The Ethnographic Filmmaking of Ian Dunlop in a Decade of Change

Philippa Deveson with Ian Dunlop

Introduction

In 1979 Ian Dunlop produced a paper covering the first seventy years of ethnographic filmmaking in Australia.¹ This was a period of significant achievement, starting as it did with the first ethnographic footage shot on location anywhere in the world—on Alfred Cort Haddon's expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898, and by Baldwin Spencer in central Australia, in 1901.

Dunlop drew his history to a close with the films of Aboriginal ceremonies shot by Roger Sandall for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in the 1960s, feeling that these marked the end of an era in Australian ethnographic film. In his final paragraph, he was prescient in anticipating that films being made from the end of the 1960s and beyond would be different in a number of important ways: while the subject matter of early ethnographic films had been 'predominantly that of traditional Aboriginal life', films were now being made about 'societies in change'; there was now 'a much closer co-operation...between the film-maker and the people being filmed'; and new recording technologies were making a more intimate engagement with people possible.²

This paper will examine the way that Dunlop's own ethnographic filmmaking evolved over a critical period of about ten years from around the mid-1960s. His early films, particularly the major series he made in the Australian Western Desert in the mid-1960s, did indeed focus on traditional life. But from the end of the 1960s his work articulated, to greater and lesser degrees, with radical developments taking place in ethnographic film both in Australia and elsewhere in the world. These developments can be seen as forming a backdrop for Dunlop's filmmaking over that period, as he gradually became aware of the groundbreaking work of filmmakers like Jean Rouch, Robert Gardner, John Marshall, Timothy Asch and David MacDougall. The collaborative nature of

1 Dunlop, I. 1979, 'Ethnographic film-making in Australia: the first seventy years (1898–1968)', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 3, pp. 111–19.

2 *ibid.*, p. 118.

Dunlop's later work in northern Australia, however, can also be understood in terms of a career-long sensitivity towards the people he worked with, and his increasing openness to being led by them.

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When Dunlop first started making films, in the 1950s, he was working with 35 mm cameras that were large, heavy and very noisy. Shooting with synchronous sound involved putting the camera in a blimp—a huge soundproof box mounted on a massive tripod. Alongside the blimp, a truckload of sound equipment and one or two sound engineers were required. In other words, if one was shooting a documentary with a small unit in a remote location, it was impossible to shoot sync-sound. At best, some wild sound could be recorded with a wire or (later) tape recorder. So early documentaries tended to have a lot of music in them or background chatter and bird chirps recorded on location—or more likely taken from a sound effects library.

In 1957 Dunlop made his first trip into central Australia when he was recruited to work on a film about the establishment of a remote weather station.³ The film included some footage of Aboriginal people who were at that time camped near the weather station, but with the 35 mm camera his cameraman was using, Dunlop was severely restricted in filming with them. All the scenes had to be carefully set-up, including a kangaroo hunt where people were asked to throw spears at a dead kangaroo that had been propped up against a tree. But despite the difficulties with arranging them, these scenes reveal an early interest in recording traditional technologies and, apart from the kangaroo hunt, the beginnings of an observational approach to filmmaking. More importantly this contact with Western Desert Aborigines and the realisation that there were still people living a traditional hunter-gatherer life in the desert started Dunlop on a decade-long quest to return to the Western Desert to film 'a day in the life of a nomadic family'.⁴

In the meantime, in the early 1960s Dunlop was commissioned to make a film about the work of a government Patrol Officer on the May River in the upper Sepik region of Papua New Guinea.⁵ Here Dunlop was again diverted from his central subject by the culture of the indigenous people in the area and his film included sequences of May River women making sago and a *singsing* that was held for the opening of a new *Haus Tamboran*, or traditional ancestral worship house, at Korogo on the middle Sepik. But again he was shooting without sound and one scene of a canoe being paddled through the reeds was augmented in post-production with sounds of paddle splashes made in a bucket.

