Representations of Aborigines in Australian Documentary Film 1901 - 2009

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Newcastle

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Attention

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Community Members

This thesis contains names, images and words of people who may have died. Readers of this work should be aware that if members of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities see names or images of the deceased, particularly their relatives, they may be distressed. Before using this work in such communities, readers should establish the wishes of senior members and take their advice on appropriate procedures and safeguards to be adopted.
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been made possible without the extraordinary help of the following people. First and most important I acknowledge the support, encouragement and patience of my husband Graeme, who has been sorely tested at times throughout the thesis process. His genuine interest in my academic endeavours has led to many reflective discussions and insights that have provided me with much needed reflective thinking and evaluation of the research material. His distance from the project has been valuable in keeping me grounded in the practicalities of research outcomes.

To my daughters, Felicity, Katie and Imogen who have always reminded me that there is life outside the thesis project and that the world does not stop just because you think you are doing something important that does not involve them. Their anecdotes and sense of humour have helped me to see the ridiculous side of myself and laugh at my many imperfections. The times at which they have shown pride in my achievements have been heartening. And to my little four legged companion, Alfie who has been mindful that I take regular breaks from my desk.

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Although, some of the earliest documentary films made in Australia were about Indigenous Australians, as a collection they have not been the subject of serious study. Making films about Indigenous Australians initially had close connections with science, both natural and medical. This helped to re-enforce and sanctify the ‘objectification’ of Indigenous Australians as subjects of scientific enquiry within the context of the discourse of Social Darwinism. The visual images contributed to their positioning as the anthropological Other in which they were considered as outside of history; an image that is now under challenge by contemporary Indigenous filmmakers.
It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that Indigenous Australians began to emerge from these ethnographic narratives. Documentary films made from that time began to recognise that Indigenous Australians were living in the political and social present. Public perceptions about how Indigenous Australians were coping with the dispossession of their traditional lands and living at the interface of two ideologically opposed cultures were dramatically challenged.

As changes in perception continued to shift in the 1970s and 1980s, astute white documentary filmmakers began to collaborate with Indigenous people to make films about their lives. These filmmakers recognised that Indigenous Australians had a lot to talk about and with access to funding available from recently established public instrumentalities, filmmaking about Indigenous Australians reflected the changing attitudes about Australia’s Aboriginal people.

By the latter years of the twentieth century, a vibrant and dynamic Indigenous film industry was emerging in Australia. With Indigenous filmmakers and technical experts in control of film production, white Australians have been witness to further shifts in the ways in which Indigenous Australians are represented on film. Indigenous filmmakers with a more intimate understanding of cultural protocols and with a high degree of social investment are taking on the responsibility of representing the Indigenous perspective on film. They have taken the medium that once positioned them as a people on the brink of extinction and are now demonstrating their acuity and skill with the visual medium. Their innovative and dynamic approach to the craft defies earlier preconceptions of a primitive and static culture unable to participant in a modern Australia.
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AASEAL</td>
<td>American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation ACMI</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australian Centre for the Moving Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEDP</td>
<td>Aboriginal Employment Development Policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFC</td>
<td>Australian Film Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFI</td>
<td>Australian Film Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFTRS</td>
<td>Australian Film, Television and Radio School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIAS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANFB</td>
<td>Australian National Film Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANRC</td>
<td>Australian National Research Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>ANU</td>
<td>Australian National University</td>
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<tr>
<td>APA</td>
<td>Aboriginal Progressive Association</td>
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<td>APB</td>
<td>Aboriginal Protection Board</td>
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<td>APU</td>
<td>Aboriginal Programs Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATOM</td>
<td>Australian Teachers of Media</td>
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<td>ATSIC</td>
<td>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>AUSSAT</td>
<td>Australian Communications Satellite</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAAMA</td>
<td>Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFU</td>
<td>Commonwealth Film Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRM</td>
<td>Civil Rights Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCAATSI</td>
<td>Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders</td>
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<tr>
<td>FFC</td>
<td>Film Finance Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPU</td>
<td>Indigenous Programs Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLA</td>
<td>Member of the Legislative Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAIBA</td>
<td>National Aboriginal and Islanders Broadcasting Association</td>
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<td>NAIDOC</td>
<td>National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NFSA</td>
<td>National Film and Sound Archive</td>
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<td>NFU</td>
<td>National Film Unit</td>
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<td>NIDF</td>
<td>National Indigenous Documentary Fund</td>
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<td>NIMAA</td>
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<td>NITV</td>
<td>National Indigenous Television</td>
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<td>NUAUS</td>
<td>National Union of Australian University Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMG</td>
<td>Post Master General</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCTS</td>
<td>Remote Commercial Television Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>SABAR</td>
<td>South Australian Board for Anthropological Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAM</td>
<td>South Australian Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service</td>
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<tr>
<td>SMH</td>
<td><em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>UCLA</td>
<td>University of California – Los Angeles</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>VAAL</td>
<td>Victorian Aborigines Advancement League</td>
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Introduction

The use of film to visually inform a mass audience is a twentieth century phenomenon. Its invention coincided with three critical moments in Australian history – the federation of the six Australian colonies to form the Australian nation; the rise of the academic discipline of anthropology; and the widespread belief that the nation’s Indigenous\(^1\) people were on the brink of extinction. In this environment, biological and medical scientists used the medium of film to record the Aboriginal people for posterity. A century later the descendants of the ‘extinct’ people were making their own films to tell their own stories for fellow Indigenous Australians and to inform a non-Indigenous audience.

This thesis will explore the extraordinary journey taken by Australian documentary filmmakers from 1901 to 2009 in the visual representation of Australia’s Aboriginal people. The purpose is to explore the filmmakers’ key role in constructing attitudes towards Australia’s Aboriginal peoples over the last century and identify the key moments when their films acted as a force both for change and empowerment.

\(^1\) The terms Indigenous and Aboriginal have been used interchangeably to refer to the original inhabitants of the Australian mainland.
Documentary Views

Since British documentary filmmaker, John Grierson defined documentary film in 1926 as the “creative treatment of actuality” the genre has been wide open to debate.\(^2\) Erik Barnouw in *Documentary: a history of the non-fiction film*, (1993),\(^3\) considers that the first moving films ever made were documentaries by Frenchman Louis Lumière in 1895. They were called *sur le vif* (catch life), which were one minute clips of everyday life such as *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, (1895) and the *Arrival of Conventioners*, (1895).

Michael Renov has identified the key functions and purpose of documentary film that help to define the purpose and expectation of the medium. He considers that documentary film’s function is to “record, reveal or preserve” the phenomenon of events that make up our lives as in Louis Lumière’s, *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, (1895)\(^4\) and that its purpose is to “persuade or to promote” by using music and certain semiotic presentations of images as in Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, (1933),\(^5\) to “analyse or interrogate” a problem or issue\(^6\) and “to express” an opinion or argument, as in Joris Iven’s *The Bridge*, (1928).\(^7\) Bill Nichols also considers that documentary film has the ability “to make us see timely issues in need of attention.”\(^8\) Both consider that documentary film is linked strongly to the historical narrative and often in fact is a participant in creating it.\(^9\) This aspect of documentary film practice is a central theme of the thesis.

More recently, Stella Bruzzi considers that since the 1970s, documentary film has developed along less rigid lines of mediation,\(^10\) indicating that documentary film styles have been influenced by changes in technology and the social and political context in which they have been made. This critical point is also a central focus of the thesis. She points out that for Nichols and Renov:

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\(^5\) Ibid., 28.
\(^6\) Ibid., 30.
\(^7\) Ibid., 32.
somewhere in the utopian future, documentary will miraculously be able to collapse the difference between reality and representation altogether.¹¹

Bruzzi considers that this tradition of documentary filmmaking is heavily influenced by the cinéma vérité (real life) movement which was popular from the 1950s to the 1970s. Developed by French filmmaker Jean Rouch, the style attempted to compress the relationship between the filmmaker and the film subjects by using improvisation and in many instances acknowledging and using the filmmaker to provoke comments and reactions from the film subjects. It was in direct opposition to the Hollywood style of production. However, Bruzzi considers that it failed to deliver an authentic reality, perhaps because the very presence of the camera “distorts and alters human behaviour” and the “resulting piece of film cannot be objective or truthful.”¹² Indeed she considers that:

filmmakers themselves (and their audiences) have, much more readily than theorists, accepted documentary’s inability to give an undistorted, purely reflective picture of reality. Several different sorts of non-fiction film have now emerged that propose a complex documentary truth arising from an insurmountable compromise between subject and recording, suggesting in turn that it is this very juncture between reality and filmmaker that is at the heart of any documentary.¹³

From this statement it would appear that Bruzzi’s argument allows for a more fluid understanding of what a documentary film promises to deliver to an audience.

The key point of this debate about documentary film is how it informs the reader’s understanding of the films selected for analysis in this thesis. It will be demonstrated that technological developments in camera and film technology coincided with a major shift in non-Indigenous attitudes towards Indigenous Australians, resulting from changes in policy and Aboriginal political activism. Put together they led to new ways of documentary filmmaking articulated by Aboriginal Australians.

In this context an important literature is emerging about Australian documentary films. Albert Moran and Tom O’Regan’s, edited survey volumes, An Australian Film Reader, (1985)¹⁴ and The Australian Screen, (1989)¹⁵ as well as Moran’s Film Policy: An Australian Reader, (1994)¹⁶ provide an important foundational contribution to the debate about documentary film in Australia. Each text gives the impression that the Australian film

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¹¹ Ibid., 2.
¹² Ibid., 7.
¹³ Ibid., 6.
¹⁴ Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, eds., An Australian Film Reader (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985).
¹⁶ Albert Moran, ed. Film Policy: An Australian Reader (Brisbane: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, Griffith University, 1994).
industry is fragile at best but more so in relation to documentary film. However, they include almost no reference to films about Aboriginal Australians.

Ina Bertrand and Dianne Collins’, *Government Film in Australia*, (1981),17 Moran’s, *Projecting Australia: Government Film Since 1945*, (1991),18 and Deane Williams’ *The Commonwealth Film Unit: predecessors and precursors*, (1995)19 focus on the development of documentary film making through the lens of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) and public instrumentalities such as the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) (now Screen Australia) where most documentary films appear to have been produced. Lisa Milner’s, *Fighting Films: a History of the Waterside Workers’ Federation Film Unit*, (2003) shows how another institution, the Waterside Workers’ Federation, enabled labour based documentary films to be made in Australia.20 However, none of these texts offer a particular focus on how Aboriginal Australians are represented in documentary film.

The introduction of television to Australia in 1956 forged strong links with documentary filmmaking in Australia. John Tulloch and Graeme Turner in *Australian Television: programs, pleasures and politics*, (1989)21 and Tom O’Regan and Graeme Turner’s, *Australian Television Culture*, (1993)22 examine the influence documentary film has made in education, art, popular culture and the importance of broadcast television in making many documentaries available to the general public. But they offer no particular account of the representation of Indigenous Australians.

The same problem arises in collections of conference papers such as *The Big Picture: Documentary Film-making in Australia*, (1991) from the 2nd Australian Documentary Film Conference held at the Australian National University (ANU) in November and December 1991. For example, Sharon Bell, in her chapter “Australian Documentary production to

22 Tom O'Regan and John Tulloch, eds., *Australian Television Culture* (St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1993).
1991: an overview,"23 discusses the state and place of documentary film in Australia and the industry’s potential to shape the nation’s future. Mark Hamlyn, in his chapter, “Documentaries at ABC – TV”24 discusses the number of hours that documentary films were screened on the ABC, and that approximately thirty hours were produced in house, that approximately forty hours were produced by the Independent Documentary Initiative established in 1988, and that the balance was made up of imported documentaries.25 He also points out that one-and-a-half hours per week were allocated to Indigenous programs produced by the Aboriginal Programs Unit comprising the Blackout and First Australians series which featured documentaries about Aboriginal experiences and culture made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous program-makers.26

More recently, Trish FitzSimons, Pat Laughren and Dugald Williamson in Australian Documentary: History, Practices and Genres, (2011)27 have re-visited the state of documentary film practice in Australia, by considering the ways in which documentary film has provided information, entertainment, advocacy and witness accounts of the events that affect the viewers’ lives. They argue that Australian documentary film production has contributed a wealth of archival images about Australia over the past century and that the funding of documentary films through public instrumentalities has enabled them to be viewed as an economic, social and cultural benefit to the nation and an important vehicle for national image making.28 Within the context of this thesis they demonstrate the importance of analysing documentary film and its capacity to make comments about Australian society. Even so, they offer no particular analysis of the representation of Indigenous Australians in documentary film. A central purpose of this thesis is to address this oversight by analysing the history of documentary film production in Australia in relation to the changing ways in which Indigenous Australians have been represented.

Ethnographic Views

Many documentary films about Aboriginal Australians are considered as ethnographic films, or ‘cultural’ films, that is, they present a slice out of the lives of people who are nominally

25 Ibid., 86.
26 Ibid., 88.
28 Ibid., 231-2.
defined as the Other; as the binary opposition to the generally presumed Western white male (or female) modern self.

Like other forms of cinema, documentary and ethnographic films appear to incorporate a narrative structure observed in fiction or feature films. Peter Loizos notes that: “many authors have stressed elements in documentaries which resemble fiction films – the use of narrative, suspense and closure, and of continuity shooting and editing being the most obvious.” This aspect appears in nearly all the films selected for analysis in this thesis. The fluidity of camera styles and the use of narrative structures used in fiction as well as documentary and ethnographic films can be attributed to changes in technology and the socio-political contexts in which the films are made. In conducting an historical survey of the ways Aboriginal Australians have been represented in ethnographic and documentary films, as in this thesis, an opportunity is presented to explore debates in visual anthropology.

The term visual anthropology came into use after the Second World War and is now used to describe ethnographic films. According to Peter Loizos an ethnographic film “require[s] a significant input of anthropological research” to separate it from the more general designation of documentary film. Yet it would appear that some of the earliest documentary films ever made are situated in the sub-genre of ethnographic. While Erik Barnouw contends that Robert Flaherty’s films *Nanook of the North*, (1922), *Moana*, (1926), and *Man of Aran*, (1934), should be considered as the first exploration films, today they are widely considered as ethnographic films because they show the lives of the people who were considered as outside of Western culture and whose lifestyles were about to radically change.

Even so, long antedating Flaherty’s films are the films made about Australian Aborigines in Central Australia in 1901 by Baldwin Spencer, the first Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne, and Frank Gillen, telegraph operator at the Alice Springs Post Office. Like the Flaherty films, the Spencer and Gillen films were made to capture the disappearing culture of a people who were the Other, in this case the Arrernte people of Central Australia. Yet they seldom receive international recognition in surveys of documentary film histories.

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30 Ibid., 7.
32 Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, "Aboriginal Life In Central Australia," in *Baldwin Spencer Collection - NFSA Title No. 246515* (Australia 1901).
Furthermore, the Spencer and Gillen films appear more ethnographically descriptive of the Arrernte than Flaherty’s films of the Eskimos, Samoans and the people from Aran.

Indeed, Barnouw seems to have completely overlooked the early ethnographic filmmakers in Australia and gives the impression that British documentary filmmakers, John Grierson and Stanley Hawes, who came to Australia to head the Australian National Film Board in 1946, introduced the genre to this country. Richard Barsam, *Non-fiction Film: A Critical History*, (1992)\(^{33}\) and Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins, *Imagining Reality: the Faber Book of Documentary*, (1996)\(^{34}\) also follow Barnouw’s familiar narrative pathway and give only glancing mention of Flaherty and none at all to Australian ethnographic film.

Similarly, the volume edited by Canadian film theorists Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, (1998)\(^{35}\) and British film theorist Brian Winston’s *Claiming the Real: the Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations*, (1995)\(^{36}\) and his more recent, *Claiming the Real II: Documentary Grierson and Beyond*, (2008)\(^{37}\) largely focus on documentary films produced in Great Britain, the US and Europe. Winston, however, does discuss the ethnographic films made by USA born documentary filmmakers David and Judith MacDougall in Uganda and Kenya in the 1960s, before they came to Australia.\(^{38}\) He also discusses the documentary film, about Aboriginal activism in the late 1970s *Two Laws*, (1981) made by political activists, Alessandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan, from the perspective of changes in camera technology and acknowledges the agency exercised by the Aboriginal people in the film.\(^{39}\)

Australian film theorist, Keith Beattie, in *Documentary Screens: Non-fiction Film and Television*, (2004)\(^{40}\) also follows a Griersonian pedigree of documentary film history and like Winston includes a chapter on ethnographic film. He also discusses the MacDougalls’ work in Africa in the 1960s in relation to their use of a reflexive style but does not include their


\(^{35}\) Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds., *Documenting the Documentary: Close readings of Documentary Film and Video* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).

\(^{36}\) Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: the Griersonian documentary and its legitimations*


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 189.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 195.

filmmaking in Australia from the late 1970s. But it is his chapter, “Decolonizing the Image: Aboriginal Documentary Productions,” that provides what is probably the first outline of the history of documentary filmmaking by Australia’s Indigenous peoples. He addresses the racialised and radicalised environment in Sydney in the 1990s in which Aboriginal filmmakers such as Michael Riley, *Quest for Country*, (1993); and includes films made by Francis Jupurrurla Kelly, *Bush Mechanics*, (2001); Essie Coffey, *My Life As I Live It*, (1993) produced their films and how the Injibarndi, Ngarluma and Gurrama communities of Roebourne in the north-west of Western Australia, *Exile and Kingdom*, (1993) produced their film and demonstrates that their overt and complete control of their image has taken almost a century to achieve. This point will be further articulated in the later sections of the thesis.

Each of the films Beattie mentions represents the differing production contexts available to Aboriginal filmmakers from the 1980s to the present. For example, Riley’s *Quest for Country*, (1993) an urban based story was produced with the assistance of the ABC and SBS as well as the Indigenous Documentary Fund (NIDF). Jupurrurla Kelly’s, *The Bush Mechanics*, (2001) was produced by a remote Aboriginal television production company, the Warlpiri Media Association and Coffey’s *My Life As I Live It*, (1993) was produced by collaboration with an independent filmmaker, Martha Ansara.

The chapter includes discussion about the growing practice of filmmaking in Indigenous communities worldwide which has become an important vehicle to promote cultural survival and assertiveness. Beattie provides examples of Indigenous media organisations established by the Kayapo of Brazil; the Inuit of Canada and various Native American media enterprises, ably positioning the pioneering work of Aboriginal communities in Australia.

Beattie’s chapter gives particular attention to the discussion about how Aboriginal filmmakers, such as Tracy Moffat’s *Nice Coloured Girls*, (1987) have taken significant steps to decolonize the documentary form and the ways in which Aboriginal Australians have previously been represented. Indeed, he incorporates the views of documentary filmmaker Francis Peters-Little who observed that for Aboriginal Australians, documentary films are associated with other forms of stereotyping, adding that: “We’ve got the opportunity as Aboriginal filmmakers to change documentary.”

