extreme social and economic deprivation. For those who might have regretted that such a talented ethnographic film-maker as David MacDougall should spend quite so many years exploring the hermetic world of the most privileged of Indian children, Gandhi’s Children represents a decisive and welcome return to a topic with broader social and political implications.

Over the course of this chapter, I have sought to show that although there may be many differences between the praxis of the films made by David and Judith MacDougall since they set themselves up as freelance ethnographic film-makers and that of the work that they produced earlier in their careers, there are also strong elements of continuity. Moreover, even when they have deviated from the norms of Observational Cinema as practised in its classical form, it has been more in the nature of a temporary fluctuation or a moment of experimentation rather than a decisive and irreversible change in any particular direction.

Thus, when the MacDougalls made Photo Wallahs in the early 1990s, it stood out as an exception within the broader body of their work up to that point in that, rather than being based on a particular social situation and a limited number of principal characters, as all their previous films had been, it consisted of the exploration of a single central idea and featured a large number of different characters, none of whom was significantly more important than any other. But Photo Wallahs has – so far – proved to be something of a one-off within their oeuvre, since they have not made any other films that are quite like it. The film that followed, Tempus de Baristas, represented by and large a return to the earlier paradigm.
There has been a similar fluctuation in the Indian school films. In the Doon School films, there is recurrent use of formal interviews standing outside the temporal horizon of the films, a practice that would have been considered anathema according to the norms of Observational Cinema in its classical mode. Similarly, in *The Age of Reason*, the relationship between film-maker and subject defines the parameters of the film in a way that is previously unparalleled in the MacDougalls’ work. The use of commentary at certain key points is also unusual. These ‘deviant’ features largely disappear in the Rishi Valley trilogy, but there are other innovations instead, notably in the highly observational, mostly non-participatory *Schoolscapes*, which is almost entirely lacking in the conversational dialogues that had been one of the hallmarks of the MacDougall’s work since *To Live with Herds*.

But then *Gandhi’s Children*, shot in the same year as *Schoolscapes*, represents a striking return to the classical Observational Cinema mode. It has not, however, been a permanent return, since *Under the Palace Wall*, David MacDougall’s most recent work at the time of writing, has more in common with *Schoolscapes*. Released in 2014 and made while David was running a film training workshop in Delwara, Rajasthan, this film is also highly observational and non-dialogical, though there is also a strong element of continuity with his earlier work in that it is narratively structured by an ‘as if’ chronology, presenting material shot over several weeks as if it were a day in the life of the village, beginning at first light and ending at dusk.

As Colin Young observed in his original manifesto-essay on Observational Cinema, ‘any intellectual discipline will outgrow its early enthusiasms and change its methodologies’.23 This is in effect what David and Judith MacDougall have been doing since the early 1990s. The films made during this period have led to the diversification of the praxis of Observational Cinema, greatly enriching it in the process. Through a process of experimentation and innovation, they have shown that it is not necessary to remain slavishly tied to a particular formula for making ethnographic films. Arguably, the ethnographic quality of the films that they produced in this period has also varied, ranging from those that are densely and indisputably ethnographic such as *Gandhi’s Children*, to those that are more in the manner of works of cinematographic experimentation, of which the most notable example would be *Schoolscapes*.

But what all these recent films have in common, which they share with the MacDougalls’ earlier work, is that irrespective of the particular practical innovations that they may have involved, they have been based, almost without exception, on a period of extended immersive fieldwork, a participatory and collaborative relationship with the subjects, and a high degree of film craft. In all these various respects, they are films that go beyond observation while also being exemplary works of Observational Cinema.
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Notes

1 I am particularly grateful to David MacDougall for his detailed commentaries on two different drafts of this chapter, one in March 2017, the other in August 2018.

2 In 1989 (i.e. after the MacDougalls had left the organisation), the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) was renamed the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

3 In addition, David has made a further four films in India that have yet to be released. These are all relatively short, totalling approximately 2 75 minutes.