3 Dunlop, I. and Gray, J. 1958, *Balloons and Spinifex*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW.

4 Dunlop, 'Ethnographic film-making in Australia', p. 117.

5 Dunlop, I. 1964, *Along the Sepik*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW.

Shooting with synchronous sound became easier during the early 1960s when filmmakers and technicians working in France and the United States developed self-blimped (sound-insulated) 16 mm cameras, which were small enough to hand hold. At the same time the Nagra tape recorder was developed in Switzerland and unwieldy sound equipment was condensed into a tape recorder that a sound-recordist could carry over their shoulder.⁶ As Dunlop reflects, the implications of all this were enormous: 'You could now shoot synchronous sound in the remotest location, you could film conversations, you could interview people, you could hear them breathing and singing and shouting. You could hear the ping of an arrow being fired!'⁷

When Dunlop finally got the go-ahead to return to the Western Desert in 1965, 16 mm sync-sound was still in its infancy and only a handful of Commonwealth Film Unit cameramen had any experience with the new 16 mm cameras. Dunlop elected to use 35 mm black and white. In a paper given at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Round Table on Ethnographic Film in the Pacific Area in 1966, he outlined his reasoning:

Should we shoot in 35 or 16mm; colour or black and white? 35mm colour was out because of expense. I decided on 35mm black and white, why? As far as an ethnographic record was concerned I thought I was unlikely to shoot subjects where colour was significant. I anticipated no ceremonies and little or no decoration. I hoped to concentrate mainly on close-ups of people carrying out activities of daily life, dark skinned people against a light background, dark shadows. For this I thought black and white would give a clearer picture. Also black and white would be faster for night shooting, and less sensitive to heat during the day. Furthermore I wanted to make a visually satisfying film, if I could, and for this I thought black and white was the medium to use.

Why 35mm? I wanted to get the best possible quality even if it did mean extra work.⁸

So Dunlop was concerned to get the best possible technical results at the same time as making an aesthetically pleasing film.

As a result of his decision to stick with a 35 mm camera, Dunlop was once again recording without sound, but when it came to editing the *People of the*

6 The new cameras also had magazines, or film cartridges, that held 10 minutes of film—a great improvement on the four minutes of earlier 35 mm cameras.

7 Dunlop, I. 2009, Presentation given as part of the Masterclasses in Ethnographic Film course, The Australian National University, Canberra.

8 Dunlop, I. 1966, Technical and production problems of ethnographic films: some aspects of filming in Australia's Western Desert, Paper given at Round Table on Ethnographic Film in the Pacific Area, Australian National Advisory Committee for UNESCO, Sydney, pp. 36–7.

Australian Western Desert series and the more general film *Desert People*,⁹ he did not want to pollute the material with sound effects from a sound library. These films are completely silent apart from Dunlop's own voice-over commentary, and even this was kept to a minimum—limited, as it was, to simple factual statements.

Figure 1 Ian Dunlop and cameraman Richard Tucker filming Minma and his family on the move from one well to another in 1965

Source: *People of the Australian Western Desert*, 1966 (© NFSA, Film Australia Collection)

The Western Desert films are the first of Dunlop's films that can be described as ethnographic, but they are generally seen as belonging very firmly within that era of 'films about traditional Aboriginal life', which Dunlop covered in his 1979 paper. Howard Morphy argues that Dunlop's production decisions place the Western Desert films at the 'high point' in 'a style of ethnographic filmmaking that is in continuity with the pioneering films made by Spencer and Gillen in central Australia in 1901'.¹⁰ In keeping with this positioning of the films,

9 Dunlop, I. 1965, *People of the Australian Western Desert. Parts 1–10*, and *Desert People*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW; and Dunlop, I. 1967, *People of the Australian Western Desert. Parts 11–19*, Australian Commonwealth Film Unit, Lindfield, NSW.

10 Morphy, H. 2005, 'The aesthetics of communication and the communication of cultural aesthetics—a perspective on Ian Dunlop's films of Aboriginal Australia', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 21, nos 1–2, p. 65.