Using Riley’s *Quest for Country*, (1993) as an example, he points out that the film is an innovative re-working of

41 Ibid., 68.
42 Ibid., 63-4.
documentary. He notes that Riley used creative short to long shots to contrast Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal approaches to land use and observed that: “The mode of poetic evocation and its emphasis on the visual (historical images and spectacular scenes of nature) is superseded…by a form of observation that is attentive to the words and stories being narrated.” These qualities are evident in the films selected for discussion in the final section of the thesis. Additionally, he notes that Peters-Little suggests that Aboriginal Australians are “sick of documentary film” representations and that may be the reason “why many indigenous artists are moving away from documentary and into fiction or drama films.” This clearly underlines the challenges made by Aboriginal filmmakers to the definitions of documentary film genre and it also follows the direction taken by Warwick Thornton in his recent projects. It is within the context of Beattie’s and Peters-Little’s observations that this thesis will argue for a reading of Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah*, (2009) feature film as a documentary film. Beattie calls this ‘Aboriginalisation’ of documentary “a strategic process of decolonising the image” and is a result of the historical, cultural and political as well as the technological contexts in which documentary films have been previously made about Aboriginal Australians. Importantly, Beattie concludes that: “‘indigenous [sic] documentary’ emerges as a series of procedures, practices, policies and protocols…which hold the capacity to remake documentary representation.”

The first serious scholar to consider the representation of Aboriginal Australians in ethnographic film is cultural studies scholar, Alison Griffiths, in her important text, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology and Turn of the Century Visual Culture*, (2002). She contends that at the time when Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen were making the first moving images of Indigenous Australians as the Other, they were influenced to a large degree by the context in which they were produced:

> Early films offering ethnographic knowledge or spectacle can be read simultaneously on several registers: as aesthetic objects; as fleeting, scopophilic gazes upon objectified men, women, and children; as historical artefacts; as colonialist propaganda; as the raw material of anthropological research; and as justifications for social policy.

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1. Ibid., 76.
2. Ibid., 74.
3. Ibid., 82.
4. Ibid.
6. Ibid., xxx.
How audiences responded to the Spencer and Gillen films had a great deal to do with the manner and the venues in which they were exhibited. She argues that, although not understood at the time as ethnographic films as in present day understandings of the term, early representations of Indigenous Australians on moving film demonstrated a strong scientific component in which the white audience was granted licence to gaze at the Other.49

This thesis argues that documentary films about Aboriginal Australians are central to any debates about the development of documentary film in Australia. As pointed out previously, some of the earliest documentary films made in Australia were about Aboriginal Australians. Yet as a collection they have not been the subject of a serious study. By comparison, there are several important studies of Australian feature films. They include Andrew Pike’s and Ross Cooper’s, Australian Film 1900 - 197750 and Scott Murray’s important studies, The New Australian Cinema, (1980), and Australian Film 1978 -1994, (1995).51 However, Australian Cinema, (1994) also edited by Murray does include a chapter on documentary film by Graham Shirley from the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). Shirley highlights the historical significance of Spencer and Gillen’s, Aboriginal Life In Central Australia, (1901) and also Ian Dunlop’s, Desert People, (1966), both of which have been selected for discussion in this thesis. They remain the only documentary films about Indigenous Australians discussed in the entire collection.52

In an earlier text, Back of Beyond, (1988),53 Murray adapted a catalogue of Australian films produced by the Australian Film Commission and included a chapter by film archivist, Michael Leigh, who made the astonishing claim that at least 6,000 films had been made about Aborigines by 1988,54 although most of them were not available because they had been made by missionaries to exhibit at church meetings and to private citizens. As a result, they were not catalogued or stored to ensure their longevity let alone accessibility to a wider audience.55

49 Ibid., 161-6.
50 Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, Australian Film 1900 - 1977 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press and The Australian Film Institute, 1980).
55 Ibid., 81.
However, unlike the purpose of this thesis, Leigh does not consider the films within a historical context let alone consider developments in camera and film technologies.

Yet if we accept Leigh’s claim that more than 6,000 documentary films have been made about Australia’s Aboriginal peoples since the 1890s, then it would appear that here has been a long fascination with documenting images of Aboriginal Australians. And while there are important critical studies of the Spencer and Gillen films made in 1901, including Chris Long’s, “Australia's First Films: Facts and Fables Part Eleven: Aborigines and Actors”, (1994)\(^{56}\) and study guides of *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983)\(^{57}\) and *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978),\(^{58}\) none of them have considered how Indigenous Australians have been represented. A similar point can be made about Keith Beattie’s studies\(^{59}\) and Scott Murray’s studies of films by Indigenous Australians.\(^{60}\) The studies of documentary filmmakers who have made important films about Australia’s Indigenous peoples, including David and Judith MacDougall,\(^{61}\) and Cecil Holmes,\(^{62}\) also overlook the ways in which their subjects have been represented. However, some surveys of Australian films from particular historical periods, such as the pioneering text by Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, (2004)\(^{63}\) do consider the representation of Indigenous people in feature films and the Australian Film Commission’s *Dreaming In Motion: celebrating Australia’s Indigenous filmmakers*, (2007) offers profiles of Indigenous filmmakers.\(^{64}\) Histories of institutions that use filmmaking as an important part of their operational mandate such as Ian Bryson’s, *Bringing To Light: a history of ethnographic filmmaking at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies*, (2002)\(^{65}\) also include films about Australia’s Aboriginal peoples. Despite these important critical studies, however, there are no critical

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59 Beattie, *Documentary Screens*.
60 Murray, *Back of beyond : discovering Australian film and television*.
64 Keith Gallasch, *Dreaming In Motion: Celebrating Australia's Indigenous Filmmakers* (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 2007).
studies which explore the ways Aboriginal Australians have been represented in Australian documentary film over time.

This thesis will redress this extraordinary oversight by surveying and analysing the way Aboriginal peoples have been represented in twelve Australian documentary films made between 1901 and 2009. They include Aboriginal Life in Central Australia, (1901);66 Life In Central Australia, (1931);67 Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950);68 Desert People, (1966);69 Warburton Aborigines, (1957);70 Ningla A-Na, (1972);71 My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978);72 Lousy Little Sixpence, (1983);73 Link-Up Diary, (1987);74 Whispering in Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre, (2002);75 Willaberta Jack, (2007);76 and the feature Samson and Delilah, (2009),77 which will be read as a documentary.

**Approach and Method**

The survey is conceived as a lineal timeline in keeping with traditional Western historical practice whereby the historical past is divided into four time periods 1901 – 1966; 1957 – 1972; 1978 – 1987 and 2002 – 2009. Each of the films selected is emblematic of the period in which it was produced and will be discussed according to five criteria.

The first is that each film will be analysed as an anchor point in relation to the social, political and scientific climate in which it was produced. For example the Spencer and Gillen film, Aboriginal Life in Central Australia, (1901), was made within the scientific paradigms influenced by human evolutionary thinking of the time, that is, as a primitive ‘race’ the Australian Aborigines were on the brink of extinction. The paradigm also defined the interactions and understandings of non-Indigenous Australians had towards the films. Questions that arise from looking at the films from this analytical perspective highlight the interest taken in Aboriginal Australians. Perhaps it is also indicative of the terms by which

69 Ian Dunlop, *Desert People*, (Australia: Film Australia, 1966).
non-Indigenous people imagined Aboriginal Australians, underlining the purpose of making films about them.

Sectioning the time line has also been determined by the development of anthropological practices during the twentieth century. For example, in the first period, the filmmakers of *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901), approached their subjects from the position of a ‘superior’ race. In the second period, the transition from ethnographic subject to political activists is recorded. However, in the third period, the development of cultural protocols was clearly demonstrated in *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978). In the fourth period, there has been a clear shift in the understanding of cultural authenticity of the subjects in *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002) and a clear modification in ethnographic techniques in *Samson and Delilah*, (2009). By tracing shifts in how documentary film, initially produced by academics or institutional bodies and then later by independent filmmakers, the manner in which these changes have occurred and have been exercised over the past century can be demonstrated. Furthermore, by linking technological changes in camera and film stock with broader shifts in scientific paradigms, the importance of inter-connecting discourses becomes apparent. These developments did not take place in isolation; rather they were inter-changeably influenced by modifications in government policies in how to deal with the ‘Aboriginal problem’ together with shifts in public attitudes towards Indigenous Australians.

Secondly, making films about Indigenous Australians was highly dependent on the development of camera and film technology. Early practitioners, such as Spencer and Gillen, had to contend with many technical obstacles in order to record Arrernte ceremonies on film. The limitations of the camera equipment imposed upon them limitations about the type of films they produced. As camera and film stock technology became more sophisticated, however, filmmakers gained greater flexibility in how, when and where they could film Aboriginal Australians. Film stock moved from the volatile nitrate, through celluloid safety film to video tape to the present standard digital recording that eliminates the restrictions of film length and the chemical treatment of film. The introduction of coloured film in the 1930s gave greater clarity to films made in isolated environments, emphasising the deep skin colour of Indigenes in contrast to the colours of the bush as well as in contrast to non-Indigenous Australians.
From the mid-1950s, development of magnetic sound strips onto film enabled synchronised sound to be recorded, changing filmmakers’ approach to the way in which they recorded filmic documents of Aboriginal Australians. Unlike the awkward wooden box camera used by Spencer and Gillen in 1901, cameras in later periods continued to develop so that they became smaller and more portable, allowing filmmakers to pan shots more effectively, or take close-up shots of their subjects and get into places that would not have been possible for Spencer and Gillen.

The third criterion relates to the sources of funding that the projects attracted. Funding significantly provided a prescribed agenda and designated the parameters that justified the expense and the time taken to complete a film project. Funding was provided by individuals and organisations that were looking to answer questions and more recently by government bodies established to promote filmmaking as part of nation building.

In the first historical period, for example, Spencer and Gillen attracted funding from three directions; the *Argus* (Melbourne) newspaper in exchange for publishing regular reports of their fieldwork; from Spencer’s family; and his employer, the University of Melbourne, which granted him extended leave of one year. In the case of *Life in Central Australia*, (1931) produced by the South Australian Board for Anthropological Research (SABAR) under the leadership of Dr John B. Cleland, the funds were provided by the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States via the Australian National Research Council (ANCR) and carried a distinctly eugenicist agenda. In *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950) produced by Charles Mountford on the American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) funding was provided by the Australian government, the Smithsonian Institute and the *National Geographic Magazine*. In this case, scientific conventions, commodity value and government public relations issues guided the way the documentary film was produced. In *Desert People*, (1966) produced by Ian Dunlop under the auspices of the National Film Unit and the newly established Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), the purpose was to make a film to satisfy the commercial requirements of the Film Unit as well as satisfying the anthropological requirements of the AIAS. In the second period, the film *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), was funded by the filmmaker who was a politician in the Western Australian parliament. In the third and fourth periods, the films were primarily funded by

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Australian federal and state government bodies whose mission statements generally included aims to encourage the work of independent filmmakers and more specifically provide funding to Indigenous filmmaking enterprises. Questions do arise as to how the funding parameters of these government initiatives affected the type of films produced under these programmes compared to the films made in the earlier time periods. In each period, however, funding for documentary filmmaking was critical to the ways Aborigines were represented.

The fourth criterion is how each film presents a particular way Aboriginal Australians were represented in its time period. For example, in the first period, 1901 – 1966, the four films represent Aboriginal peoples as objectified bodies, considered by many non-Indigenous Australians as close to extinction and too primitive to meaningfully engage in a modern white Australia. Changing government policies of assimilation were continually stressed by conflicting debates about how to apply its strictures. This together with a range of legal and legislative variations imposed by individual state governments and their authorities, in conjunction with the influence of scientific discourses, created the circumstances under which Indigenous Australians could later draw attention to their inhumane treatment. In the last time period 2002 – 2009, the films demonstrate how Aboriginal Australians have moved behind the camera to represent their own people telling their own stories in their own image.

The final criterion used in the selection of the films was their availability. All the films selected for analysis were widely exhibited near the time of their production; however, the SABAR film may have enjoyed the least public exposure but was nevertheless widely screened in anthropology lectures at universities across Australia and in universities overseas. Today, each of the films are readily available from archival repositories such as the National Film and Sound Archive, (NFSA); the Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS); the South Australian Museum and Australian university libraries and the film distributor Ronin Films.

The significance of these criteria rests on the films having a participatory role in academic inquiry, with some, such as Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1948) now included in secondary and primary school study sites. To a lesser or greater degree this level of availability can be witnessed in most of the films produced since Essie Coffey’s film, My Survival As An

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Aboriginal, (1978) where study guides have been formulated by Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) and are readily available on the Screen Australia website.82

In setting out the criteria above, the thesis addresses the selected films in a marked departure from more traditional works on film studies. Unlike many film studies, the discussion of the films does not seek to concentrate on particular filmmakers, such as Ian Bryson’s, Bringing to Light: a history of ethnographic filmmaking and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, (2002) or to documentary films produced in a narrow time period such as in Felicity Collins’ and Therese Davis’, Australian Cinema After Mabo, (2004). Rather, the purpose is to open up discussion based more firmly on long term development of semiotic images that have been constructed around Indigenous Australians, how these constructions have been affected by scientific, social and political shifts, and the camera and film technologies available to the filmmaker. For example, in the Essie Coffey film, My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978), which belongs to the third time period 1978 – 1987, the intention is to explore the significance of Coffey’s challenge to the viewer in the way she uses the camera as an instrument of communication. The circumstances that enabled her to access a camera in this way contrasts vividly with the cameras used in the first section of the thesis.

Further, the analysis of some of the films was enhanced by interviews with the filmmakers conducted by the candidate in 2007, 2009 and 2010 in several locations. At the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs, Northern Territory she interviewed Warwick Thornton, David Tranter and film editor Dena Curtis; at Broome, Western Australia she interviewed independent filmmaker Mitch Torres; at Sydney, at the ABC Studios in Ultimo she interviewed Message Stick host Miriam Corowa; and in Canberra she interviewed retired AIAS filmmaker, Ian Dunlop.

The techniques employed to read the films will place them in their historical context with reference to the type of camera and film technologies available to the filmmakers. The background to the making of each film will be explored, together with a description of each film and how it was received at the time. Some of the films will be discussed in relation to interviews conducted with the filmmakers, to provide valuable insights to their reasons for making documentary films. The reasons are varied but they underline the importance of

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telling valuable stories to engage an audience to provide a greater understanding of Aboriginality and understand Australian history from a different perspective.

The twelve films selected for analysis form the central part of the thesis and are utilised to provide key anchor points for the discussion. The discussion centres on the shifting ways in which Indigenous Australians are represented on documentary films and demonstrate the importance of visual texts in constructing identity. As Indigenous filmmakers have firmly grasped this medium, they have been empowered, changed the ways in which Indigenous Australians are represented and provided important points for discussion about the non-Indigenous and Indigenous relationship in the Australian context. An important example of how they have been empowered to change their representation is discussed in the final chapter which argues for a reading of Warwick Thornton’s feature film, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009) as a documentary film.

The discourse used to analyse and discuss the films is drawn largely from the disciplines of history and anthropology, and from some aspects of film and media studies, government policy and technology. This inter-disciplinary approach assists in portraying a broader understanding of the array of mechanisms which play important roles in revealing how the representation of Indigenous Australians in documentary films has been manifested in an Australian context.

**Structure**

The thesis is organised into seven chapters, and divided into four sections, defined by historical shifts, discussed earlier. The first section, ‘True Lies: Authentication and Dispossession, (1901 – 1966)’, comprises a single chapter covering the heyday of scientific racism. In this period the biological sciences dominated scientific discourse and it was widely believed that Australia’s Indigenous peoples were on the brink of extinction. In this section, four films will be considered: *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901); *Life in Central Australia*, (1931); *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1948); and *Desert People*, (1966).

Collectively the films provide vignettes of the circumstances in which they were produced. They also fit into the generalised sub-genre of ethnographic films. Each was produced with the purpose of recording the pristine and ‘untouched’ lives of Aboriginal Australians, before they ‘disappeared’ or were ‘contaminated’ by the influences of modern white Australian
society. In this representation they are located in the ethnographic present and thus outside of history. The films establish an underlying theme of primitivity and Otherness.

Section Two, ‘Political Authenticity, (1957 – 1972)’, comprising two chapters, focuses on the increasing politicisation of Australia’s Indigenous peoples. During this period changes in camera and film technology began to alter the ways in which filmmakers could interact with their subjects. Other technological changes such as the introduction of the new visual medium of television in Australia enabled Aboriginal Australians to become more visible to the general public as political actors.

Chapter Two focuses on the politically charged film, *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), where in contrast to the films in the previous chapter, it places Indigenous people in a contemporary political situation. No longer represented as remnants of an ahistorical primitive society, they are now considered as a people whose lives are being disrupted by the immediacy of the atomic bomb and rocket weapons testing at Maralinga and Woomera. The film highlights the prevailing attitudes of ambivalence and disregard in relation to the welfare of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara of Western Australia and South Australia.

The film was made to deliver a very specific message to government using the conduit of public outrage and to make a major contribution to public debate about the consequences of atomic and rocket weapons testing on land set aside for Australia’s Indigenous peoples and more specifically about the conditions in which many of them were forced to live as a result of government welfare programmes. Lulled and unchallenged by the images of Aboriginal Australians represented in the earlier films, the Australian public was shocked by the images of starving and sickly people. The film was not only screened to audiences of Aboriginal rights groups such as Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) but it was also screened on commercial television, bringing the images into the lounge rooms of many Australians for the first time. This confrontation triggered widespread debate about the conditions in which many Aboriginal people lived and Indigenous issues from that time on occupied a more prominent role in parliamentary and news media discussions.

Chapter Three examines the rise of Aboriginal activism as represented in the film, *Ningla A-Na, (Hungry for Our Land)*, (1972). The film records the Aboriginal protests which took place outside Parliament House in Canberra in 1972 as observed by Italian filmmaker, Alessandro Cavadini. As a departure from the remote outback locations of earlier films, this
film is situated in an urban environment, giving substance to the diversity of Aboriginality. No longer are they represented as ahistorical, primitive and remote entities, Aborigines in this film are represented as participating in the ‘everyday’ and participating as constituents in the political system, albeit one that continues to actively marginalise them. The film effectively focuses the viewer’s attention to key players in the protest movement, such as Paul Coe and Gary Foley who continue to work to improve the situation of Aboriginal Australians today. The film represents Aboriginal people as political actors now demonstrating that they wield enough power to cause discomfort to the government.

Significant footage of the news reports broadcast on ABC TV news was included in the film to underscore the significance of the moment and to contextualise the longevity of the protest over the six months of its active life. The film is understood as a defining moment in Indigenous history and the images continue to produce a pan-Aboriginal nationalism that many Aboriginal Australians find inspiring. *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957) and *Ningla A-Na*, (1972) bookend the most active years of the Aboriginal protest movement.