4 These workshops have so far taken place at six different locations: the Doon School in Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand; a government school in New Delhi; the Prayas Children’s Home for Boys, also in New Delhi; the private Rishi Valley School in Andhra Pradesh, a government primary school in the village of Delwara in Rajasthan; and a day school in Ladakh. Regrettably, a discussion of these projects lies beyond the scope of this chapter, but readers are encouraged to consult The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology 15(2) (2014): 453–79 where scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds comment on the four films produced through the New Delhi government school project. This publication also includes a brief introduction by David MacDougall explaining the general background of the workshops. See also Potts (2015).

5 MacDougall (1992b), 98.

6 See Chapter 11, pp. 329, 336, 339, and Chapter 12, p. 359 for references to Dai Vaughan’s work on ethnographic films made for British television. For his writing about editing, see Vaughan (1999).

7 MacDougall (1992b), 99. See the discussion of The Song of Ceylon in Chapter 1, pp. 50–2.

8 MacDougall (2001).

9 David MacDougall, personal communication, August 2018. I am grateful to MacDougall for this estimate of his shooting ratio which is based on a thorough revision of his camera logs and is slightly at variance with the previously published figures.

10 MacDougall (2001), 18.

11 In this discussion, I draw on David MacDougall’s articles both about the Doon School films (MacDougall 2001, 2006c and 2006d) and about the representation of childhood on film more generally (2006b). See also his most recent accounts (2019), particularly pp. 49–53 and 89–102.

12 MacDougall (2006d), 125.

13 MacDougall acknowledges that his interest in the way in which the subjects of his later Doon School films handled this period of transition in their lives was ‘no doubt’ related to his own boarding school experience. In an uncharacteristically personal aside, he comments, ‘even today when I dream, I almost never dream about living in a family. I am part of a group, often among strangers – a collection of people trying to make a life together’ (MacDougall 2006d), 127.

14 Perhaps the most extended example of voice-over narration in MacDougall’s oeuvre is in Link-Up Diary, one of the last films that the MacDougalls made in Australia, with David working, unusually, on his own. However, in this case, the voice-over is primarily informational, whereas in The Age of Reason, it is much more subjective.

15 Notwithstanding the citation of Locke at the beginning of the film, he is not the originator of the phrase borrowed for the title of the film. The Age of Reason was originally the title given to a series of pamphlets published around the beginning of the nineteenth century by the English and early American political activist, Thomas Paine.

16 MacDougall (2006d), 141.

17 Of the four other films that MacDougall shot at the Rishi Valley School, only one has so far been formally released: this is Arnav at Six, shot in 2008 and released in 2012. The others are Motion and Emotion and Of Kites and Filming both shot in 2004, and Mohnish Sings, shot in 2008 (David MacDougall, personal communication, March 2017).

19 MacDougall had first attempted to shoot a film consisting of a series of long takes, with one shot per scene, as far back as 1988–89, the period when he was making *Photo Wallahs* in Mussorie with Judith MacDougall. Although the film was never completed, it still exists in the form of an edited 16 mm workprint (David MacDougall, personal communication, August 2018).

20 See Chapter 2, pp. 79–81.

21 MacDougall has recently published a powerful account of his experience of making this film (2019), pp. 53–60.

22 Personal communication, August 2018. MacDougall adds that, in general, in the film as a whole, he felt that he had treated the boys with respect and was confident that they themselves would have regarded the exclusion of the scenes in question as an entirely unwarranted misrepresentation of their situation. He also quotes directly from a letter that he had received from one of the most prominent subjects: ‘It was brave of you to bring the reality before everyone. I do not understand why people get offended. I think seeing is not more disgusting than actually living in such conditions for many years continuously.’ See also MacDougall’s discussion of this specific point in his recent book (2019), p. 58.

23 Young (1993), 113.