Dunlop admits that the aim was to shoot as if the film unit didn't exist, with the camera as the 'eye of God' looking down upon a pristine environment. He humorously recounts how, during filming, he was constantly brushing out the ripple-sole footprints made by Bob Tonkinson, the young anthropologist who accompanied him on the trip.¹¹

Dunlop recalls that, at this stage in his career, he was not aware of developments that were taking place in the world of ethnographic film overseas. He had seen John Marshall and Robert Gardner's *The Hunters*¹² at university, but didn't know of their more recent work and had never heard of Jean Rouch,¹³ the French filmmaker considered by many to be the pioneer of modern ethnographic filmmaking.¹⁴

It could be argued, however, that Dunlop was pioneering his own new approach with his Western Desert films. As Morphy says:

Dunlop's filmmaking differed from his amateur predecessors—eg., Spencer and Gillen, Norman Tindale and T. G. H. Strehlow—not only in a technical and filmmaking sense, but also in his attitude to and understanding of Aboriginal society and its historical position. This difference comes across in the films most directly in the commentary, but also in those subtle features of film style, which makes people write that they present a humanistic vision.¹⁵

Dunlop's 'humanistic vision' is conveyed most clearly in the way he talks about the people he filmed in the Western Desert. Where earlier ethnographic films treated people as anthropological archetypes, Dunlop's films give them a dignity as individual human beings—by using their names.

The films were extremely well received, as Dunlop's production decisions were perceived to be in keeping with each other and with an overarching aesthetic purity: 'The simplicity of the shots and the preciseness of the contrasts are only rivaled by the understatement of the commentary. The absence of music or any other form of background sound, gives evidence of a profound modesty joined with effectiveness.'¹⁶

11 Dunlop, Masterclasses in Ethnographic Film presentation.

12 Marshall, J. and Gardner, R. 1957, *The Hunters*, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

13 Dunlop, I., Personal communication, 8 November 2011.

14 A champion of participatory filmmaking from the late 1940s onwards, Rouch had a huge impact on the world of ethnographic film, particularly with the groundbreaking reflexivity of *Chronique d'un Été*, the film he made with sociologist Edgar Morin about modern life in Paris: Rouch, J. and Morin, E. 1961, *Chronique d'un Été*, Agros Films, France.

15 Morphy, 'The aesthetics of communication and the communication of cultural aesthetics', p. 65.

16 Téchiné, A. 1967, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 65.

Looking back, however, Dunlop now acknowledges that in 1967, on his second trip to the Western Desert, he should have switched to 16 mm film with sync-sound. He now feels that not having done so was a mistake¹⁷—made partly because *Desert People*, the general film he had edited from the earlier material, had been such a huge success overseas.¹⁸

About the same time as Dunlop was filming in the Western Desert, Cecil Holmes filmed four Arnhem Land ceremonies, three of them with synchronous sound equipment—a first for Australian ethnographic film.¹⁹ But these films were not a radical departure from the past in terms of subject matter. Funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), they fitted into a program of anthropological record making that sought to preserve cultural knowledge thought to be in danger of disappearing. With the formation of the institute's own film unit in 1965, the project of recording Aboriginal ceremonies was carried forward by filmmaker Roger Sandall, who produced six films of ceremonies between 1966 and 1968.²⁰

Both Holmes' and Sandall's films of the 1960s used sync-sound, but they were not subtitled. While Sandall went on to make groundbreaking subtitled films like *Coniston Muster* in the 1970s,²¹ he explained that, with these early record films, only partial fragments of speech were captured and he considered the words of the songs recorded to be too 'esoteric and repetitious to be comprehensible to outsiders'.²²

The first ethnographic films to be subtitled were produced overseas. These were Timothy Asch and John Marshall's 'sequence films' of the mid to late 1960s, each featuring a particular event recorded by Marshall amongst Ju/'hoansi in the Kalahari, but, as they were designed for use in teaching, they were not widely screened. In 1970, Asch went on to produce *The Feast* and other films about the Yānomamö of Venezuela that were also subtitled—although, again, Dunlop would not have seen these until at least the mid-1970s.

17 Dunlop, Personal communication, 8 November 2011.

18 Following a glowing review in *Le Monde* (4 March 1967, p. 20), *Desert People* was screened every night for a week to packed houses at the Cinématèque Française.

19 Holmes, C. 1964, 1965 and 1966, *Ubar, Yabuduruwa, and Lorrkun*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

20 Sandall, R. 1966, *Walbiri Ritual at Ngama, Djunguan of Yirrkala, Gunabibi: An Aboriginal fertility cult; 1967–68, Emu Ritual Art Ruguri; 1967, Mulga Seed Ceremony, Walbiri Ritual at Gunadjari*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

21 Sandall, R. 1972, *Coniston Muster: Scenes from a stockman's life*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

22 As paraphrased in MacDougall, D. 1995, 'Subtitling ethnographic films', in D. MacDougall 1998, *Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p. 165.