Section Three, ‘Authentic Collaborations, (1978 – 1987)’, comprises chapters Four and Five. The period is defined by significant changes in the way funding for filmmaking altered. For example, public instrumentalities such as the Australian Film Commission’s Creative Development Branch were established to ensure an active documentary filmmaking industry as part of an ongoing policy to promote and reflect the cultural and social diversity of the Australian community both at home and overseas.

The development of a more collaborative relationship between white filmmakers and Aboriginal Australians is also reflected in the way Indigenous Australians wanted to be represented on film. The crisis of representation, most keenly felt in the discipline of Anthropology, was the result of international decolonisation movements originating on the African continent and the civil rights movements in the US and provides an opportunity to follow major shifts in the debate about ethnographic filmmaking. These movements significantly influenced changes in social and political attitudes towards the Other and astute non-Indigenous filmmakers realised that the point of view of the indigene had a powerful political and social message.

Within the discipline of history, changes were also apparent where the influence of feminism created a space for new histories to be told. From the 1970s, the historiography of the discipline shifted from the meta-narratives of prominent leaders such as, George
Mackaness’s, *Admiral Arthur Phillip: Founder of New South Wales, 1738-1814*, (1937)

military engagements such as John Laffin’s, *Anzacs at War: The Story of Australian and New Zealand Battles*, (1965)

and nation building usually centred around the achievements of the white male, to micro-narratives where the experiences of women, children and the Other were given unprecedented attention in texts by Patricia Grimshaw, *et.al., Creating a Nation*, (1994)


Considering history from different perspectives provided important understandings about how individuals dealt with the conditions in which they were living and these more democratic attitudes were increasingly taken up in broader arenas.

Chapter Four discusses the experimental steps being taken by Aboriginal Australians who began to exercise more visible control over the filmmaking process. This contrasts with the way films had been previously produced and reflects their shifting political position. The films, *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978) and *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1982), discussed in this chapter represent the steps towards a collaborative enterprise. Although government funding was becoming more readily available to independent filmmakers such as Martha Ansara and Alec Morgan, through the Sydney Independent Filmmakers Co-operative, and the Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission, Aboriginal people were still hampered by their social and educational disadvantage. Approaching and or dealing with government entities still posed a major threat to many Aboriginal people because of past experiences. The literacy levels required to search for and apply for financial grants to make films continued to be out of the reach for many would-be Aboriginal filmmakers.

The films that resulted from these collaborative projects, *My Survival As An Aborigine*, (1978) and *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1982) coincides with anthropology’s crisis in representation of the Other. The international crisis in anthropology and more specifically visual anthropology was the result of the world wide decolonisation process, finally coalescing into a formal discourse centred on the representation of Indigenous peoples. Importantly, here the discussion continues to examine urban Aboriginality and the difficulties experienced by many Indigenous people in Australia which offer some understanding of the

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85 Patricia Grimshaw *et al., Creating a Nation* (Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1994).
86 Eric Willmot, *Pemulwuy, the rainbow warrior* (Sydney: Bantam, 1988).
obstacles many people still had to overcome as a result of the troubled history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Chapter Five, *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), filmed by visual anthropologist David MacDougall, is a reminder that past government policies that sought to assimilate Aboriginal children into mainstream white Australian society by forcing a disassociation between them and their Aboriginal families, continue to have long term consequences. As a record of the painful search of recovering an even more painful past, the film projects a belief that the pain can be resolved by bringing the displaced people together again. This process would be undertaken in a very different manner now but at the time the film was made this seemed to offer the best way of resolving the pain. In order to present the story within the limitations of the visual medium the story had to be simplified. The protagonists use their knowledge of government archives to assist in recovering and reuniting Aboriginal families and give the people a chance to find out who they are.

The film is included to emphasise the lag time between policy changes and the effects wrought by these measures and how in present times the spectre of past policies continues to hamper the well-being of many Aboriginal people. Difficulties with losing personal and cultural identities are made apparent in anti-social behaviours such as those represented in the Coffey film and in the formulation of general public opinion. The gross misunderstandings and perpetuation of negative images of Aboriginal people in the media hark back to earlier imaginings of Aboriginal people who cannot cope with living in a modern western society.

Section Four, ‘Authenticating Aboriginality, (2002 – 2009)’, comprising Chapters Six and Seven, focus on documentary films made by Australia’s Aboriginal filmmakers. The films selected represent current practices in filmmaking and demonstrate how they offer accounts of historical narratives from an Aboriginal perspective, providing little known or understood anecdotes about how it is to be an Aboriginal person in Australia today.

In Chapter Six, the two films selected for analysis, *Whispering in Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), by Mitch Torres and *Willaberta Jack*, (2007) by David Tranter project new insights into Aboriginal ways of seeing the world. Their methods of representation reflect their intimate understanding of the film medium and what it does and how the images affect the viewer. Increased funding and financial assistance provided by government bodies such as the Indigenous Unit of the Australian Film Commission; the Department of Communications, Information and the Arts; the film development arm of
Special Broadcasting Services Television (SBS); and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) *Message Stick* programme, underscore the critical part played by these bodies. Both films contest accepted histories by demonstrating the part played by Aboriginal people in the past and in presenting an Aboriginal perspective to the events that took place.

Chapter Seven considers the present moment in Aboriginal filmmaking by reading Warwick Thornton’s feature film, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009) as a documentary account of the lives of two Aboriginal adolescents in the Alice Springs region of the Northern Territory. The opportunity to read *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), as a documentary film is afforded by the definitions presented to define what a documentary film may encompass. Keith Beattie, for example, defines documentary film as “representing the observable world,” in that the “documentarian draws on past and present actuality — the world of social and historical experience — to construct an account of lives and events.”87 In *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), the narrative is drawn from the observable world; past and present. The neglect and abuse of Aboriginal children is recognised as a formidable challenge to government agencies and the Indigenous communities in which they occur. The film also draws on past and present actuality and historical experience and constructs an account of the lives lived by many Aboriginal children in central Australia, with aspects of Thornton’s own life reflected in the film’s narrative. More importantly, Beattie explains that the narrative of a documentary film needs to be “embedded within the account of physical reality” and “at the center of all non-fictional representation, namely, that a documentary depiction of the socio-historical world is factual and truthful.”88 The film indeed demonstrates the real lives lived by many Aboriginal people and reactions to the film attest to the truthfulness of the narrative; that is documentary is concerned with presenting *truth claims*, but it cannot present the *truth* and it is this difference which helps to substantiate reading *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), as a documentary. Substance abuse as portrayed in *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), affects a large proportion of the Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory and measures such as substituting Opal fuel, a lower aromatic petroleum product, for regular fuel in Indigenous communities is an example of authorities trying to curb the incidents of this addictive habit. Moreover, Paul Rotha considers that documentary film is defined: “not by subject or style, but approach. Documentary approach to cinema differs from that of story-film not in its

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88 Ibid.,
disregard for craftsmanship, but in the purpose to which that craftsmanship is put.”

Thornton’s purpose in making the film is to lay open the experiences of young Aboriginal Australians in the Northern Territory today. He considers that: “a film’s success can be determined by how much it changes the world, creates understanding and affects policy.”

These are two key elements in defining the success of a documentary film. By employing these definitions as well as the points made earlier in the discussion in relation to Peter-Little’s observations to read Thornton’s film, it demonstrates how he has presented the narrative in such a way that it is not perceived as finger-pointing by a white audience but rather as a statement of fact. The film has achieved this by its success in the marketplace as well as its inclusion in academic resources for schools and universities as a teaching aid.

Outcomes

In taking a long term historical approach and employing a discourse drawn from anthropology, history and film studies, new findings emerge about the relationship between Aboriginal people and filmmaking. The first is that until the late 1960s, many of the film makers represented Aborigines as living in a timeless ethnographic present – outside of history and destined to die out. The dramatic consistency of the representation is continued from Spencer’s film in 1901 to Ian Dunlop’s Desert People, (1966). The Warburton Aborigines, (1957) film was among the first to contest that image. Second, is that once Aboriginal Australians began to be involved in filmmaking, a very different set of representations began to emerge. Among the first films to show this is My Survival As An Aborigine, (1978). Third, now that Aboriginal filmmakers are behind the camera and have complete control over the filmmaking process they are challenging the stereotypes of ‘primitivity’ and the ethnographic present in which they were previously trapped. Finally, Aboriginal stories of the present, such as Samson and Delilah, (2009), challenge the distinction between feature and documentary film. The Aboriginal sense of visual performance, so clearly apparent in the film by Spencer and Gillen, continues in Samson and Delilah, (2009). What has been uncovered is that film is a comfortable medium for many Aboriginal people because it relates readily to an intimate understanding of the visual – a fundamental concept practiced in oral societies.

89 Paul Rostra, Cinema Quarterly Vol 2, no. 2 (1934): 78.
90 "Australian Centre for the Moving Image".
The structure and the argument of the thesis, foregrounds and underscores the changes that have taken place in the representation of Indigenous Australians in documentary films in the socio-political context of Australian history. Drawn together and subjected to an interdisciplinary analysis the films selected form a picture of the relationship between Indigenous Australians and documentary film practices in Australia.
Section One

True Lies: Authentication and Dispossession, (1901 – 1966)

The first chapter of the thesis focuses on four ethnographic films made in the first six decades of the twentieth century. They are: *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901); *Life in Central Australia*, (1931); *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950); and *Desert People*, (1966). The films have been grouped together because they exhibit similarities in the way Indigenous Australians were being represented on documentary film. The similarities were premised on the belief that Indigenous Australians were becoming extinct as a discrete race of people and critical research into their lifestyle and customs needed to be conducted before they disappeared.

Although rarely acknowledged in the writings of anthropologists, the impetus for this salvage approach to anthropology was due to the rapid and unrelenting expansion of white pastoralist and mining interests across inland Australia. The formation of regional centres and townships meant that Indigenous forms of land use were incompatible with the economic interests of white settlers. Restricted physically and spiritually from the land they had occupied for thousands of years, Indigenous Australians had little alternative but to work on
pastoral leases in order to continue inhabiting their traditional lands or in other instances they were forcibly moved to the outskirts of townships or to missions where they came under the scrutiny of government officials and policies designed to further fragment their families and social networks.

The films analysed in this first section reflect the political dichotomy in which Indigenous Australians occupied in this time frame. Represented on documentary film as ‘the last of their kind’, Indigenous Australians became understood as being apolitical, separated from mainstream Australia and its progressive and positivistic notions of history and industrialisation. The films of Spencer and Gillen, *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901) the SABAR¹ scientists, *Life in Central Australia*, (1931); Mountford’s, *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950) and Dunlop’s, *Desert People*, (1966) locate Indigenous Australians in an imaginary space as iconic Stone Age artefacts at odds with the aspirations of modern Australian society.

The films in this section were made within the scientifically endorsed context of Social Darwinism that prioritised a hierarchical ordering of the human ‘races’. Within this discourse, the technology and religion of Indigenous Australians was considered to be probably the most ‘primitive’ of all the human ‘races’.² The manner in which the field survey was conducted by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen in 1901 when *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901), was made was a symptom of this trend in science. Spencer and Gillen were fascinated by the exotic and primitive culture of Indigenous Australians. The influence of Victorian era fetish with collecting artefacts of primitive culture led them to believe that by using the very latest European technology to make a visual record of images of Indigenous Australians performing ceremonial dances, would authenticate the artefacts manufactured by ‘authentic’ (meaning full-blooded) Aborigines. This search for authenticity is demonstrated in *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901).

Nearly twenty years later, a team of medical scientists from the University of Adelaide and the South Australian Museum, known collectively as the South Australian Board for Anthropological Research (SABAR) were studying aspects of Aboriginal physiology in

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¹ The South Australian Board for Anthropological Research was a group of medical practitioners from the University of Adelaide together with anthropologists and zoologists from the South Australian Museum who annually engaged in expeditions to the central and remote regions of Australia. They collected biometric data of Aboriginal peoples and their environment.

central Australia. Concerned about the growing numbers of mixed race progeny in the Indigenous population and unease about this evidence of miscegenation, Dr John Cleland, leader of the SABAR group, believed that Indigenous Australians could be biologically integrated into the mainstream population without fear of any detrimental effects to the white population. Working on the hypothesis that blood groups could be utilised as a racial indicator, Cleland and his team searched for authentic or full-blooded Aborigines to establish a biometric baseline from which they could determine the efficacy of a policy of biological absorption of the Indigenous population. The film made at Cockatoo Creek in 1931, and known as *Life in Central Australia*, (1931), records the procedures used to collect blood samples and other bodily fluids along with other biometric measurements carried out by the medical team to test this hypothesis. By promoting the biological absorption of the Indigenous population it was anticipated a united Australian citizenry would be socially and politically more stable. At the same time the ‘Aboriginal problem’ would be addressed.

At almost another twenty year interval, the films made by Charles Mountford, leader of the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) in 1948, represent a museum like fascination with the imagined primitiveness of Indigenous Australians. By portraying the Yolgnu people of Arnhem Land in the film, *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950), as living in splendid idyllic isolation, Mountford effectively positioned them as quaint and iconic features of the Australian landscape. The premise of the expedition was that the Yolgnu represented an isolated and untouched population. However this fallacy was quickly dispelled when the expedition team met Yolgnu who had been in contact with Australian and American service personnel during the Second World War. They knew how to play cards, use American slang and now preferred to wear blue jeans. Mountford’s film carefully avoids any reference to these changes denying the reality that many Indigenous Australians were now living in constant cultural contact with white Australians. Mountford’s search for the authentic Aborigine was only found in the film he made of his visit to Arnhem Land.

In 1965 Ian Dunlop, a film director at the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) filmed a group of Pintupi people in the Western Desert region of Western Australia. In the film, *Desert People*, (1966), he claimed they were the last surviving groups of Aborigines still living a wholly traditional way of life. What this family group did was to re-enact a lifestyle that they too had recently abandoned some months prior to Dunlop making the film. The search for the ‘authentic’ Aborigine by this time period was a difficult task as many Indigenous Australians had been forcibly
relocated to Mission stations such as Warburton in order to survive. The fragmentation of complex social systems, lack of inter-family support systems due to the pastoral and mining industries made living in traditional ways impossible to sustain. The ‘authenticity’ of Desert People, (1966), is reminiscent of Robert Flaherty’s, Nanook of the North, (1922) and Mountford’s Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950) where traditional Indigenous lifestyles were portrayed as museum exhibits, lulling the white Australian population into a sense of complacency and romantic mythologising.

These films are emblematic of an era in which Indigenous Australians were portrayed as being primitive and therefore irrelevant to the idea of a young, modern progressive country. The films capture what was thought to be the final days of a uniquely ancient culture.
Chapter One

The Search for the Authentic

Aborigine: 1901 – 1966

Aboriginal Life in Central Australia, (1901)

Life in Central Australia, (1931)

Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950)

Desert People, (1966)

Introduction
In the early twentieth century, the ‘Doomed Race Theory’, that predicted the disappearance of the Indigenous peoples of Australia, exacerbated the importance of collecting their images on the new technology of film. This chapter will explore the ways in which four
ethnographic films represented Australian Aborigines in the period from 1901 to 1966. The four films selected for analysis comprise *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901), made by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen about the Arrernte people at Charlotte Waters near Alice Springs; *Life in Central Australia*, (1931) about the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people at Cockatoo Creek, made by members of the South Australian Board for Anthropological Research (SABAR) under the leadership of John Burton Cleland and Norman Tindale; *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950) directed by Charles Mountford and cinematographed by Peter Bassett-Smith in 1948 on the American – Australian Expedition of Arnhem Land; and *Desert People*, (1966), directed by Ian Dunlop with the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (AIAS).

The films were selected primarily for their availability but with consideration of the historical context in which they were produced and are emblematic of the changing relationship between Indigenous Australians and documentary film production. Each film was produced under the auspices of an Australian cultural institution and was exhibited in Australia at the time of its production. *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901), was selected because it was the first moving film made of mainland Indigenous Australians and Spencer was Professor of Biology at the University of Melbourne. *Life in Central Australia*, (1931), was selected for containing a considerable amount of sequential unrestricted footage and showed the members of the SABAR team collecting samples and conducting tests on the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre peoples. *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950), was selected because it was produced on the last large scale anthropological expedition, the American-Australian Scientific Expedition (AASeAL) to Arnhem Land mounted in Australia. The Australian government co-sponsored the expedition and the films were produced by the National Film Unit (NFU). *Desert People*, (1966) was selected because it is a compilation of films taken from a longer series of films produced by Dunlop for the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS). This version was also screened in a retrospective of Australian ethnographic films at the 1967 Florence Festival Dei Popoli.

This chapter argues that despite changes in cinematic technology reflected in the four films and the sixty years that separate the first film from the last, they reveal minimal changes in the way filmmakers represented Indigenous Australians. Indeed, all the films position Indigenous Australians as objects of ethnographic inquiry and as people who were believed to be on the brink of extinction.
Further, it will argue that the ideological and hegemonic context in which they were made have successfully contributed to embedding Indigenous Australians in a marginalised position and reflect social cultural and political circumstances in which they were made. As historian Russell McGregor points out, the dominant ideology of the ‘Doomed Race Theory’ which persisted throughout this period,\(^1\) shaped the ways the filmmakers represented Indigenous Australians. The history of scientific inquiry that guided the imperative for scientists in the early twentieth century to produce films about Aboriginal people falls into two entwined streams: the first concerns debates about race and the other focuses on the progress of human-kind. By the 1930s in Australia, these debates were further entwined to include a specific form of eugenics that would seek to absorb the Aboriginal people into the white population.

Both streams of the debate were based on the doctrine that human development travelled in a linear trajectory. The doctrine placed Indigenous Australians at the beginning of the evolutionary trajectory where they were considered too ‘primitive’ to exist in, let alone survive, the twentieth century. It is not surprising that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the new technology of moving film opened up a fresh opportunity to capture the ‘primitive’ on film before they died out or before they were contaminated by the progressive Caucasian race. Two British anthropologists take McGregor’s point further. Nancy Stepan\(^2\) points out that in this period the ideology of racism underpinned the rationalisation and development of scientific discourse regarding the hierarchical ordering of human races; and Peter Bowler\(^3\) argues that ideology of racism was buttressed by the belief that progress was a unique attribute of Western civilisations. Indeed, Australian archaeologist John Mulvaney and anthropologists, Howard Morphy and Alison Petch point out that: “the type specimen of ‘desert nomad’ whose society was interpreted as an unchanged relic from the dawn of the stone age” had lasting implications for the way Indigenous Australians would be represented on documentary film.\(^4\) Put together, their understandings of scientific racism offer an important intellectual, social and political context in which early documentary films about Indigenous Australians were produced in Australia.

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In the first decades of the twentieth century, Western knowledge producers were lured by pedagogical and hegemonic demands of scientific practices to collect as much evidence as possible about Indigenous Australians in the belief that they were a dying race. This frenetic thirst for data collection meant that the scientists were rarely reflexive, if at all conscious of the political ramifications in filming Indigenous peoples as the Other. Indeed, the unquestioning presumption of non-Indigenous scientists embedded within the ideology of scientific racism and biological determinism meant investigation of the Other was necessary to develop and reinforce ideas of their own cultural positioning by emphasising, in this instance, the ‘exotic and primitive’ situation of Indigenous Australians.

Despite their alleged primitiveness what is important about the films discussed in this chapter is the interest Indigenous people take in the filmmaking process. There appears to be active negotiation between the filmmakers and the communities being filmed. For example, Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen were initiated into the community at Alice Springs so that proper social relations between the filmmakers and the community would afford the best outcome for both the Arrernte and Spencer and Gillen.5 In all four films payments of various items such as boiled sweets, tobacco, flour and tea were made to the participants. In the instance of Mountford’s *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950), cash and food payments were made to the Yolgnu for cooperation in making the films and producing other material artefacts signalling a growing sophistication in their economic relationship with white filmmakers.6

Furthermore, the suppression of traditional rituals because of land dispossession and missionary activities meant that filmmaking offered an opportunity for the Indigenous communities to express aspects of their culture. It appears that even in the first films made by Spencer and Gillen the Arrernte understood the significance of performing ceremonies for these men with a camera that showed great interest in their cultural practices.7 When filmmaker Ian Dunlop was taken back to Warburton Mission, he remembers Minmarra being

5 “Australian Aborigines,” *The Age*, 8 July 1902.
6 Sally K. May, “The Last Frontier? Acquiring The American-Australian Scientific Expedition Ethnographic Collection 1948” (Bachelor of Arts (Honours), Flinders University, 2000), 70-1.
quite anxious to show him the ways in which his family had lived in the desert before being resettled at the Mission.\textsuperscript{8}

Making a film document about an Indigenous community also appears to add proof of ‘ownership’ of the ceremony and the right to gift the ceremony to another visiting group. As early as 1897, Gillen had observed that performing and exchange of the rights to perform ceremonies was also a profit making exercise for those Arrernte who were knowledge holders of the ceremonies.\textsuperscript{9} Significantly, in gaining greater understanding of the power of film over the course of the twentieth century, Aboriginal have utilised its evidentiary aspects for claiming long term custodianship of land use, for example the Arrernte in Alice Springs, Northern Territory; the Pintupi communities of the Western Desert in Western Australia; and the Yolgnu communities of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

The films in this chapter reflect the interests of the scientists who chose the activities that they considered were important to film, reinforcing an already established portrayal of the natural and by extension the primitive situation of Indigenous Australians. The quest for the authentic Aborigine, unsullied by Western influences, provided Spencer and Gillen with the professional sensationalism of finding the pure form of the race.\textsuperscript{10} Within the then current scientific paradigms, evidence of the primitive nature of Aboriginals influenced the manner in which they were placed in Australian society, premised on the hierarchy of Social Darwinism. This doctrine, developed in the nineteenth century, is redolent with racial overtones. A society could be understood as a species and was thought to be endowed with certain biological traits (see Mulvaney above) that alleged evolutionary forces would favour successful social groups and others would not be able to survive and therefore die out.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{9} Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch, \textit{My Dear Spencer}, 166.
\textsuperscript{10} "Australian Aborigines," \textit{The Argus}, Tuesday 8 July 1902.
**Aboriginal Life in Central Australia, (1901)**

**Background**

The first Australian based practitioners of ethnographic filmmaking were Walter Baldwin Spencer, who held the first Chair of Biology at the University of Melbourne and Frank Gillen, a telegraph officer and Protector of Aborigines in Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. The films they produced in 1901 provide the earliest examples of ethnographic films made where a large audience viewed the film.

The friendship between Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen began during the time of the Horn Expedition in 1894. Appointed for the expedition as the zoologist and photographer, Spencer developed an interest in researching Aboriginal material culture and social customs. Gillen was the Telegraph master in Alice Springs between 1892 and 1899 and was Aboriginal Protector in the region and developed friendly relations with the local Arrernte communities. His occupation and rapport with the local Aboriginal community allowed him some scope to accumulate more than a superficial knowledge of their culture, habits and language. He claimed knowledge of the Arrernte language but according to his biographer, John Mulvaney, this must be considered within the context of his flamboyant personality. However, it was for these reasons the Horn Expedition recruited Gillen to collect Aboriginal artefacts and to supply informants for the expedition’s anthropologist Edward Stirling, a lecturer in physiology from the University of Adelaide. During the expedition Spencer and

12 Films had been made in 1898 of Tiwi Islanders by Anthony Wilkin, a member of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait Islands. The leader of this expedition was Alfred Haddon. The films made on the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait Islands have been intentionally excluded from this survey because they were made by British cultural institution; the films were screened “on no more than a handful of occasions” and these took place only in England. Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology and Turn of the Century Visual Culture* 145 &48. However the films have since been used as evidence of long term occupancy of the Tiwi Islands in the Mabo Case in 1992.

13 Named after its financial backer, William Austin Horn, mining and pastoral magnate eager for a knighthood, the expedition surveyed a vast tract of country from Oodnadatta northward to the McDonnell Ranges in the Northern Territory. Over fourteen weeks the members of the expedition made comprehensive findings and Spencer was able to record 398 genera and 171 new species of mainly insects and beetles spiders reptiles and molluscs as well as 8 new botanical species, 16 unknown and 16 other species previously unknown in arid Australia. Mulvaney and Calaby, *So Much That Is New: Baldwin Spencer, 1860 - 1929, A Biography*, 116-35.

14 Mounted Constable, William Willshire, had developed a reputation for ‘dispersing’ and ‘pacifying’ Aboriginal communities around the Daly River and Finke River regions. Following an attack on sleeping Aborigines in the vicinity of Tempe Downs Station near Alice Springs, Frank Gillen, then sub-protector for Aborigines, investigated the atrocity and had Willshire committed for trial for murder at Port Augusta. Many pastoralists supported Willshire by funding his legal representation. Willshire was acquitted and returned to his practice of dispersal but eventually the authorities transferred him to Adelaide where he became a night watchman at an abattoir. Gillen gained the confidence of Aboriginal people around Alice Springs for his involvement in the case. <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A120578b.htm> [Access Date: 07/08/08].

Gillen developed a good working rapport. The fractious interpersonal relations between some members of the Horn expedition steered Spencer and Gillen into undertaking an expedition of their own that allowed them to concentrate their efforts on more specific anthropological data gathering. They began planning for an expedition to be undertaken in 1901.

Spencer had been advised to include cinematic equipment for their fieldwork in 1901 by British Anthropologist Alfred Haddon.\textsuperscript{16} Titled \textit{Aboriginal Life in Central Australia}, (1901), from the handbills of the exhibitions, the films comprise a collection of the 150 feet (the length of the film stock) sequences collated by the National Film and Sound Archive. The survival of the footage is remarkable given that it is highly volatile nitrate film; when the fumes build up in confined spaces they cause an explosion.

\textbf{Funding}

The expedition on which the film was produced was funded from various sources and not all contributions were monetary. The University of Melbourne did not contribute financially to the expedition but granted Spencer a year’s unpaid leave from his teaching post. In addition, Spencer contributed funds to the sum of £400 from his father, Reuben, an amount debited to his share of his inheritance when his father died.\textsuperscript{17} Gillen was granted leave for the year from his position at the post office as well as receiving allowances of approximately £400. The South Australian government granted approximately £200 in concessions for railway transport between Adelaide and Oodnadatta.\textsuperscript{18} They also received support from the Governor of South Australia, Sir Fredrick Holder, in addition to the rail concessions; he supplied a trap and tackling as well as “four suitable horses from the Govt.”\textsuperscript{19}

By far the largest financial contribution of £1,000 came from the \textit{Age} (Melbourne) newspaper proprietor, David Syme who in return for this donation published regular field reports from Spencer during the course of the expedition. This greatly increased newspaper sales for its weekly magazine, \textit{The Leader}, capturing the popular imagination about the adventure of such

\textsuperscript{16} Ian Dunlop, "Ethnographic Film-making in Australia: The First Seventy Years (1898-1968)," \textit{Aboriginal History} 3(1979): 111-12.
\textsuperscript{17} Mulvaney and Calaby, \textit{So Much That Is New}, 194.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 191-2.
\textsuperscript{19} Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch, \textit{My Dear Spencer}, 309.
an enterprise. Both Spencer and Gillen used their professional connections to gain any small advantage possible. Spencer acquired letters of introduction from “Alfred Deakin and other politicians supporting their expedition” and through Gillen they used telegraph stations as supply bases. They were granted the services of Mounted Trooper Chance as driver, cook and handyman however this cost them £200. They were also accompanied by two Arrernte men from Charlotte Waters, Purunda (Warwick) and Erlikiliaka (Jim Kite) as horse handlers.

From Gillen’s correspondence about the preparations, it is clear that the expedition was underfunded for its ambitious objectives. Long, physically exhausting days in the field were followed at night by hours of developing photographs from glass plates, writing up field notes and journals as well as correspondence to Syme and family members could have been made less arduous if more funds had been forthcoming.

![Figure 1 The Arrernte dancers. Still from Aboriginal Life In Central Australia, (1901).](image)

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22 Ibid., 348.
23 Ibid., 351.
The Film
The unrestricted compilation of film footage obtained from the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA)\textsuperscript{25} shows Arrernte men demonstrating a ceremonial dance, (Figure 1) and later their preparation for another ceremony as well as a dance performed by a group of Arrernte women. Scenes also include women in food preparation. (Figure 2) Like many films made in the early twentieth century, filmmaking was conceived as making a record of human movement and activities, in a sense, an animated photograph. From John Mulvaney’s account of Spencer’s notes, it was clearly Spencer’s intention to make an accurate record of the Arrernte.\textsuperscript{26}

Spencer needed to develop ways of constructing the events to allow for the restrictions imposed by the Warwick Bioscope camera. One such consideration was the short length, 150 feet (3 minutes), of the film stock, which made long dance sequences (that sometimes lasted longer than ten minutes) very difficult to record because the film needed frequent changing.\textsuperscript{27} Film theorists, Arthur and Corinne Cantrill observed that Spencer became quite proficient at

\textsuperscript{25} Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, \textit{Aboriginal Life in Central Australia}, "Baldwin Spencer Collection - Title: 246515 " (Australia: National Film and Sound Archive, 1901).
\textsuperscript{27} Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch, \textit{My Dear Spencer}, 327-8.
utilising the 150 feet (3 minute) film length so that the end of ceremonies would be included. 28

The lack of a panning mechanism also hampered Spencer’s attempts to accurately record dance ceremonies and one of these events is recorded by Gillen on 8 May 1901. 29 This according to Spencer resulted in lengthy footage of empty landscape (edited out of the unrestricted version supplied by the NFSA) because the camera lacked any panning mechanism to follow the performers’ movements. 30 Other problems that beset the filmmakers were the weight and bulk of the camera; 31 the lack of operational instructions, specifically, how fast to crank the wheel that fed the film through its various sprockets inside the camera; 32 the focussing mechanisms and viewfinders that made shooting more of a hit-and-miss affair 33 and the problems the heat caused with the wooden camera body which cracked, leaking light and dust onto the film. 34 It was a culmination of these difficulties that Spencer and Gillen believed would increase as they travelled further north. They decided to use the entire 3000 feet of film stock at Charlotte Waters. 35 This decision satisfied Spencer and Gillen’s three considerations: it enabled them to capitalise on their friendly relations with the Arrernte, who allowed them to record their ceremonies; 36 it solved the technical problems that arose when using the camera in harsh conditions (that would only increase as they travelled further north) and; it allowed for greater ease in sending the film to Melbourne to be developed. This would have become increasingly difficult from more remote locations they visited in the later stages of the expedition. 37

The importance of procuring the display of primitivism, as filmed by Spencer and Gillen, reveals ethnographic film’s close allegiance with Western knowledge production processes in the search for the authentic Aborigine. In supplying tangible evidence of primitivism Western scientists could demonstrate a clear separation between primitive Indigenous Australia and a modern, white, technologically progressive Australia. Even so, the films belie the dynamics at play between the filmmakers and the Arrernte. (Figure 3)

29 Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch, My Dear Spencer, 336.
30 Spencer, Wanderings, 1: 360.
31 Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch, My Dear Spencer, 333.
32 Spencer, Wanderings, 1: 359.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 374.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
Reception

The film screenings drew large crowds of curious onlookers at venues such as Melbourne’s Town Hall eager to experience the novelty of the relatively new technology of moving film. They were also eager to experience the uniqueness of seeing for the first time, ‘natives’ who appeared as if they had been transplanted from some distant stone-age past. Regular updates by Spencer published in The Leader, had aroused widespread interest in the expedition and the film, photographic and phonograph exhibitions were eagerly anticipated. According to newspaper reports in the Melbourne dailies, The Argus, “Australian Aborigines” and The Age, “Australian Aborigines” both published the day after the exhibition, on 8 July 1902, told how enthusiastically the audience responded after viewing the films, photographs and hearing the phonograph recordings.

39 As one example, Spencer exhibited the films and still photographs on 7th July 1902 at the Melbourne Town Hall, in the presence of the Governor, to an audience of over 2000 people. “This was the first major public screening of an ethnographic film made in the field.” Mulvaney and Calaby, So Much That Is New, 217.
40 "Australian Aborigines." The Argus, 8 July, 1902.
41 "Australian Aborigines." The Age, 8 July, 1902.
The popularity of the screenings is underlined by the fact that sixty-three lectures were also recorded as having taken place in the two years after Spencer and Gillen returned from the field.\textsuperscript{42} Most of the lectures were delivered by Spencer in Melbourne, with the first taking place at the Town Hall in the presence of the governor, Sir George Sydenham Clarke. Later lectures were held at the smaller Athenaeum Theatre; the Savage Club, (a gentleman’s club founded in 1894); and in regional areas such as Castlemaine.\textsuperscript{43} A number of lectures were given by Gillen in Adelaide at the Town Hall, one of which was delivered to the Geographical Society and another at the University of Adelaide;\textsuperscript{44} and later, Gillen gave lectures in regional areas of South Australia.\textsuperscript{45} At almost each event the films, still photographs and sound recordings were displayed as part of the overall entertainment.\textsuperscript{46}

The intention to exhibit the films, photographs and phonograph recordings on their return is apparent in Spencer’s willingness to publish material in the newspaper and in his correspondence with his friend American anthropologist, Lorimer Fison.\textsuperscript{47} This is also evident in the comments made by Gillen at the time of making the films on the expedition.\textsuperscript{48} In addition, the lectures attracted funding that assisted the University of Melbourne through a period of financial difficulties and the proceeds from the screenings were used to buy equipment for science laboratories.\textsuperscript{49} The exposure of the films to a relatively non-academic audience, such as the 2,000 patrons who attended the first screening in the Melbourne Town Hall, enabled a wider audience to connect primitiveness to Indigenous Australians peoples as a semiotic signifier. It was reported in one newspaper review, \textit{The Age}, when Spencer introduced the exhibition he announced that:

\begin{quote}
It must always be remembered that though the native ceremonies reveal, to a certain extent, what has been described as an ‘elaborate ritual’, they are eminently crude and savage. They are performed by naked, howling savages, who have no permanent abodes, no clothing, no knowledge of any implements, save those fashioned out of wood, bone or stone.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

In the social, political and scientific context of the time, this statement would have carried a very strong message to the audience that exemplified the constructed binary oppositions of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[42] Letter to Ian Dunlop from Spencer’s daughter, Mrs Rowan in 1967, Pers. Com. from Dunlop 05/09/2011
\item[46] Ibid., 217-9.
\item[47] Cantrill and Cantrill, "The 1901 Cinematography of Walter Baldwin Spencer," 37.
\item[48] Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch, \textit{My Dear Spencer}, 333.
\item[50] "Australian Aborigines." \textit{The Age}, 8 July, 1902.
\end{footnotes}
civilised and uncivilised that intentionally separated white Australians from Indigenous Australians. This separation can be implicated in contributing to, not only the psychological but also the physical marginalisation of Indigenous Australians. In the service of a dominant ideology predicated in racialised evolutionary theory, the images of Aboriginal people were a spectacle and these films provided a distraction from addressing the reality of Aboriginal lives in the wake of dispossession and the destruction of cultural networks. At this point Aboriginal peoples were considered to be the “nadir of evolutionary development” and were deemed to inhabit the position on the evolutionary ladder as the missing link between the apes and human forms.51

Within the context of evolutionary and race discourse, white Australian audiences were encouraged by these films to view Indigenous Australians as a primitive ‘race’ unable to cope with the intrusion of the highly evolved Caucasian race. At the public exhibitions the films reinforced the idea of the primitive and uncivilised lifestyle of the Arrernte. Spencer’s statement above underlines the Western supposition that because they are: “naked howling savages” the Arrernte have no place in a modern and progressive Australia. Their primitive attributes consign them to a passing phase in Australia’s natural history.

Spencer and Gillen were searching for the authentic Indigenous Australian or native. Aboriginal Australian lifestyles and social arrangements depended upon important connections to the land which colonial expansion had disturbed and broken, leading many Indigenous communities to starve where once they had been prosperous. The Arrernte community which lived near Charlotte Waters at the time of Gillen’s term at the Alice Springs Telegraph station had already been affected by the expansion of the pastoral industry and it is uncertain how well Spencer and Gillen understood the everyday effects these changes had on the social structures of the Arrernte. They certainly did not reflect these changes in the film. On the other hand, the Arrernte were anxious to record some of their ceremonies on film, Gillen records how they were summoned to ceremonies to record the events on moving film and take still photographs.52 This underlines the active engagement of Arrernte agency in the process.

51 McGregor, "The Concept of Primitivity," 95.
52 Mulvaney, Morphy, and Petch, My Dear Spencer, 335.
The serendipitous discovery of the films was made by filmmaker Ian Dunlop in 1966 when he was researching the history of ethnographic films made in Australia. Stored in a tin shed at the back of Museum Victoria, away from any other collections because of the safety hazard they posed, the films were still in their original cardboard boxes.\footnote{Dunlop, "Ethnographic Film-making in Australia: The First Seventy Years (1898-1968)," 113.} The Museum received them in 1916 when Spencer’s collection was annexed to Museum Victoria from the University of Melbourne.\footnote{Ibid.} At Dunlop’s insistence the films were transferred to the NFSA where they were copied onto safety film.\footnote{Ibid.} These are the duplicates that are now available for study. The original films are now stored in a special unit under the auspices of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) in Canberra, formerly known as the National Historical Film and Speaking Record Library (within the then Commonwealth National Library). Museum Victoria holds the copyright for access to the copied Spencer and Gillen films held at the NFSA.