Dunlop was only exposed to the ideas and films of people like Jean Rouch, Robert Gardner and Colin Young in 1966, when the UNESCO Round Table on Ethnographic Film in the Pacific Area was held in Sydney. And it was not until 1972, when Dunlop saw David MacDougall's *To Live with Herds* at the Venice Film Festival, that he realised the full impact that subtitling could have. He still recalls being 'bowled over' by it.²³

Thirty years down the track, in 1995, MacDougall reflected on the transformation that had taken place from earlier films with voice-over commentary to films with synchronous sound and subtitling: 'Audiences no longer listened to spoken information *about* people in these films but began to watch and listen to them more directly.'²⁴ They had, to some extent, been given a voice.

Although Dunlop claims not to have fully appreciated the powerful effect that subtitling could have until he saw *To Live with Herds* in 1972, he had himself been working with synchronous sound since 1969—and was also already thinking in terms of subtitling people's speech.

In 1969, Dunlop and a small film crew used a 16 mm camera and Nagra tape recorder to film male initiation ceremonies of the Baruya people in the New Guinea Highlands. But after two years of editing, when French anthropologist Maurice Godelier and linguist Dick Lloyd were flown to Sydney to help with subtitling the Baruya films, they discovered they were unable to deliver accurate translations of dialogue without the aid of a Baruya consultant. Dunlop had to give up the idea of subtitling the films, which he says was a bitter blow,²⁵ and the series of nine films, *Towards Baruya Manhood*, was completed in 1972 without subtitles.²⁶

At the same time as he was working on the Baruya films, Dunlop began another project in Australia—this time in northeast Arnhem Land. In 1969 he had been asked to make a film documenting the impact of the new NABALCO bauxite mine on the Yolngu Aboriginal community at Yirrkala. He made a preliminary research trip to Yirrkala in February 1970, and returned with a film crew in August of the same year.

They were using 16 mm colour but once again Dunlop was worried about the cost and quality of the colour stock. In a report on the film project, written in 1971, he says:

23 Dunlop, I., Personal communication, 24 August 2011.

24 Here and elsewhere, however, MacDougall expressed some reservations about the way in which the ability to incorporate synchronous, subtitled dialogue led to an overemphasis on the spoken word in ethnographic films: MacDougall, 'Subtitling ethnographic films', p. 175.

25 Dunlop, I., Personal communication, 10 January 2012.

26 Dunlop has had recent discussions with French anthropologist Pierre Lemonnier at the Centre de Recherche et de Documentation sur l'Océanie in Marseille about the possibility of finally correcting this omission, with a digitised version of the material.

The first trip was shot in Ektachrome 7242. I have considered whether we should change to B/W stock, partly for economy, and partly because it would give greater latitude for shooting under bad light conditions. On the other hand colour is of course becoming more and more the accepted stock for everything. I frankly have not resolved this in my own mind yet.²⁷

Once again, he was filming with a view to translating and subtitling dialogue, but the results of this were not seen until many years later. What had begun as an idea for a single film evolved into a long-term film project that continued over eight filming trips until 1982. The first film to come out of the project was released in 1979²⁸ and the subtitling and commentary in this and all the films that followed were the result of years in the cutting room working with Yolngu informants, anthropologists and linguists.²⁹

Dunlop had gone to Yirrkala wanting to adopt a new approach to his filming with people—and wanting to establish a real collaboration with Yolngu. His research trip diary records how, during his first few days at Yirrkala, he had tried to explain some of his ideas to the President of the Yirrkala Village Council, Roy Dadaynga Marika: 'Then I had a long talk to Roy. It is hard to say how much he really understood about the idea of the film.'³⁰

Further into the diary, an account of a meeting with anthropologist Nancy Williams (later employed as anthropologist to the project) reveals how his ideas were evolving:

Nancy agreed very much with the idea of trying to get people to tell us what they thought we should film. This was the new approach to Anthropology. It incorporated the active co-operation of your subject. I suggested the first filming might be a meeting of the [Yirrkala Village] Council discussing what we should film.³¹

The entry is fascinating from the point of view of speculation about the influence that mainstream anthropology may or may not have been having on Dunlop, or ethnographic film more generally, at that time. As Morphy suggests:

The Western Desert films were made at the time of paradigm change in which ethnographic filmmaking began to move away from an objectivist recording of cultures to one in which the filmmaker acknowledged

27 Dunlop, I. 1971, *YIRRKALA—A report on the film project—5th February*, Film Australia Yirrkala File FP23-036, Ian Dunlop Collection, National Archives of Australia, Canberra.

28 Dunlop, I. 1979, *Madarrpa Funeral at Gurka'wuy*, Film Australia, Lindfield, NSW.

29 The last of the twenty-two films to come out of the project was released in 1996.

30 Dunlop, I. 1970, *Diary and Daily Notes of Research Visit to Yirrkala, February 1970*, Ian Dunlop Collection, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, p. 2.

31 *ibid.*, p. 6.

a more interactive role in the documentary process. This change of perspective is often said to be associated with more general changes in anthropology with the overturning of the functionalist paradigm, the realization of the constructed nature of ethnographic writing, and a move to more historically positioned and less bounded views of social and cultural processes.³²

Although, as Morphy is also aware: 'it has been argued that some of the changes that occurred in anthropology were foregrounded in developments in ethnographic film.'³³

A few days after introducing the idea of the film project to Roy Marika, Dunlop was directed to a meeting of the Village Council where Roy was continuing the discussion:

I went to Roy's house. A young woman planting in the garden two houses down, said Roy was at a council meeting and they were waiting for me, so I rushed down to Yinitjuwa's house where on the balcony Roy was holding council with about eight other men and Nancy Williams was sitting in as assistant secretary of the council.

Roy then said 'Well Ian we held a council meeting yesterday about the film' and he then proceeded to give an exposition of the film as he saw it and it was an astonishing performance. He explained the purpose of the film, as in fact I conceive it, very much better than I could have done, and here I was worrying that I had not made myself clear and that they had the wrong end of the stick. He drew one circle that was the aboriginal culture and then another and that was the mission and then another large oblong and that was the mine. Then he explained how there was interaction between all these, one with another and much more, which I can't exactly remember.³⁴

Given Roy's apparently instant grasp of what the project could be, it was easy for Dunlop to continue on the journey he had begun—with the more personal and respectful approach of the Western Desert films—to a much closer collaboration with some of the people he got to know over the years at Yirrkala. And although it is clear that Nancy Williams recognised anthropological parallels and was sympathetic with the direction in which Dunlop was moving, it is also easy to see how his approach at Yirrkala was perhaps more the result of his natural inclination and the response of Yolngu to the project than the result of any strong influences from either anthropologists or other filmmakers. As Dunlop

32 Morphy, 'The aesthetics of communication and the communication of cultural aesthetics', p. 65.

33 *ibid.*

34 Dunlop, *Diary and Daily Notes of Research Visit to Yirrkala, February 1970*, pp. 8–9.

now recalls, the ethnographic films he saw around this time—at the UNESCO Round Table in 1966 and the Venice Film Festival in 1972—simply backed up his feeling that these were the kinds of films he wanted to make.³⁵

When Dunlop returned to Yirrkala to begin shooting later in 1970, he began, as he had thought he might, by arranging to film another Village Council meeting. And, for the first time, Dunlop was happy to be included within the camera's frame, expressing his hope that this would be a truly collaborative project:

We want this film to be not just a film which we make, but a film which we all make together. We want you to help us with this film—we want you to advise us—tell us the kind of things you think should be filmed—so that everybody feels that it's not just us making the film, but we're all working together.³⁶

Figure 2 Ian Dunlop talking to Council President, Roy Marika, and other clan leaders at the Yirrkala Village Council meeting in 1970

Source: Yirrkala Film Project, 1970 (© NFSA, Film Australia Collection)

Only small sections of the council meeting were filmed—just enough to offer representative shots of each of the clan elders who spoke—about half-an-hour

³⁵ Dunlop, Personal communication, 8 November 2011.

³⁶ Ian Dunlop speech in Dunlop, I. 1995, *Pain for this Land*, Film Australia, Lindfield, NSW.

in total; however, an audio recording of almost the entire meeting was made. Some years later this was translated by Wandjuk Marika, who had been present at the meeting and so had a fairly good idea of what people had talked about.