To present day observers, the films demonstrate the Arrernte in the film as lively, vibrant people and in charge of their lives. The film shows a robust community who appear to demonstrate a clear understanding of the visual representation of their ceremonies and culture; arguably more than what Spencer and Gillen may have understood at the time.

The publicity attracted by the Spencer and Gillen films ensured the scrutiny of the colonial eye. In turn, this rationalised the imposition of restrictions on Indigenous Australians through legislation and social exclusion and justified the objectification of their material and social culture for the purposes of scientific enquiry and commercial gain. The influence of science, in particular anthropology via ethnographic films, was thus legitimated and professionalised, inadvertently becoming a significant influence in the development of popular culture understandings of Indigenous Australians that reinforced their socioeconomic marginalisation within Australian society.

By the 1920s the fascination with the ‘primitive’ continued to be driven by the search for the origin of the modern Caucasian and why ‘races’ had seemingly developed at differing rates of technical sophistication. The film sequences Spencer and Gillen produced in 1901 reflected the belief in the ideology of the ‘dying race’. By the 1930s changes in camera technology enabled a more flexible approach to filmmaking. The group of scientists from the South
Australian Museum and the University of Adelaide were interested in studying Indigenous Australians to establish biometric baselines. The perception that race was a quantifiable biological indicator was given considerable licence and the use of film to demonstrate how this was measured, provides important insights to the work of the Adelaide group.

**Life in Central Australia, (1931)**

**Background**

The ethnographic films produced by the South Australian Board for Anthropological Research (SABAR) not only provides important images of the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people of Central Australia in the early 1930s but also a visual record of how scientific data was collected in the field. The 1931 film, *Life in Central Australia*, shot at Cockatoo Creek in the Northern Territory, is the sixth film in a series of twelve films made by SABAR on their annual fieldwork trips undertaken between 1926 and 1937.\(^{56}\) The film, *Life in Central Australia*, (1931),\(^{57}\) is presently held by the South Australia Museum (SAM), and has been selected for the availability of long sequences of unrestricted material. The film is significant because it was produced when the study of eugenics played an important part in directing scientific enquiry into blood groups as hereditary markers between different human groups.

Members of the eugenics movement believed that a person’s character and abilities were determined by their biological inheritance and that the unrestricted breeding of the lower classes could pose a threat to the Caucasian race.\(^{58}\) These ideas were extended to race mixing where incidents of miscegenation were thought to intensify the effects of degeneration. However, Cleland and his colleagues applied the ideas of eugenics to blood grouping, hoping to serologically identify differences between Indigenous Australians and white Australians. In addition, the other tests carried out on the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people were designed to establish a biometric baseline that would indicate the degree of difference between them and white Australians to determine how distant the two ‘races’ were in evolutionary terms. Establishing this differential was an important factor in attracting the funding from the Rockefeller and Carnegie Institutes.

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\(^{56}\) Other films were produced by SABAR after the war. Thomas Draper Campbell produced colour films of expeditions sponsored by SABAR. By this time the personnel had changed and so had the direction of research.  


\(^{58}\) Bowler, *The Invention of Progress*: 198.
After finding no discernible physiological difference between the occurrence of particular blood groups in the Indigenous population and white Australians, Cleland concluded that Indigenous Australians could be safety absorbed (biologically) into the mainstream population without any harmful effects such as ‘throwbacks’; this conclusion was translated into the term ‘Absorption’, a policy which enjoyed a brief period of acceptance by Aboriginal Protectors, such as Cecil Cook in the Northern Territory who held the post from 1927 – 1938, and A.O. Neville in Western Australia, who held the post from 1919 – 1940, implicating the policy with the separation of Indigenous families, now known as the Stolen Generations.

The 1931 expedition included the largest number of scientists and academics on any one of the annual expeditions to central Australia. Consequently film footage of the way data was collected is a comprehensive representation of their activities in the field. Additionally, on a linear time scale, the film is located at a junction where government policy took into consideration the promise of Cleland’s hypothesis of absorption and his research into blood grouping. This policy became important in addressing what was referred to at the time as the ‘half-caste’ problem. Although it was recognised that Indigenous culture was dying out, it now became apparent that individuals with Indigenous ancestry were rapidly increasing in numbers.

John B. Cleland, Professor of Pathology at Adelaide University and Chairman of SABAR, was the foremost advocate in Australia of biological absorption. He and his associates followed lines of inquiry into the ramifications of biological absorption of the Indigenous population into the white mainstream population. In the film, this research is identified by the taking of blood from the earlobes of the test subjects. In his 1931 article in the *Australian Medical Journal*, Cleland reported that he and Professor T. Harvey Johnston: “tested ninety individuals of whom 26 belonged to Group 0 and 64 to Group A. In addition, a number of cross tests were done between native red cells and native sera; in all approximately 1,000 tests were made.”

**Funding**

As early as 1923 Cleland’s hypothesis attracted funding from international philanthropic institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation in the United States. The funds for

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60 Cleland, "Anthropological Expedition to Central Australia," 796.
anthropological research were channelled through the Australian National Research Council (ANRC) a portion of which was set aside to support the work at SABAR.61 At this time influential members of the Galton Society, the leading eugenics organisation in the world, held key positions in the Rockefeller Foundation administrative structure, including Raymond Fosdick, Clark Wissler, Charles Davenport and Madison Grant who lobbied hard to establish a proposal to study primitive man in relation to human evolution.62 They believed that the study of Australian Aborigines considered the world’s most primitive peoples, would provide the best evidence to prove their hypotheses.63

The funding for the research programme at SABAR came from the ANRC, together with intermittent funds from the Carnegie Corporation; and from private donations. Much of the work was carried out by the researchers from Adelaide University on a voluntary basis.64 Collectively, the funds enabled the employment of a dedicated cinematographer on the expedition along with the latest film technology available; at least two cinematic cameras; a 35mm and a 16mm black and white silent format. Some of footage of this expedition was recorded on the new Kodachrome 16mm colour silent cinematic film.65 At the time it was technologically impossible to copy colour film and as a result this sequence of film taken at Cockatoo Creek was screened only on rare occasions and the film has now deteriorated so extensively it cannot be viewed at all.66

The Film
Although the film makes no specific references to eugenics or policies regarding absorption, it does demonstrate the processes of collecting the biometric data. The film shows how the scientists interacted with the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people who came to the scientist’s camp. The film represents them as test subjects that provide a source of biomedical data with which to test various hypotheses. For example, the viewer sees the methods of blood collection used in the field at this time to develop the hypothesis that Aboriginal peoples were ‘safe’ to absorb into the settler Australian population. Part of the

61 Ibid., 793.
63 Ibid., 136-7.
66 South Australian Museum, "Curator's Notes".
film serves as a visual record of the methodology employed in the field and helps to anchor the visual narrative to the scientific circumstances that were present when the film was produced.

Although the film’s narrative of 1:00:55 minutes focuses on the experiences of the scientists, it also provides important images of the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people. The scientist’s three weeks round journey from Adelaide to Cockatoo Creek is shown in three stages. The first comprising 00:05:58 minutes, shows the group of scientists leaving Adelaide by train to Alice Springs. The group included:

Dr T. D. Campbell, [Dentistry] (Organiser), Professor J. B. Cleland, [Pathologist and Ornithologist] (Chairman of the Board for Anthropological Research), Professor T Harvey Johnston, [Professor of Zoology specialising in parasitology] Professor C. S. Hicks, [physiologist, pharmacologist] Professor H. J. Wilkinson, [anatomist, camera operator] Dr R. H. Pulleine, [physician of ear, nose and throat] Dr H. K. Fry, [physician of neurology] Dr R. F. Matters, [physiologist] Mr H. M. Hale (Director of the South Australian Museum), Mr N. Tindale (Ethnologist to the South Australian Museum), Mr H. Gray (student of medicine), and Mr E.O. Stocker [camera operator] as well as the assistant taxidermist from the Museum, Mr A Rau.67

However, Cleland did not include three other important people. The first was Charles Mountford, now forty-one years old, who worked under the supervision of Norman Tindale,

67 Cleland, "Anthropological Expedition to Central Australia," 793.
then aged thirty-one and an ethnologist at the South Australian Museum. On this expedition Mountford collected crayon drawings made by some of the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people. The second was Ernest Kramer, from the Aborigines’ Friends Association, who was also on the expedition. He acted as liaison between the scientists and the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people. Finally, Mr F. Colson acted as guide, cook and insect collector.

The film’s second stage of 00:02:16 minutes begins at Alice Springs where the scientists and their ‘half-caste’ helpers load pack horses and lorries with equipment and supplies for the journey to an outlying pastoral station. The final stage of 00:01:14 minutes shows the group travelling by camel for the rough journey to Cockatoo Creek. The long visual narrative to reach the destination helps to reinforce the remoteness, isolation and the harsh terrain that the scientists had to overcome in their quest to meet up with the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people. It also shows that these people must very primitive and remote indeed.

The next stage of the film of 00:28:10 minutes shows Warlpiri men in anthropological positions, such as throwing spears, (Figure 4) hunting kangaroo, and cooking their catch on the fire. It also shows one of the men using a metal axe to prepare a kangaroo for the fire. Collectively, these images reinforce semiotically the primitiveness associated with the Aboriginal men recorded on the film.

The film then shows the scientists and some of the Aboriginal people involved in data collection. For example, Cleland and Dr Thomas Harvey Johnson are filmed taking blood from an Aboriginal man’s earlobe using a haematology pipette, a now largely disused method for obtaining blood samples. At two moments (00:03:01 minutes in total) in the footage, slow motion shots make an examination of spear throwing and walking, indicating the influence of Professor Wilkinson, an anatomist who also assisted in filmmaking, and his interest in muscle connections with the skeletal frame. It is unclear from the film but it might be possible that this was shot with the 16mm camera.

Other footage shows how members of the SABAR groups interacted with the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people in the area. The cinematographer, E.O. Stocker is shown with

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68 South Australian Museum, "Crayon drawings relating to the Cockatoo Creek expedition, Northern Territory, 1931. Board for Anthropological Research Expedition G". 1931.
69 Cleland, "Anthropological Expedition to Central Australia," 793.
an Indigenous man who he lets look through the lens of the camera. (Figure 5) This footage is interesting in that it appears to be the first image made of an Indigenous Australian looking through the lens of a cinematic camera from the operating side. The viewer also sees scenes of one of the scientists talking to a group of children. These scenes imply a cordial relationship between the scientists and the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people.

The film appears to conclude with the return of the expedition party to Adelaide. The film footage shot on 35mm nitrate stock was not incorporated into the main six reel narrative shot on the 35mm and 16mm safety film footage but is included in what could best be described as an extended visual appendix of 00:17:01 minutes showing how the party collected data in the field and is identified as NFSA Title No. 335556.

Although the visual appendix shows the Indigenous subjects with numbers painted on their bodies, the individual people are afforded some recognition of their traditional names. For example, the test subject G57 is also recorded and referred to as Kakuta, a Warlpiri man. This is only apparent in the curator’s notes that accompany the film and Tindale’s field notes held by SAM. There are also images of Tindale and Campbell sitting with members of the Warlpiri group collecting information and using an Edison phonograph to record their voices.

The appendix also shows the basal metabolic tests which determined the efficiency of body temperature, and were carried out by physiologists Cedric Stanton Hicks and R.F. Matters. The equipment employed for the tests seems cumbersome and elaborate, ably contrasting the

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70 South Australian Museum, "Curator's Notes".
clutter of an outdoor laboratory and camp kitchen with the handful of spears, boomerangs and pitchies (wooden bowls) that the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people brought with them when they gathered at Cockatoo Creek.

The film also includes footage of Herbert Mathew Hale, director of the South Australian Museum and Tindale making plaster face moulds, a gruelling experience for the Indigenous test subject. Herbert John Wilkinson collects dermagraphs (hand prints) whilst Henry Kenneth Fry and Robert Henry Pulleine conduct sense and intelligence tests. Medical student, Gray washes some children’s hair so that he can examine hair track patterns. Film footage shows Wilkinson taking still photographs of Indigenous subjects. The photographs are now considered classic anthropological representations showing body profiles; frontal, and side on shots of the women subjects. Taxidermist A. Rau returns on a camel from a day of collecting animals.

Collectively this elaborate display of scientific ritual is a performance detailing the proficiency and the scientific objectivism of the members of the expedition in their fields of expertise. The Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people are represented as being on friendly terms with the scientists and demonstrate that they have a positive awareness of the camera. They are filmed as they move from one testing station to another around the camp having blood taken, plaster face moulds made, profile pictures taken as well as subjecting themselves to basal metabolic tests. The scientists allow the film to convey their expertise to the audience who are envisaged as being impressed with their efforts, particularly international scholars and philanthropic institutions. The apparent remoteness and primitiveness of the
Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people, portrayed at the beginning of the film, might have impressed both local and international audiences at the time the film was made, however there appears to be no literature available to confirm any audience reception of the film.

As a silent film, the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people represented have no direct dialogue with the audience, however their amiable disposition in front of the camera is evident. They demonstrate they have considerable agency because without their willing cooperation, the scientists would have had little hope of attaining their participation in conducting the tests. They appear to be eager to show their skill at spear throwing, making pitchies, shields and spears. Intermittently segments of this footage are shot in slow motion to accentuate the graceful movements of the men. When footage of a pubic tassel being made and is then completed an inter-title appears which says “on retiring the suit is hung on the door”. The Aboriginal man hangs the pubic tassel on his wurley (bush hut) while looking directly at the camera and smiling demonstrating not only his sense of humour at the situation created by the scientists but also an acute awareness that he is performing for the camera. (Figure 6)

There are scenes of Aboriginal people making aural recordings on an Edison phonograph. They appear to be enjoying hearing their voices played back. Groups of Aboriginal people are gathered around Norman Tindale who is writing down what appears to be words for different parts of the body, such as the ear. The groups are seen laughing at his attempts.

The visiting scientists afford the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre an opportunity to be paid in food, tobacco and boiled sweets, in exchange for their participation in the tests. The extra food would have helped to compensate for the greater number of Indigenous people gathered in the area for ceremony, making the relationship between the scientists and the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre peoples mutually beneficial. At 00:14:52 footage shows Ernest Kramer of the Aborigines’ Friends Association. He was responsible for gathering the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre at Cockatoo Creek for the scientists and distributed food to the children.71 In his journal article, Cleland addresses his concern about the cooperation they could expect of the Warlpiri when he makes a reference to a recent massacre (now referred to as the Coniston Massacre).72 Due to the arduous nature of the tests carried out on

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71 Cleland, "Anthropological Expedition to Central Australia," 793.
72 Ibid.
them, this may indicate the value of the foodstuffs provided by the SABAR group but also may indicate the increasingly limited availability of food due to the encroachment of the pastoral industry on traditional territory.\textsuperscript{73}

The film shows the extensive array of equipment brought by the scientists to Cockatoo Creek. This is in marked contrast to the handful of equipment, including boomerangs, spears, pitchis and woven bags brought by a larger number of Aboriginal people to the site. The simplicity and understated presence of the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people underline their relaxed relationship with their environment. However, their lack of technology was more likely to be interpreted at the time as a sign of their primitivity. In the film they are firmly positioned as objects of scientific curiosity. Even so, they demonstrate a marked pride in showing their skills on camera.

The significance of \textit{Life in Central Australia}, (1931), is that it offers valuable visual evidence of the method of data collection, which in turn portrays the process of scientific ritual as a cultural artefact. The film demonstrates that the scientists were more interested in the processes of data collection than with the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre peoples and their recent experiences of massacre. Thus the Aborigines were confined as the Other, that is, as suitable objects of scientific research. Despite the humanity afforded to them, this appears to be conditional on accessing what were believed to be authentic Aborigines.

\textbf{Reception}

Like the film made by Spencer and Gillen, the images captured on \textit{Life in Central Australia}, (1931), helped to sustain and consolidate negative ideas about Indigenous Australians, particularly with regard to their perceived lack of technological progress through the semiotics of the films. The film was screened in universities to instruct a new generation of medical scientists and anthropologists in prolonging this perception. According to the South Australia Museum’s curator of the film, “the films were produced for educational purposes and commercially and loaned to individuals and institutions as a teaching tool, copies of these films exist in institutions throughout Australia and overseas.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 793-4.
\textsuperscript{74} South Australian Museum, "Curator's Notes".
Life in Central Australia, (1931) has enjoyed only limited viewing to public audiences, screened primarily at key cultural institutions, such as universities as educational tools and at theatre venues to interested groups of the public. However, today the film is intrinsic to understanding how the professional scientific community’s views of Indigenous Australians were developed at the time and how the community saw itself as more important than the subjects of their research. This is reflected in the way they went about their work collecting samples from Indigenous bodies in order to establish biometric baselines of Aboriginal physiology from which they could extrapolate ideas about race and heritance. The subjugation and objectification of Indigenous Australians was enabled through the subtle reinforcement of racial ideology and the dissemination of scientific discourses contained in the films.

From the perspective of Cleland and his associates, the film was produced with a humanitarian agenda, although the spectre of ‘racial’ difference and ‘primitivism’ is quite apparent to a twenty-first century audience. Anthropology via ethnographic films continued to be legitimated and professionalised and inadvertently became a significant influence in the development of government policies and popular culture understandings of Indigenous Australians, reinforcing their marginalisation within Australian society.

**Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950)**

**Background**

Charles Mountford’s pathway to the American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) in 1948 came after he made crayon impressions of rock carvings at Panaramitee, north of Peterborough in South Australia in the 1920s. In 1926, he took them to the South Australian Museum in Adelaide and in 1926 he published a scientific paper about them with Norman Tindale. As an enthusiastic amateur, he accompanied Tindale on the 1931 expedition to Cockatoo Creek where he collected crayon drawings made by the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people. Later he replaced Stocker in taking a greater part in filming some of the following SABAR expeditions.

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75 "Aborigines filmed," *Hobart Mercury*, 26th October 1939, 8.
Charles Mountford did not have any academic qualifications when he started photographing and recording Aboriginal rock art in South Australia. He was born 8 March 1890 in Peterborough, South Australia and spent his childhood living in the country towns of Peterborough, Georgetown and Moonta where his family had friendly relations with local Aboriginal peoples. He left school at age eleven and held numerous farm jobs until he became a tram conductor and then a mechanic with the Post Office, in Adelaide. His biographer, Max Lamshed, believed it was Mountford’s promotion and relocation to Darwin in 1920 that introduced him to regular conversations with Aboriginal men. Mountford made friends at the local Aboriginal camp where he was invited to ceremonies and listened to stories, not realising at the time the significance of this opportunity. On numerous occasions he and another Post Office colleague, Florenz Blesser, went hiking and bike riding and Mountford learned much about the local fauna and flora of the areas surrounding Darwin.