The transcript of Wandjuk's translation makes fascinating reading. It reveals that, from the very first filming that took place, the clan elders assembled seized the opportunity to record a message for future generations of Yolngu. Mungurrawuy Yunupingu (father of Galarrwuy and Mandawuy Yunupingu) started with the following statement:

We are here just a short time before we pass away and they are filming us and we are looking at them face to face but one day we are going to pass away. We don't know what they will do after that. This is our first good opportunity to tell the story to our children through our picture, our film of the Film Unit.³⁷

Milirrump Marika, in whose name Australia's first land rights case was being fought,³⁸ then spoke directly to his children:

We want to tell you about this story before they build the township of Nhulunbuy [the new mining town]. We tell you first and we teach you first what the old people, what our own law is, before the new law comes in, so you can know and hear our voices from every clan and you see us on this film what we have been discussing, and put the law through, our law through this picture, the movie...through this machine...We are telling you, as your father's father's forefathers did, now we are carrying on and we take the word as before and now this is our time, we are going to talk to you before we pass away and we never know what might happen.³⁹

In retrospect, Council President, Roy Marika (Milirrump's younger brother), was extraordinarily conscious of their joint reflexive purpose:

Thanks to you people. It's very good indeed, and one day I'm going to write a letter to the Commonwealth Film Unit so they will send a copy of the tape here so you can hear your voice and what you have been discussing and making law. It is law now. This is a good thing for us, to

37 *Council Meeting Translation*, Ian Dunlop Collection, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, p. 14.

38 Known as the Gove Land Rights case, '*Milirrump v Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia*' was an attempt to stop the development of the NABALCO bauxite mine and the service town of Nhulunbuy.

39 *Council Meeting Translation*, Ian Dunlop Collection, pp. 57–8.

remind (everyone of) all your voices, so I'm going to put your voice in the Council House for your children's children when they have grown up.⁴⁰

Several of the clan elders talked about ceremonies they were holding, or about to hold, and expressed their agreement that the public parts of these could be filmed. Dunlop had not gone to Yirrkala to film ceremonies and, at that time, wouldn't have had much idea of their significance there. But Yolngu may have been expecting him to film ceremonies—because this was what previous filmmakers had done—and without doubt they also wanted this to happen, as we hear Roy Marika say in *Pain for this Land*:

This is our chance to record our history
for our children...and our grandchildren...
Before we die we should make a true picture,
our own Yolngu picture, that will teach our
children our dances and Law and everything—
our singing—our own Yolngu culture.⁴¹

Because he was trying to get a general feel of the place by filming a bit of everything, Dunlop's coverage of ceremonies on this first trip to Yirrkala was very patchy. In addition, constraints of budget, and hence film stock, meant that he was not able to commit himself to a full cover of ceremonies.

In his report on the film project in 1971, he outlined a clear list of reasons why some filming of ceremonial life was essential:

- a) It is a very important part of life at Yirrkala.
- b) It should be filmed for the record.
- c) The Aborigines want and expect it to be filmed.⁴²

The last of these points was borne out as the film project continued, with Yolngu requesting the filming of major ceremonies in 1971, 1972 and 1976.

In 1971, the filming of a Djangkawu ceremony in colour was to be partly financed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies' recording program. Dunlop started filming despite the institute's sudden and mistaken decision that a Djangkawu ceremony had already been filmed in 1966 and that this would simply be a repeat performance.⁴³ Dunlop continued to cover the ceremony as fully as possible despite a telegram telling him that he must stop, as he recorded

40 *ibid.*, pp. 47–8. The films were never kept in the council house, but are now housed by the Mulka Project, a new-media keeping place at the Yirrkala arts centre.

41 Subtitles from Dunlop, *Pain for this Land*.

42 Dunlop, *YIRRKALA*, pp. 4–5.

43 Roger Sandall's film *Djunguan of Yirrkala* (1966, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra) recorded a Djungguwan ceremony, *not* a Djangkawu ceremony.

in his diary: 'Institute of Aboriginal Studies cancel shooting of Djunguwal ritual stop please return stock allotted to this project stop.'⁴⁴ Somewhat wryly, he concluded: 'So we'll have to decide whether we received this telegram or not.'⁴⁵ Fortunately, Dunlop decided he hadn't received the telegram and continued shooting (with institute stock) until the conclusion of the ceremony.

In fact, in 1976, Dunlop *was* invited to film a Djungguwan ceremony,⁴⁶ the 'same' ceremony that Roger Sandall had filmed in 1966. But every Yolngu ceremony is a unique event. Indeed, Dunlop's film brought out the particular purpose of the 1976 performance and the meaning it had for the people involved. As David MacDougall observes: 'Sandall's work tends to emphasize the spatial relationships and choreography of the rituals. Dunlop's looks more closely at the role of ritual leaders and translates more of the conversations and song texts.'⁴⁷

The 1976 film incorporates one of the discussions that took place around the decision to 'open' the Djungguwan to being filmed, where we learn of another key motivation for Yolngu involvement with the film project.

MITHILI: We are not going to hide our sacred Law...
but bring it out into the open.
We've spoken about this before...
so think about my words...
That's why we've moved back here on to our own land...
to show that our foundation is in this country...
our dancing and singing and sacred Law...
this is our home.
Now when whites or Government come here...
They'll see for themselves and understand...
about our land and our sacred Law.⁴⁸

■ View Discussion Sequence from *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy*⁴⁹

Unlike earlier ethnographic films recording ritual and other aspects of traditional life, the Yirrkala Film Project was conceived to document the impact of the NABALCO bauxite mine on the Aboriginal community at Yirrkala. The Yolngu response to the film project can be seen as part of their response to the threat that the mine and new mining town, just twenty kilometres from Yirrkala, held for them; and later, to the losing of their land rights case. In April 1971, Justice

44 Dunlop, I. 1971, *Yirrkala Diary*, Ian Dunlop Collection, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, p. 28.

45 *ibid.*

46 Dunlop, I. 1989, *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy*, Film Australia, Lindfield, NSW.

47 MacDougall, D. 1991, 'Whose story is it?', *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Fall).

48 Subtitles from Dunlop, *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy*.

49 View associated media files via the ANU E Press website at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012>

Blackburn handed down his ruling in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory that Australia had been *terra nullius* (or 'land belonging to no-one') before European settlement, and that Yolngu did not own their land.

In the council meeting that Dunlop recorded, Yolngu were expressing their feeling that they should make a record of their 'dances and Law and everything'—especially, as Mungurrawuy said, 'before we pass away and we never know what might happen'. But there was more to it than this. Right from the beginning of the film project, and with even more urgency following the loss of their court case, some Yolngu clearly saw the potential of film for educating European Australians about their connection to their land.

So, although ostensibly just another film of an Aboriginal ceremony, the film of the Djungguwan ceremony that Dunlop and his crew shot at the Marrakulu clan homeland settlement of Gurka'wuy in 1976 also operates as a statement of Yolngu rights to land—informing the wider world about the Marrakulu clan's connection to Gurka'wuy.

During the filming of the ceremony, Dunlop asked Dundiwuy Wanambi to explain the ritual significance of the trees and rocks along the beach at Gurka'wuy. He still relives what happened as a magical moment: at the end of the beach, at the very spot where Djerrka, the water goanna ancestors, came ashore and gave this tract of land to the Marrakulu clan, Dundiwuy picked up a stick and began drawing the design of a Marrakulu clan Djerrka painting on the wet sand—his clan's title deeds to the very place where they were standing. Dunlop feels it is one of the most powerful statements of land rights that he has ever filmed.⁵⁰

■ View Dundiwuy Drawing in the Sand Sequence from *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy*⁵¹

Conclusion

Looking back at the decade of change through which Dunlop's approach to filmmaking evolved, it is possible to see that the films he produced were more a response to an engagement with people—and their response to his filming—than to the radical developments in ethnographic film that were going on around him. Dunlop's work can be seen to have taken place on the fringe of

⁵⁰ Dunlop, I. 1997, Personal communication.

⁵¹ View associated media files via the ANU E Press website at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012>

developments overseas and, perhaps for this reason, while aware of these, he was not driven by any strong theoretical positions or new orthodoxies that can be seen to have developed around ethnographic filmmaking at this time.