Following the death of his first wife Mountford returned to South Australia with his two children to take a short holiday with his parents. The Senior Mountfords were Methodist home missionaries at Dawson, a township about twenty kilometres (16 miles) north-east of Peterborough. Responding to “vague talk of rock carvings, said to have been made by Aborigines” the Mountfords went exploring. On finding the caves, Mountford “made tracings of the grooves, … photographed others and took them to the South Australian Museum.” It was from here that Mountford’s association with the South Australian Museum began. His interest in ‘native’ art became well publicised in the South Australian press.

Mountford’s home-grown popularity and the quality of his still and cinematic photography, as well as his publications, appealed to the general public rather than to specialists and helped increase the popularity of anthropology as a profession of adventure and daring. His affability and talent for producing films such as Brown Men, Red Sands, (1942) and Brown

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77 Max Lamshed, 'Monty' the biography of C.P. Mountford (Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth: Rigby Ltd, 1972), 23.
78 Ibid., 26.
79 Ibid., 27.
80 Ibid., 28-9.
81 Ibid., 26.
82 Ibid., 29.
84 For example, Brown Men, Red Sands, 1949; Brown Men, Blue Mountains, 1946.
Men, Blue Mountains, (1943) and the subsequent publications under the same titles, fitted snugly into National Geographic Magazine’s American national imaginary profile. Exotic places, such as the Australian outback, were far flung places where ‘primitive’ peoples still existed and men were tested by their physical abilities.85

After exhibiting the films in Australia to a parliamentary delegation he was sponsored by the Australian government to exhibit the films along with lectures in the United States as a public relations exercise. The popularity of these films to an international audience reinforced earlier notions that Australia was a location that provided sites for data collection for research on early human development. This reputation attracted the interest of Gilbert and Melville Grosvenor of the National Geographic Magazine who offered a grant to Mountford for ethnological research in Arnhem Land in northern Australia.

The American–Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL) in 1948 signalled the last extensive undertaking of anthropological surveys in Australia. In Mountford’s account of the expedition, he recorded that four colour films were shot during that time by himself (as director) and Peter Bassett-Smith working the camera.86 The films were titled Arnhem Land, (1950) a survey of the natural history and ethnology of that region; Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950) dealing with native life and crafts at Yirrkalla [sic]; Birds and Billabongs, (1951) picturing the birds and the water-lilies of Oenpelli lagoons; and the Arawaltja Ceremony, (n.d.) of Groote Eylandt.87 The films were expected to be produced within the stylistic conventions of the National Geographic Magazine, as well as the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) which would be responsible for providing the post production facilities. Of the four films made, Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950) was chosen because it is the most well-known and readily accessible. Copies were sold to educational institutions and special interest groups in Australia and borrowed through the National Library lending system and to educational institutions overseas.88

Preparations for the expedition began. As the publicity surrounding the expedition increased so did the interest of Australia government Ministers such as Arthur Calwell who anticipated

87 Ibid.
a valuable collaboration between the US and Australia. By the time the expedition left for Arnhem Land in 1948 there were fifteen members comprising:

from the Smithsonian Institute; Mr Frank M. Setzler, archaeologist and deputy leader; Dr David J. Johnson mammalogist; Dr Herbert Deignan, ornithologist; and Dr Robert H. Miller, ichthyologist. The Australian nutrition unit comprised Dr Brian P. Billington, a doctor of medicine; Miss Margaret McArthur, nutritionist; and Mr Kelvin Hodges, a biochemist from the Institute of Anatomy in Canberra. Added to this were Mr Frederick McCarthy, Curator of Ethnology from the Australian Museum, Sydney; Mr Raymond Specht, botanist from the University of Adelaide; Mr Howell Walker, staff photographer and writer from the National Geographic magazine; Mr Peter Bassett-Smith, movie, photographer, from the Department of Information; Mrs Bessie Mountford, honorary secretary and treasurer; Mr John Bray, cook and honorary entomologist; Mr Keith Cordon, transport officer and Mountford as expedition leader, ethnologist and film director.89

At this time Arnhem Land was a protected region, and its remote location helped to increase the sense of exoticism, remoteness and adventure of the scientific enterprise.

**Funding**

The film was made under the funding programme provided for the expedition to Arnhem Land. This was a joint collaboration between the Australian government, the Smithsonian Institute and the *National Geographic Magazine*. The film was processed by the newly established National Film Board’s production arm the Commonwealth Film Unit.

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89 Lamshed, Monty, 131.
The Film

The film was made in 1948 and shot on a 16 mm negative format Kodacolor film as well as a black and white 35mm nitrate film. But because magnetic sound strips on cinematic film had not been developed at this time, the narration was added after the film was edited and is the standard fruity, well spoken, condescending ‘voice of God’ style used extensively in this time period in Australian documentary and newsreel films. The film is 725 feet (220.98m) in length with a 19 minute running time. Cultural historian, Martin Thomas has noted that the films made on the 1948 expedition were: “the antithesis of ‘fly on the wall’ filmmaking. Rather, they were the documentation of premeditated performances of aspects of the culture; performances that came about as a consequence of negotiations and exchanges.”90 As in the Spencer and Gillen film, Aboriginal Life in Central Australia, (1901), and Life in Central Australia, (1931), where the dances and skills were performed for the camera, Mountford organised and paid for the Yolgnú to construct huts, canoes and other activities for the purpose of making the film, a practice that betrays the essence of ethnographic film as being a true record of ‘life as lived’ by the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land in 1948.91 This practice was not new. When Robert Flaherty made Nanook of the North, (1922), Moana, (1926) and Man of Aran, (1934) he paid the protagonists to reconstruct a lifestyle that had essentially ceased to exist at the times the films were produced.92

The film opens with an acknowledgement of the sponsors, the Smithsonian Institute, the National Geographic Society, and the Commonwealth of Australia. A map gives context to the location of where the film was made in Yirrkala. There are scenes of boys on the beach playing in small canoes. (Figure 7) These scenes are intercut with the construction of a bark canoe, used to collect foods from swampy areas; (Figure 8) turtle hunting by a group of men in a dug-out canoe, used for hunting game in the sea; and the construction of a bark shelter. (Figure 9) There are also scenes of a man with a group of children on the beach. The identification of this man reveals that he is Mawalan Marika, now an artist of international reputation. Amongst the children is his young son also an artist and political activist.93 He is drawing pictures of animals and animal tracks in the sand to show them how to identify the different animals they will encounter. Intercutting between each of the activities reinforces that these processes take time. Also shown is a man getting a fire started and cooking the

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91 May, "The Last Frontier!," 70.
turtle on the beach. In the evening, women are shown grinding seed on a stone and preparing food to eat with the turtle meat. A man is shown retiring to his upper level sleeping space where the smoke of the fire below seeps in to keep the mosquitoes at bay.

In keeping with the earlier films discussed in this chapter, Mountford was anxious to demonstrate that it was made in a remote region of Australia. The music for the film was selected by Adelaide composer Mirrie Hill to emphasise the remoteness and primitiveness of the Yolgnu people represented on the film. During the film’s opening and closing credits, traditional Yolgnu music from the Arnhem Land region is used to evoke this exoticism. Added to this auditory prompt, a map showing the region in which the film has been shot helps to underline the implicit and understandable ignorance of the audience of exactly where this place is located.

The map motif reinforces scientific knowledge of the territory in which the film is situated. This form of ownership can be understood as a re-colonisation of the Yolgnu people. The use of Yolgnu music seeks to evoke in the audience the promise of adventure and exploration in ‘remote’ regions while the change to European style music seeks to evoke a more pensive moment, signalling that the images of the Yolgnu people on the film enjoying an idyllic lifestyle has a limited life expectancy. The auditory and visual motifs manage to position the Yolgnu at a progressive disadvantage, placing them in another dimension and outside the imagined lived reality of the white population of Australia.
Reception

According to a report by Frederick McCarthy, then Foundation Principal of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), tabled at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) conference in 1966, the film attracted an audience in the millions. The film was screened in such as venues such as public libraries, church halls for special interest groups, schools and universities and was sold to international educational institutions. McCarthy placed the film in the educational film section of his report and together with the other films in this category, he noted that they were in high demand and received a good reception from schools as well as from “audiences in societies, civic bodies, churches, universities and adult education groups”. He considered the films that were most popular included scenes of men hunting for turtles, making fire, building canoes and children playing. All these activities are portrayed in Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950).

Even though Mountford believed he was portraying a positive picture of the Yolgnu, the films simply managed to fossilise their way of life. World War II had brought with it many changes to the lives of the Indigenous communities in Arnhem Land and many of the scientists from the Expedition were disappointed by their inauthenticity. Instead of finding happy noble savages as depicted in the film Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950), “their ‘stone-age men’ [were] wearing jeans, playing cards and using American slang.” Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950), is a representative product of an era of a fascination with the exotic and the primitive.

Like the films taken on previous ethnographic expeditions, Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950), reflected the advances made in camera technology, which allowed the camera operator more control over the way the camera equipment was used. As a result, Mountford's aesthetic sensitivity and his skill as director confirmed its future commercial value. Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950), has been screened more extensively to the general public than any other of the films mentioned in this chapter. It sits comfortably

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95 "New Films on Aborigines," Northern Standard (Darwin), Friday 14 September 1951.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., 12-13.
100 May, "The Last Frontier?," 179.
within the community imaginary constructed by *National Geographic Magazine*. Indeed as Tamar Rothenberg points out, the “strategies of innocence” the magazine was retailing at the time underscores the paternalism and virtuousness of European societies by asserting European hegemony to improve people’s lives. This strategy was enacted through the accumulation of knowledge through science, to enable “uplifting” discourses to circulate within white societies.\(^{101}\) In *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950), Mountford considered that he was trying to educate white Australians (and white Americans) about Indigenous Australians. Because the film was produced on a scientific expedition in the remote regions of Australia, the benevolent and unchallenging images constructed of the Arnhem Land peoples objectified them as sources of knowledge; places where white people can accumulate knowledge about the Other. Indeed the film continues to be utilised as an educational tool today and is included in Film Australia’s Digital Learning internet website “Australians at Work” film collection for high school students and includes teaching and learning notes.\(^{102}\) As a result, the film has probably reached a far greater audience now than was intended upon its release in 1950.

Although Mountford’s intention was to explain the Aborigines to non-Indigenous Australians and to celebrate the value of their art and culture, he was nevertheless, irrevocably bound by the scientific premise of his time. His representation of them was configured within the boundaries formed by previous generations of scientists and the prevailing social and cultural conventions of non-Indigenous Australia. The happy noble savage, infantilised through paternalist benevolence, is relegated to a parallel universe where they exist separately from the rest of the Australian population.

The portrayal of the Yolgnu did not challenge the notion that they and Torres Strait Islander peoples had appropriated many Western habits by the time the film was made. The film did not address issues surrounding the establishment of missions in the region nor the growing tensions between the interests of mining and the traditional owners of the land on which these industries encroached. The Yolgnu people were very aware of the outside world, having been heavily involved with the patrols to repel Japanese invasion and other military activities in the region during the Second World War. Indeed, they had become very sophisticated in

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dealing with Balanda (Yolgnu for white fellas). The understanding that the study subjects would be in a pristine condition was an important premise on which the interest and finance of the expedition was placed. The reality of the prevalence of cultural exchanges is ignored in Mountford’s portrayal of the Yolgnu in Arnhem Land.

The timely establishment of the National Film Board in 1945, later named the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU), ensured that *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950) was processed in government facilities. The visit of British documentary filmmaker John Grierson to Australia and New Zealand in 1939 put in motion plans to establish a national film unit in each country. This signalled a movement towards using film as an educational tool to reach large audiences. The CFU envisaged projecting an image of Australia as a unified national citizenry to whom information could be disseminated on a mass scale, and particularly at this juncture, information and propaganda for the war effort. After the war the Unit concentrated on producing films about post war reconstruction and as film historian Albert Moran has pointed out: “the films do more than simply reflect society. They are active inventions or projections in their own right.” These pedagogical and hegemonic conventions were understood as a ‘common-sense’ approach to the way in which Australia represented itself and its Aboriginal inhabitants, when they were represented on film, and followed the stylistic conventions of the Unit observed in *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950).

**Desert People, (1966)**

**Background**

By the mid 1960s, the CFU began to consider film projects that it had previously sidelined. Young filmmaker, Ian Dunlop had proposed to film everyday life of Pintupi people living in the Western Desert in Western Australia. In conjunction with the newly established Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), he produced a film about two Pintupi families living in the Western Desert.

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It was while filming *Balloons and Spinifex* (1957) at the remote Giles Weather Station\(^{105}\) that Dunlop became enthralled by the Desert environment. In an interview I conducted with Ian Dunlop in 2010, he said:

> Well of course I jumped at the job because I’d never been into central Australia, I’d never met any Aboriginal people and I knew there were Aboriginal people living near the weather station, nomadic Aboriginal people, I was interested in all these things and so I said: “Yes!” … I imagined the desert to be bare sand hills like I imagined the Sahara is; not this really rich environment.\(^{106}\)

He recalled the intoxicating environment.

> when I wasn’t filming hot air balloons going up into the sky, I would climb the Rawlinson Range and look out over this vast expanse all this Spinifex and see the fires of individual groups, twenty, thirty, fifty miles away and I thought, wow, a day in the life of a nomadic family. That’s what I want to do when we finished doing our filming.\(^{107}\)

On his return to Sydney, Dunlop said that he:

> put in a proposal to make a film about the day in the life of a nomadic family and I got a reply: “Yes, well next time we do something on the Northern Territory we might include something on Aborigines.” So, that was it. So I realised the time was not right to do anything on that.\(^{108}\)

The dream would take seven years to come to fruition. In the intervening period as Dunlop related in the interview, he tried; “to get onto as many outback films and films in Papua New Guinea that I could do and although they might be ghastly films on mineral resources and economic developments in New Guinea, I learnt a lot about the general situation anyway.”\(^{109}\)

It was during this time Dunlop had the opportunity to make *Towards Baruya Manhood*, (1972) with French anthropologist Maurice Godelier. Finally, in 1964, Dunlop took two weeks leave from the Unit to scout out the possibility of filming the life of Western Desert people.

\(^{105}\) Giles Weather Station was established in the mid-1950s near Maralinga to track weather conditions for the Maralinga Atomic bomb testing, and the Woomera Rocket Range tests. The tests were an Australian and British project that encompassed the Western Australian, South Australian and Northern Territory governments. Controversy about the neglectful treatment of the traditional Aboriginal custodians of the land in which the tests were conducted became an embarrassment for the federal and state governments both domestically and internationally.

\(^{106}\) Ian Dunlop, Personal Communication, 16 June, 2010.

\(^{107}\) Ibid.

\(^{108}\) Ibid.

\(^{109}\) Ibid. (During this time he worked with French anthropologist Maurice Godelier, filming initiation ceremonies of the Baruya of New Guinea in 1962)
Funding

*Desert People*, (1966), was made as a shorter compilation of the *People of the Western Desert*, (1966) series that comprised ten films in total. The films were made under the auspices of the then Commonwealth Film Unit (now Screen Australia) and the newly established Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), now known as Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, (AIATSIS). The purpose of the CFU was to promote Australia to Australians as well as to overseas audiences. Film historian, Ian Bryson has noted, the CFU was expected to contribute to nation building and:

> [u]nder Hawes’ supervision, a program of films was begun which sought to portray Australia and Australians as striving to build a nation as a single people in the face of adversity. It sought to introduce a new social order through portraits of people working together to build a prosperous nation.\(^{110}\)

The film unit at AIAS was also in its infancy and it was not until 1965 that it employed a full time filmmaker, Roger Sandall.\(^{111}\) In this context, Dunlop’s films represented an outstanding addition to the growing archive films about Indigenous Australians and the joint funding of the film project by the two government bodies could be seen as a co-operative effort.

The Film

The film runs for 51:00 minutes and was shot using 35 mm black and white film. The sound track was recorded separately and incorporated at the editing stage of production. Advances in camera and film technology, allowed for a greater flexibility in making close up shots and filming at night time. At this time there was still no reliable synchronous sound track on cinematic film stock so the narration was added later at the editing stage of production.

Approximately 25,000 feet of 35mm black and white film was shot in 1965. At that time, most CFU films were shot in 35mm. Because I saw this as possibly “the last chance” to film nomadic life, and I wanted the result to be as beautiful as possible, I decided to use black and white film.\(^{112}\)

Despite these advances in technology, Dunlop’s approach to filming Indigenous Australians in *Desert People*, (1966) was still one that was searching for the elusive authentic Aborigine in much the same way as Spencer and Gillen, Cleland and his associates and Mountford, indicating an intellectual hiatus in the way Indigenous Australians were still scientifically objectified as subjects of inquiry. Dunlop shot the film in 1965 and it was released in 1966. He describes this film as: “a more interpretive film, showing a day in the life of two families

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\(^{110}\) Bryson, *Bringing To Light*: 6.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., 32.

\(^{112}\) Dunlop, "Film Notes - Desert People".
of the Western Desert” and “it is made from most of the material contained in *People of the Australian Western Desert*, (1966): Parts 1, 2 and 4, and from a small section of Part 9 (getting water from a well)” with a running time of 00:51:14.\(^{113}\) *Desert People*, (1966), was selected because it represents a collation of the larger series of films and this version has been screened more widely in Australia and was exhibited at a retrospective of Australian ethnographic films at Festival Dei Popoli in Florence in 1967.

At the beginning of the film, an overlaid inter-title emphasises that Djagamara and his family and that Minma (Minmarra) and his family were probably the last ‘nomadic’ Indigenous people left untouched by Western civilisation in Australia. (Figure 10) In the interview with Ian Dunlop referred to above,\(^{114}\) Dunlop revealed that he went to great lengths to find the

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\(^{113}\) Ibid.  
\(^{114}\) Dunlop, Personal Communication, 16 June, 2010
families. They came from the Pintupi language group and consisted of Djagamara, his three wives, one of whom is named Gadabi and several children. Dunlop filmed this family around the water holes in a place known as Badjar in the Clutterbuck Hills in Western Australia. The second family comprised Minma (Minmarra) and his two wives, Manggadjji and Yanindu (or Binngga); three sons, Burunyaru, Nun and Djamdidjin; and a niece Nyungala.

Dunlop only had contact with Djagamara’s family for a few days, before they decided to leave the waterhole but he was able to film some of their everyday activities. (Figure 11)

When we met the people, it wasn’t a rush job, [we] camped with them for a few days and walked about with them and they’d show you where their spear trees were, where they got their artefacts and things like that, and when one of them came into the group I was able to see what she was carrying, the goanna she got tucked in this belt and bush tomatoes and so on. It was just superficial at one level and at another just oh it just blew my mind.\textsuperscript{115}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure11.jpg}
\caption{Richard Tucker with Ian Dunlop filming a close-up of Minma carving.}
\textit{Source: Bringing to Light, (2002)}
\end{figure}

The production crew had enlisted the help of some the Pintupi people living on Warburton Mission who were kin to Djagamara and his family. This enabled the crew to camp in close proximity to the family group and afforded the production crew closer interaction. Dunlop later recalled:

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
Things were going pretty well, until one day after just a few days they shot through for various reasons. But it might have been because our guides were putting pressure on him to go back with them to Warburton; he didn’t want to do this because one of his wives was of the wrong skin and he’d be speared when he got back to Warburton.  