Dunlop was slow to take up the new technologies of more portable 16 mm cameras and synchronous sound-recording equipment, preferring a conservative approach in the interests of getting the best-quality pictures he could. He wanted to do full justice to what he knew would be the last opportunity to film people living in the Western Desert; however, he has been criticised for having missed an early opportunity to record people's voices,⁵² and now acknowledges his mistake in not having switched to using a lighter weight camera and Nagra recorder on his second trip to the desert.

Dunlop was at pains to hide any signs of the presence of a film crew in his Western Desert films and, again, he has been criticised for this lack of reflexivity.⁵³ Following Rouch, other ethnographic filmmakers of the time were at pains to reveal the constructed nature of their films; but Dunlop's approach was in keeping with his enormous respect for the people he was filming and his, admittedly romantic, feeling for the stark beauty of their life in the desert.

Given the chance to pursue his dream of making a film on the life of Western Desert nomads, Dunlop had approached his subject with his own particular sensibility and a sensitivity that was unknown in earlier anthropological films, and his *People of the Australian Western Desert* series remains a document of enormous integrity and value. Anthropologist Sue Davenport, who works at Balgo on the northern edge of the Tanami and Great Sandy deserts in Western Australia, recently told Dunlop that, these days, before old men from the community take young boys out bush to teach them about the old ways, they sit down and watch Dunlop's films to remind themselves of how they used to live.⁵⁴

Dunlop did take up recording with synchronous sound from 1969, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and at Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land. But his aim of subtitling his *Towards Baruya Manhood* films was thwarted by the difficulty of getting the language of so remote a people translated. And, while the twenty-two films that came out of the Yirrkala Film Project were all fully subtitled, they were not released until many years after this breakthrough of modern ethnographic film had made its mark.

While the films of ceremonies that Dunlop made at Yirrkala could be seen to continue a tired tradition of anthropological record making, they again are

52 Bryson, I. et al. 2000, as cited in Morphy, 'The aesthetics of communication and the communication of cultural aesthetics', p. 65.

53 Tuareg, M. 1984, as cited in *ibid.*, p. 65.

54 Dunlop, I. 2009, Personal communication.

quite different from what had gone before. They were made at the request of Yolngu, who wanted their ceremonies recorded as a means of educating both their children and the wider world.

In her foreword to the book *Yalangbara—Art of the Djang’kawu*, Banduk Marika compares her Rirratjingu clan’s paintings with Dunlop’s film of her clan’s ceremony. She says: ‘In a way, *Yalangbara* is like the film about my father, *In Memory of Mawalan*, in showing people that this is our land, these are our ancestors and they are important for Aboriginal people, not just our family.’⁵⁵

This film and many others from the Yirrkala Film Project have acquired the status of artefacts that can be used by Yolngu in much the same way as they might use paintings of their ancestral clan designs. Both the paintings and the films are a statement of a relationship with and, hence, rights to land.

On one of his last trips to Yirrkala, in the mid-1990s, Dunlop was told about a workshop that Yolngu had organised to assess the long-term social, economic and environmental impacts of the NABALCO bauxite mine after twenty-eight years of operation. Wulanybuma Wunungmurra, chairman of what was now a town council, told Dunlop how, the day before the workshop, the council had screened *Pain for this Land*.⁵⁶ In the sequence of the Village Council meeting that Dunlop had filmed at the very outset of the film project, those present saw and heard their fathers and grandfathers talking with prophetic foresight about the effect the mine would surely have upon their community and their country. Wulanybuma told Dunlop that people had cried.⁵⁷

■ View 1970 Council Meeting Sequence from *Pain for this Land*⁵⁸

On the last day of the workshop the General Manager of the mining company was invited to attend. Now that the mine had been going so long there were few white employees who had been there at the beginning or who had any idea what it really meant to the Yolngu then. The workshop organisers sat the General Manager down and screened the film again—and then they told him ‘We still feel much pain for this land’.

55 West, M. (ed.) 2008, *Yalangbara—Art of the Djang’kawu*, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, p. 8.

56 Dunlop, *Pain for this Land*.

57 Dunlop, I. 1996, Personal communication.

58 View associated media files via the ANU E Press website at <http://epress.anu.edu.au/titles/humanities-research-journal-series/humanities-research-vol-xviii-no-1-2012>