Dunlop remembers that the women and children had already left and the film crew was left: “taking the last shots of Djugamara disappearing into the wilderness and we knew there was no point trying to follow them.”  

Dunlop’s alternative was to return to Warburton Mission. There he asked Minma’s (Minmarra’s) family group, who had come into the mission nine months earlier, if they would return to their country and live in a traditional manner so that he could record their everyday activities. Dunlop recalled:

so we went with him, back to their own country near Tikatika and we started filming. They took off their bedraggled mission clothes, which was no hassle to them, and each day we went off and did food gathering and spent a fortnight doing this and then took them back to Warburton. And then from that I made the ten films of the People of the Australian Western Desert and the more general film Desert People. 

Here again the film is a construction about what white people value about Indigenous peoples is their primitivity and alienation from the mainstream population. In the film notes, Dunlop
provides evidence that Minma (Minmarra) and his family were directed to carry out a number of tasks to satisfy the concept of the film.\textsuperscript{119} Hunting and food gathering, processing of grain to make flour for seed cakes are some of the activities filmed in the everyday life of this family group. The comment that the family “removed their bedraggled mission clothes” for the film makes it clear that the reality for Indigenous people was at odds with the way in which white people wanted them to be represented. It is unclear what or if any payment was made to Minma (Minmarra) and his family for this work. Returning the Warburton Mission, to collect a new family to film, Dunlop was fortunate to include Robert (Bob) Tonkinson,\textsuperscript{120} a doctoral student in anthropology who had some knowledge of the languages in that area.

**Reception**

*Desert People*, (1966), attracted much critical attention in Europe with screenings in Florence, the Edinburgh Film Festival and the Recontre Cinematographique Internationale de Prades in Paris in 1967. He told me that: “In Paris, *Desert People* went down with the Parisians incredibly well. From then on I had a free hand at the Unit.”\textsuperscript{121} In 1967, two years after shooting the *Desert* films, he received a call from another patrol officer at Woomera in Western Australia, letting him know that he thought that contact had been made with Djangamarra and his family. Dunlop returned to the Western Desert to film three families in the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara lands that resulted in a further series of films about the Western Desert people (Parts 11 – 12 of the Western Desert series), one of which is subtitled, *At the Patantja Clay Pan*, (1969).

Ian Bryson notes that Dunlop’s *Desert*, films produced images portraying “for the first time Aboriginal people … represented as humans going about their daily life, in families, with names and in spite of an incredibly harsh environment.”\textsuperscript{122} The *Desert* films were praised for their archival value because they ‘faithfully’ recorded, in detail, traditional everyday life of Indigenous people in that region of Australia. However, what they also imply is that the authentic Aboriginal has finally passed away. The families Dunlop filmed had to be retrieved from Warburton Mission implying they were no longer present as a relic of an ancient past. The Indigenous Australians who now remain are what might be considered by white Australians as the ‘inauthentic’ remnants of a traditional culture and as such their sacred sites,

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Tonkinson later became Professor of Anthropology at the University of Western Australia, 1984 - 2003.
\textsuperscript{121} Dunlop, Personal Communication, 16 June, 2010
\textsuperscript{122} Bryson, *Bringing To Light*: 31.
beliefs and connections with their traditional lands are deemed to be unimportant in the greater envisioning of Australian progress.

The film was well received in Australia and was rapidly included into school programmes. It is because of its observational film style, Desert People, (1966) has primarily been screened at ethnographic film festivals and in educational institutions. The film is at present included in the NFSA’s “Australians at Work” website\textsuperscript{123} as well as an excerpt of the film is included in Screen Australia’s anthology of films, “Film Australia’s Outback”\textsuperscript{124} both includes teacher’s notes for studying the film. The extended families of Djangamara and Minma (Minmarra) could also have appeared in Warburton Aborigines, (1957), which is discussed in the next chapter.

**Conclusion**

The four films discussed in this chapter, reveal important characteristics and similarities which demonstrate the overpowering belief held by the filmmakers about the primitivism of Indigenous Australians over a period of more than sixty years. First is that the Indigenous Australians were represented in the films were located in remote Australia, as if they were from another planet and were not permitted to speak for themselves. Second, is that the differences between the films are more about technology than representation. For example, Spencer and Gillen’s frustration with their subjects running from the frame of the camera to the use of smaller 35mm and 16mm cameras used by Dunlop that allowed close ups of the subjects and more flexibility with taking shots in difficult terrain, still represents the Indigenous subjects as the Other authentic Aborigine. The tension over the disappearance of what by the 1960s had become to be regarded as one of the oldest cultures on earth was keenly felt because Western culture had displaced most of the Indigenous people by taking their land. As a result, the films reinforce the view first presented by Spencer and Gillen that only Indigenous Australians living in remote and isolated places were truly authentic to their cultural practices. The alleged disappearance of Indigenous culture allowed white Australians to dismiss them as a relic of a distant past, so ancient that it had no place in a modern Australia. Despite the construction of cultural practices undertaken by all the filmmakers to portray this in their films is was not until Indigenous people took their


representation into their own hands that they are given a voice to say how living with two cultures has touched their lives.
Section Two

Political Authenticity (1957 – 1972)

The films two films analysed in this section Warburton Aborigines, (1957), and Ningla A-Na, (1972), portray Indigenous Australians as part of the Australian political landscape. The films bookend the decades where political activism for Indigenous rights was at its height in Australia. They are significant for the way they stimulated attitudinal and institutional changes relating to the way in which Indigenous Australians were represented not only in documentary film but in the broader public dialogue.

The apolitical position of Indigenous Australians carefully portrayed in the films discussed in the first section was rudely challenged by the 1957 film, Warburton Aborigines, (1957). Made by Western Australian Liberal politician, William Grayden, the film portrays Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatadjara people of Western Australia starving and in very ill health as a result of their forced removal from their lands which lay in the path of the British –
Australian Atomic and Rocket Weapons testing at Maralinga and Woomera in South Australia.

Grayden’s film jolted white Australians into realising that Indigenous Australians were still alive. It not only revealed that a particular group of Indigenous Australians were being forcibly removed from their land so that the atomic and rocket weapons testing could take place, but that they were also starving and in poor health. These circumstances transformed them from the apolitical Other into a modern political issue. The visible clash with modernity and the poor state of health of the Indigenous people shown in Grayden’s film challenged previous representations of Indigenous Australians on film and can be seen as the prelude to increasing political activity on the behalf of and by Indigenous Australians in the coming decades. This prelude also signalled changes in the way Indigenous Australians were represented on documentary films. The contrast between this film and that of Dunlop’s government produced film only nine years later underlines the resistance to the images of Grayden’s film.

In the second film analysed in this section, the political activism movement in Australia is represented by the film Ningla A-Na, (1972) made by itinerant Italian political activist filmmaker Alessandro Cavadini. The style of this film is clearly influenced by then current European trends in documentary filmmaking where elements of observational and cinéma vérité techniques were used to give the viewer the impression of an impromptu recording of significant political events.

The film portrays the aggressive political activism many urban Aboriginal people were engaged in at this time, influenced by the Civil Rights Movements (CRM) in the US as well as the feminism, anti-Vietnam war and anti-apartheid movements occurring on a global stage. These films are placed together in this section because they represent the shift between the films discussed in Section One where Indigenous Australians where portrayed as ethnographic objects to people with active political and social aspirations. Protesting for land rights, they assert their rights as political constituents.

From these earlier protest movements, a growing awareness of Aboriginal voices was beginning to be realised. The technical developments in film and camera technology and the introduction of more portable video cameras and tapes meant that filmmaking would become more democratised because of the decreasing costs of equipment and the elimination of chemical processing. Importantly, the introduction of synchronised sound recording made it
much easier to record the voices of those people previously silent. In *Ningla A-Na*, (1972) the voices of Indigenous Australians are clearly heard.
Chapter Two

The Moral Challenge: 1957

*Warburton Aborigines, (1957)*

**Introduction**

While the films discussed in the previous chapter, represented Indigenous Australians as ahistorical people set in a Stone Age past and expected to die out in the not too distant future, the Indigenous people themselves were encountering modernity in more frightening ways. In 1952 the Australian Government made an agreement with the British Government, to provide
a site in Central Australia, to test atomic weapons and fire atomic powered rockets.\textsuperscript{1} The
decision was made without reference to the Indigenous peoples who lived in the path of
rockets. Rather it was expected that they would move voluntarily to the nearby Warburton
reserve in Western Australia. In 1954, as part of the preparation for the rocket tests, a
weather station was established at Sladen Waters, (later known as Giles Meteorological
Station) near a well-known waterhole used by the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people.
When William Grayden, a Liberal Member of the Western Australian Parliament visited the
area in 1955, he found that the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people he had seen on an earlier
visit in 1953 were in a distressing state of malnutrition. The effects of a prolonged drought
were intensified by the construction of Giles weather station which he believed had denied
them proper access to the waterhole and as a result had greater difficulty in obtaining water
and food. Horrified by this state of affairs, upon his return to Perth, he established a
Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into the impact of the rocket tests on the Ngaanyatjarra
and Ngatatjara people. The report which was tabled in the Legislative Assembly on 12
December 1956, found that indeed the changes brought about by the atomic and rocket tests
and the imposition of the Giles Meteorological Station had drastically altered the fortunes of
the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara.\textsuperscript{2} The Select Committee members were appalled by the
state in which they found the Indigenous people of this isolated area. They observed that
many Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people were suffering from beri-beri, trachoma, yaws,
syphilis, dental problems, and pneumonia along with general malnutrition and deprivation.\textsuperscript{3}

In the Report, Grayden claimed that the land excised for the weapons testing had disrupted
the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara peoples’ ability to utilise the land in traditional ways by
restricting their access to sacred places and water holes; with the added effects of a prolonged
drought, their plight had become more severe. Any restriction to waterholes affected the
Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara in two ways. First they needed access to reliable water and
secondly, the wildlife they relied on for food would move away from the area in search of
water. Grayden makes it clear that he believed the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara were being
sent into exile.\textsuperscript{4} Moreover, he was concerned that the government would provide only for the
children who were to be separated from their parents in an institution to be established at

\textsuperscript{1} P. N. Grabosky, \textit{Wayward governance : illegality and its control in the public sector} (Canberra: Australian
Institute of Criminology, 1989), 236-7.
\textsuperscript{2} William Grayden, \textit{Adam and Atoms} (Perth: Frank Daniels Pty. Ltd., 1957), 100.
\textsuperscript{3} William Grayden, “Select Committee Appointed to Inquire Into Native Welfare Conditions Into the Laverton-
\textsuperscript{4} Grayden, \textit{Adam and Atoms}: 9.
Cosmo Newbury over 360 kilometres (200 miles) away.\textsuperscript{5} In his book, \textit{Adam and Atoms}, (1957), Grayden cites clauses from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, pointing to the numerous violations imposed upon the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatadjara peoples and he criticises the federal government’s decision to conduct the weapons testing on the Reserve and the consequent mismanagement of their welfare needs caused by the disruption by the imposition of the weapons testing program.\textsuperscript{6}

The \textit{Report} was tabled in the Legislative Assembly on 12 December 1956 and printed copies were distributed to “three major Western Australian newspapers.”\textsuperscript{7} At the time Grayden noted that: “except for a brief reference to it by the \textit{West Australian} on the 14\textsuperscript{th} December, 1956 the Press paid little attention to the report.”\textsuperscript{8} In parliament, Grayden kept lobbying for the state government to take proper responsibility for the welfare of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatadjara people.\textsuperscript{9} The issue only attracted interest in the mainstream media after the Communist newspaper, \textit{Tribune}, in Sydney, prepared an article on the \textit{Report}.

At that point, Rupert Murdoch, proprietor and young journalist on \textit{The News} (Adelaide), and \textit{The Sunday Times} (Perth) announced his intention to visit the area. His account claimed that he could not find any evidence to support the claims made by the Select Committee; in fact his headline: “Sick, starving natives – report is exaggerated”\textsuperscript{10} further undermined the Report and questioned the competency of its members. (Figure 13) In Perth, Stanley G. Middleton, West Australian Commissioner for Native Affairs, (1948 -1962) also refuted the \textit{Report}’s claims of neglect and sickness and said that: “The Select Committee’s Report is grossly exaggerated,”\textsuperscript{11} This comment sparked a flurry of claims and counter claims in the Western Australian press between Grayden and detractors of the \textit{Report}. Members of the Select committee felt that the Western Australia press was decidedly one-sided in their presentation of the \textit{Report}’s conclusions and recommendations.\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 47.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 48.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Rupert Murdoch, \textit{The News}, 1 February 1957.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Grayden, \textit{Adam and Atoms}: 53.
\end{itemize}
Emsged by these attacks, Gra\textsuperscript{den} decided to make a film about the conditions in which the Ngaanya ana and Ngatatjara people were living and took with him Pastor Doug Nicholls, well known Aboriginal activist from Victoria and opponent of atomic testing. Nicholls also

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**THE FACTS ON THE WEST AUSTRALIAN NATIVES**

Sick, starving natives — report is exaggeration

ALICE SPRINGS, Today: No aborigines in the Central Australian reserves are dying of thirst or starvation—or disease. The great nation-wide consternation for these people has not been necessary.

After several days and many hundreds of miles of travelling over this most remote of all country, and seeing at least two-thirds of its inhabitants, I say that these fine native people have never enjoyed better conditions.

White men’s homes have meant more water than ever. Missionaries and others give hitherto-unheard-of medical attention, and no-one is allowed to starve.

The wide-spread consternation and horror caused by a report of a committee of West Australian Parliamentarians, and further statements attributed to their spokesman, Mr. W. Gindele, MLA, can only result in a further set-back to the prompt appreciation of the very real problem of Australian aborigines. The report itself was not only hopelessly exaggerated, but the statements it were so careless in their handling of the facts that at some points the truth disappeared altogether.

**CASE WAS 10 YEARS OLD**

**NOT ONE REALLY SICK**

**CHECKED, RECHECKED**

**A SWIM TO REMEMBER**

**EYE DISEASE TREATED**

**MOTHERS DO NOT KILL BABIES**

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13: 'DI.epcto ch""mtocNpport 4e.chf&quU"l8lllWafiiCi'tan<WpidureaflTchimd.RdS'

itw&tdcl.r1rl.19533j,ylill 4el..TAeN s(. ,ll' 195?,p.3Sw4c:Na&MI

J,'fusefrf'lOftAwmlia=Jdqi/ CIUJild:sn&.w.<4«UU"IIIi.arp?iiD=123>
appeared in the film. In representing Indigenous Australians as a contemporary political issue rather than as a dying race, the film presented a moral challenge to mainstream white Australians.

The use of film as an evidentiary document was understood at its earliest conception. Although at the present time digital technology has caused many audiences to become wary about what they view on a film, the semiotic power of the visual still remains a potent drawcard that makes documentary film an important mode of persuasion and revelation; an important aspect for this film.

On their return from Warburton Reserve, Grayden, Lapham and Nicholls convened a public meeting in February in Perth at the Methodist Mission Hall. These meetings were held in an effort to circumvent the denials by the Western Australian government that there were sick and malnourished Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people on Reserve lands affected by the weapons testing programmes. The recent visit in February 1957 to the Reserve by J. J. Brady, the Minister for Native Welfare (Liberal MLA), maintained that Grayden’s account was exaggerated. Accompanying Brady’s inspection party were “officers of the Native Welfare Department. A medical and eye survey will be carried out at the same time by Dr. W. S. Davidson and Professor Ida Mann.” Two weeks later at the beginning of March 1957, Grayden’s and Nicholls’ already energetic public lecture schedule now included a screening of the film shot on their February trip to the Reserve.

**Warburton Aborigines, (1957)**

**Background**

William (Bill) Grayden was a mechanical engineer who served with the 2/16th Infantry Battalion in the Australian armed forces in the Middle East; Kokoda; and Borneo theatres in the Second World War. In comparison with the films discussed in Chapter One, Grayden’s film departs from the more conventional ethnographic representation of Indigenous

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13 S. E. Lapham, Labor, Member of the Western Australian Legislative Assembly (MLA), was appointed to the Select Committee to investigate the conditions at Warburton Ranges. He was one of the two Labor appointees; the other was J. J. Rhatigan. Other delegates included Stewart Bovell, representing the Liberal and Country League and E. P. Oldfield representing the Country and Democratic League.

14 It appears at this stage Grayden and Nicholls were not exhibiting the film as it was still being processed.

15 Grayden, *Adam and Atoms*: 83; Ida Mann, “Probable Origins of Trachoma in Australiasia,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation* 16(1957): 1184 & 86. In her survey taken in 1957 Mann found the incidence of trachoma to be “less severe” in desert areas such as Warburton because of the hot dry conditions when compared to the people she found suffering the disease further north in more tropical climes.

Australians because he was not an academic trying to locate the ‘authentic Aborigine’; he was acting as a politician and concerned citizen trying to draw attention to the deficiency in the government’s duty of care for these unfortunate people.

The film was selected for several reasons. First, it attracted wide publicity at the time and may have been the first documentary film about Indigenous Australians screened on the new medium of Australian television. Second, is that in capturing images of malnourished Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara peoples, it shifts the film genre from ethnographic to documentary and was designed to shock the audience. As one of the first advocacy films made in the interests of Indigenous Australians, it focused on the health conditions and welfare of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people of the Western Desert in Western Australia and the duty of care the federal government owed them for disrupting their habitat with the rocket and atomic testing programmes.\(^{17}\)

The films in Chapter One represent Indigenous Australians as a separate population from white Australians. Their world, one that was rapidly diminishing, can passively be accepted as quietly passing away by white Australians. Indigenous culture was perceived as being unresponsive to the national narrative which looked forward in a positivist mode to technological and social progress rather than to the distant Stone Age past. By contrast, the images in Grayden’s film shocks the audience by showing how Indigenous Australians were not dying out peacefully but were being forced into starvation by an ambivalent government under circumstances that were cruel, horrific and inhumane.

The film raised awareness of Indigenous people and their continued occupation of the vast inland tracts of the continent thought to be uninhabited due to the perceived desolation. To white Australians this desert land had little prospect of sustaining life unaided. The perception of desolation meant that the land could be utilised for use as a testing site for rocket missiles and atomic bombs as well as mining because nobody could or would want live in such a place. The weapons tests were to be conducted in the remote desert region of Maralinga in South Australia and the pathway of the test zone extended across a large area of Western Australia to the north-west coast, between Broome and Port Hedland. (Figure 14) That the interior of Australia could be used for such tests was predicated on the notion that it was a vast and empty space. The embeddedness of ideas about the Indigenous population dying out, had been the way in which Indigenous Australians were represented in the earlier

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 2.
Figure 14 Although dated 1964, this map indicates the areas affected by the Missile and atomic testing which began in the mid-1950s. Source: Davenport, 2005

films meant that the interior desert regions were psychologically conceived as empty and therefore an ideal place to conduct atomic and rocket weapons tests.

**Funding**

The film was self-funded by Grayden because he felt so strongly about the conditions in which he found the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people.

**The Film**

The version of the film supplied by AIATSIS, is called *Warburton Aborigines* and is catalogued Grayden _ W001 DAC00035-1. It is a silent colour 16mm film of 00:18:30 minutes duration with no inter-titles.
The film opens with views of a desolate encampment and footage of a blind woman sitting on the ground in filthy well-worn European clothes obviously uncomfortable with the attention of the camera. There is a shot of some wurleys (traditional bark shelters) and a pan to rotten carcasses of cattle and birds that emphasise the severity of the drought. Grayden is shown drinking from a well.

Previously, in parliament question time on 26 September 1956, Grayden had commented that the government was taking Indigenous people away from their country due to their land being required to conduct the weapons testing programmes and were being "virtually dumped on the rubbish tips of Laverton and other mining towns in that area. The footage taken of these scenes on his return visit in 1957 emphasises Grayden’s ability to find images that underscored the evidence that the Select Committee found on their trip in late 1956 and the findings included in their Report.

The footage then cuts to Warburton Mission where Indigenous families are dressed in clean and tidy European style clothes. A group of about twenty children play in the yard and then scenes of a white man (presumably the Mission manager, Will Wade) with children milking goats; drinking the milk out of tin cups and gardening. The camera cuts to a group of people of various ages sitting on the ground in the Mission yard. One young women shows off her gold wedding band and then a woman with her child appears showing signs of malnutrition having presumably just arrived at the mission. They provide a vivid contrast to the people viewed previously. There is a scene of about twenty or more people lining up at the Mission’s tiny hospital and it looks like they have a long wait. Many are sitting in the direct sun and looking uncomfortable due to the hot conditions. The footage then takes in scenes of more sick mothers and babies, one with a baby with severe burns on its thigh, which the Report describes as being caused by the baby rolling onto a campfire.

Grayden and his colleagues leave the Mission in a truck. They go to an airstrip where there is a waterhole implying they need to get supplies independently of the Mission. The camera cuts to Doug Nicholls talking to a group of people of various ages and condition. They include a blind man with a heavily bandaged foot which is shaped like an elephant foot to help him to walk. The bandage is removed and we see that the man has lost his foot at the ankle.

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18 Ibid., 9.
Grayden and his colleagues travel by truck to Giles Meteorological Station where they come across a group of Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people sitting under trees. Doug Nicholls is seen crouching talking to some of the men. The camera cuts to a line of children arranged in profile so that their distended stomachs are shown. Two children with Doug Nicholls drink from a waterhole and they are arranged in front of the camera in profile to show their distended stomachs; (Figure 15) more shots of Nicholls with similar children. Wide view shots are taken of children that emphasise their malnourishment. Doug Nicholls feeds a child porridge. Another child is shown grinding seed for seed cakes but chooses to gather the uncooked mixture and eats it straight from the grinding stone. Another child is shown eating raw kangaroo that is swarmed with flies. Another child sits under a tree and looks to the camera, its face a mass of flies. (Figure 16) The still photograph of this child was used frequently in pamphlets issued by the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League (VAAL) and at the present time is still strongly associated with the inequality experienced by Indigenous Australians.20

Nicholls helps a mother and her child into the back of a truck presumably to take them back to the Mission. The camera then pans to a mother with suckling child eating porridge out of a tin can using a stick to transfer the mixture to her mouth. The film concludes with the find of a human skeleton which is moved and buried in a shallow grave. In Grayden’s account, *Adam and Atoms*, (1957) he claims that the corpse is that of a man in his twenties and that

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according the Indigenous people accompanying him, the young man died of thirst at a location of about seventy-three miles north of the Warburton Mission at about “the same time as Mr Murdoch visited the Warburton Mission and sent back his dispatches claiming that “No aborigines in the Central Australian reserves are dying of thirst or starvation – or disease”.” Grayden was relentless in his quest to ensure that the reliability of the Select Committee’s report was asserted and that the neglected welfare of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara was properly recognised.

Reception

The film provoked anger and shock, firstly to those who went with Grayden to film the evidence. After the two week expedition, a traumatised Doug Nicholls declared:

my people are starving…everywhere we went they pleaded for food and water; it is terrible…I wish I had not gone to the Warburton Ranges. I wish I hadn’t seen the pitiable squalor, the sights of my people starving – the most shocking sights I have ever seen. Never, never can I forget.21

This comment is made more significant because Nicholls was no stranger to poverty and discrimination. He was born on the Cumeroogunja Mission in New South Wales in 1906. His father was a farm labourer and his mother was a domestic servant. Nicholls himself was trained as a farm hand and worked as a tar boy with a shearing team before he began his career as an Australian Rules footballer. His sister was forcibly removed by authorities and sent to Cootamundra Girls Home. In Chapter Four, the analysis of Lousy Little Sixpence, (1983) will explain in greater detail the privations experienced by Indigenous people on government reserves and highlight the significance of the Stolen Generations.

21 Ibid., 150.
It showed Aborigine children too weak to brush flies from their faces; the hunch of an Aborigine who had died of thirst; and others in various stages of emaciation and starvation.

Tasmanian timber industry crisis

HOBART: "Seventeen Tasmanian Commonwealth Government-owned mills have been closed down in six months: 26 more have had their production reduced and 300 or more timber workers are unemployed.

Mr. Byron Trlmlt, secretary of the Tasmanian Timber Workers Union, took the line that "fully supports the demand for greater allocation of Federal money for housing."

"A modern house, with furniture, averages 15,000 super-feet if liber and home building, and although with the paper industry, it is the foremost factor in the Tasmanian timber trade."

Mr. Trlmlt said that the union "fully supports the demand for greater allocation of Federal money for housing."

"Mr. W. Onus, president of the Victorian Aborigines Protection League and Mr. H. S. Groves, president of the Aborigines-Australian Fellowship, attacked the Pastoral Government for its "inhuman treatment" of the Aborigines."

If it continued the Aborigines would be driven to fill the gap left in the market by the reduction of the benefit.

He called for a ban on Malayan timber.

Large mainland firms have a big grip on Tasmania and of the Ildefonse sawmills, at least four and several others were closed by Tasmanian Board Mills, a company in which Holyman of AFA is a big shareholder.

Mr. Trlmlt said that defeat of the Menzies Government was the main essential to solving these problems.

Petition launched on Aborigines

SYDNEY: There were cries of disgust and horror and people openly wept when a film showing the plight of Aborigines was screened in the Town Hall on Monday.

The film was made by Pastor Douglas Nicholls, of Victoria, on a recent tour of the Warburton Ranges in Western Australia.

The screening was a feature of a meeting called by the Aborigines Australian Fellowship to protest against the ill-treatment of the Aborigines. Pastor Nicholls was chairman.

The meeting decided to seek a petition for a referendum to make Aborigine Affairs a Commonwealth Government concern. Several Petition appeal

Mr. Leslie Hayken (Labor), MHR for Parkes, appealed for the maximum number of signatures and promised to submit the petition to Parliament.

Dr. I. Parkes E.114 -ALP for the people.

Mr. W. Onus, president of the Victorian Aborigines Protection League and Mr. H. S. Groves, president of the Aborigines-Australian Fellowship, attacked the Pastoral Government for its "inhuman treatment" of the Aborigines."

If it continued the Aborigines would be driven to fill the gap left in the market by the reduction of the benefit.

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Mr. Trlmlt said that defeat of the Menzies Government was the main essential to solving these problems.

Secondly, the images that the Grayden film produced shocked the domestic audience into
questioning the role of state and federal governments over the treatment of Indigenous peoples everywhere in Australia. Unlike the ethnographic films discussed in Chapter One, this film challenged the established visual images of Indigenous people created by those films. The earlier films had portrayed Indigenous people as remnants of a dying race. Rather, *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957) challenged viewers to abandon this notion. The film portrayed Indigenous Australians as living in the modern world because their health and well-being was being threatened by the rocket and atomic testing programmes. The Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people continued to be portrayed as dying out however the film showed evidence that it was not a peaceful process but one that was full of suffering and distress. The outrage the film provoked in the Australian public is evidence that white Australians felt the government, especially the federal government, had been negligent in its duty of care for the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara peoples. (Figure 17)

Indigenous Rights organisations such as the ‘Save the Aborigines’ committee, repeatedly screened the film at specially convened meetings, in order to gain wider popular support for Indigenous Rights. An unnamed journalist from the Hobart *Mercury* who had viewed the film in a public hall in the Melbourne suburb of Bayswater commented:

> You can’t see it without realising the horror of it…There was a child…so weak that he could not brush from his face the flies that were crawling over it in their thousands. If I hadn’t seen it I wouldn’t have believed it…the men and the women with arms and legs so thin that you could see not just the bone structure but the bones. I have seen nothing more shocking, nothing more damning, than this film.23

*Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), was screened by Indigenous associations such as FCAATSI within a month of its production in the field. After being picked up by television broadcaster GTV Nine in Melbourne, the film was screened to a much wider audience.

The film appeared in several different formats. Initially the film was recorded by Grayden using a Bell and Howell hand held 16mm camera, and the narration was read by either

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Grayden or Nicholls at church and community screenings and then later a separate sound narration was created for its cinema and television release.  

However, as Tom Gallacher, a film editor on the Melbourne based Focus program, initially responsible for screening the film on GTV Channel 9, has pointed out:

> The transformation to a black and white print seemed to enhance the quality of the image. I edited the film to the length requirements of the Focus programme and George Odgers wrote the commentary. I believe that Tom Miller did the voiceover.

The colour film had to be transferred to a black and white print copy film for the purposes of using the footage on broadcast television. However, it was most likely that it was screened in colour at the numerous church and civil rights meetings if a colour projector were available. Unfortunately no records confirming this probability appear to exist. Nor are there records to estimate the numbers of people who attended the film screenings as well as the number of people who watched the film on television. Although at one venue, Bayswater a Melbourne suburb, a figure of 150 audience members is given by a reporter from the Hobart Mercury.

In Melbourne, Stan Davey, a member of Federal Council of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), arranged to have the silent colour film televised on GTV Channel 9 in Melbourne under the title Manslaughter, (1957). However film editor/journalist, Tom Gallacher at GTV Channel 9 Melbourne, recalls it was Doug Nicholls who arrived at the television station with the raw film footage. After the film was reprocessed and narration added it was also screened to GTV Channel 9 audiences in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and Adelaide under the title, Manslaughter, (1957). In Perth, the film was screened under the title Their Darkest Hour, (1957). Such was the power of the images that concerned and outraged white Australians wrote directly to the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies relating how shameful it was that such a situation could be allowed to occur in such a prosperous country as Australia. In the letters responding to these angry accusations, the Prime Minister’s Department explained that the federal government did not have any

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26 Ibid.,  
27 Ibid.,  
29 Horner, Seeking Racial Justice: 25. The film is also known as Their Darkest Hour when it was shown in a cinema in Perth. At AIATSIS it is catalogued as Warburton Aborigines – Grayden – W001 DAC00035-1  
30 Gallacher.  
responsibility to the welfare of Indigenous people; rather it was the responsibility of the state
governments.

The viewers of the film criticised the Australian government, the state governments of South
Australia and Western Australia as well as the British government, about the treatment of
those Aboriginal peoples they believed were affected by atomic testing. The graphic
images of suffering provided evidence of human rights violations and punctured the positivist
narrative that had been carefully crafted by the Australian government for the domestic and
international stage. Until then the Australian government had bathed in the glow of public
opinion associated with the prestige that technological advancement and working with
eminent British nuclear scientists had afforded them. After the film was screened on
television and in church and public halls, the Australian government was widely criticised by
many humanitarians, Aboriginal rights campaigners and members of the general public for
their neglect and indifference of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara peoples affected by the
rocket testing on the Central Reserves.

For domestic audiences, the film provided a shocking truth about the reality of Indigenous
lives and galvanised support for Indigenous civil and land rights issues. The shocking images
contained in the film underlined for many Australians the realisation that the ability of the
Australian government to shift the responsibility for the welfare of Indigenous Australians
when it suited, challenged their belief in its integrity. The excision of Reserve lands and the
removal of Indigenous people from their country, the subsequent neglect of the communities
in the wake of the disruptions caused by the weapons testing programmes overshadowed the
prestige of contributing to technological and scientific advances.

Internationally, in 1957, the Australian government was criticised for its refusal to ratify the
International Labour Organisations Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations which
encouraged governments to ensure equal opportunity for indigenous peoples.

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32 Jennifer Clark, *Aborigines and Activism: Race and the Coming of the Sixties to Australia* (Perth: University
of Western Australia Press, 2008), 74-5.
34 Clark, *Aborigines and Activism*, 74-5.
recalcitrant attitude and procrastination to effectively address Indigenous issues made interactions at international forums increasingly embarrassing for the government.\textsuperscript{35}

Increasingly, Indigenous rights activists in Australia used international forums such as the United Nations (UN) and the Commonwealth Heads of Government to highlight the Human Rights violations occurring in relation to Indigenous Australians. The film put into sharp relief the necessity to amend sections the Constitution that discriminated against Indigenous Australians.\textsuperscript{36}

Previously equal rights activists including Jessie Street, the Australian representative for London’s Anti-Slavery Society, and Shirley Andrews, campaigner for Aboriginal Protection Society at the United Nations (UN) had been examining Australia’s Constitution to determine the references to racially discriminatory sections. The deflections given by the government over which level of government was responsible for the welfare of Indigenous Australians helped to focus the efforts of the campaigners to calling for amendments to the Constitution. Menzies’ announcement in 1952 to host the weapons tests in the Australian desert came from a federal level; however the state governments were responsible for the Indigenous communities affected by the excision of Reserve lands required to carry out the tests. \textit{Warburton Aborigines}, (1957), clearly demonstrated that many Indigenous Australians were adversely affected by the tests. As John J. Brady, the Western Australian Minister for Native Affairs explained on 21 December 1956,\textsuperscript{37} in response to Grayden’s petition to provide increased funding to alleviate the suffering of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people, he hoped that: “the Commonwealth government will realise it has an obligation, as a Commonwealth and national Government, to alleviate the unfortunate position in which these people find themselves.”\textsuperscript{38}

The film demonstrated to many Australians the legislative anomalies concerning the administration of Indigenous Australians. Activist groups such as Save the Aborigines led by Anna Vroland worked with Shirley Andrews to organise public meetings where the film was screened and where “a series of resolutions that encompassed a demand for full human rights

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{36} Chesterman, \textit{Civil Rights}: 42-3.
\textsuperscript{37} This response was given in parliament before Brady visited the Warburton – Laverton area with the medical specialists and before the press sensationalised the results of the \textit{Report}.
\textsuperscript{38} Grayden, \textit{Adam and Atoms}: 52.
[to] be guaranteed [to] the remaining Aboriginal tribes and a referendum to ensure that the native people of Australia become a Commonwealth responsibility." Arguably, the film played an important role in winning support to run a campaign calling for a referendum to change sections of the Constitution that were racially discriminatory. The reception of the film contributed to the formation of the first nation-wide Indigenous rights organisation which became the Federal Council for Australian Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI).

The tangled web of restrictions imposed on Australia’s Indigenous people by different state governments and by the federal government created many anomalies about their legal status. This placed the federal government in a dilemma. Along with civil rights organisations, it came to the realisation that in an international forum such as the Commonwealth of Nations and the United Nations (UN) that: “it is the nation-state that is held responsible for the treatment of Indigenous people,” not the state governments. By leaving the state governments to deal with Indigenous issues, it was forfeiting its international reputation. This increasingly anomalous situation, argues John Chesterman, in conjunction with increasingly demanding domestic activism stimulated by the widespread screening of the film, prodded the federal government to take legislative action over Indigenous affairs. In this context, Warburton Aborigines, (1957) not only drew attention to the failure of the federal government to take responsibility for Australia’s Indigenous people but provided ammunition for activists to draw attention to human rights violations. In this context, Warburton Aborigines, (1957), can be seen as a direct link to the campaign in the next decade to amend the Australian Constitution to ensure the civil equality of Indigenous Australians.

As a result of the publicity generated by the film, high profile activists such as Jessie Street, and Shirley Andrews, were able to combine their efforts with those of the Council for Aboriginal Rights and Save the Aborigines to form a federal body from the disparate state Indigenous Rights associations which was named the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). Grayden’s film also positioned the federal government’s obligation to a duty of care of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara peoples.

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39 Attwood, Rights for Aborigines: 150.
40 Chesterman, Civil Rights: 40.
42 Ibid., 54.
43 Attwood, Rights for Aborigines: 149.
as a moral issue and challenged its method of management of Australia’s Indigenous people. The film also enabled the issue to be raised at the UN Indigenous Peoples’ Forum over the next decade and at the Commonwealth Heads of Government assemblies. Most importantly the issue of Indigenous rights had been transmitted into the homes of white suburban Australians.44

Another important aspect of the film lies in how it was made and funded. It was the first documentary film about Indigenous people that was made and funded by a politician rather than an academic or a filmmaker like Charles Mountford who relied on institutional support. It is perhaps for this reason that it breaks the long standing practice of representing Indigenous people as culturally fossilised subjects. This is a film about political advocacy and its message was clearly to provide evidence of these abuses.

In contemporary documentary narrations of the historical treatment of Indigenous Australians, sections of this film have been used in a number of more recently produced films. Indigenous filmmakers such as Rachael Perkins (First Australians, 2008), Frances Peters-Little (Vote Yes for Aborigines, 2008), and others like Katherine Aigner (Australian Atomic Confessions, 2004) have used excerpts from the film to underline the historical experiences of Indigenous people in modern Australia.

However, some anthropologists, such as Peter Sutton suggest that:

> It is noticeable that those living in the communities with the worst conditions can have a much greater tolerance of those conditions than visitors from happier locations or those who have come from different cultural backgrounds. Part of the problem, from an outsider’s point of view, can be that many insiders either already were, or have become, relatively unshockable.45

These views also reflect the conclusions drawn by the Berndts at the time the film was made.46 Perhaps for some viewers of this film, scenes of people in such dreadful conditions were the result of the sensitised reactions of outsiders unused to the extreme fortunes of life in the Australian desert. Even so, the film made many more Australians sympathetic to Indigenous issues. After viewing the film, Labor politicians Gordon Bryant and Kim Beazley Snr, “kept the issue of constitutional change before the parliament” ensuring a constant

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44 Clark, Aborigines and Activism: 74-5.
reminder to the Menzies Liberal government of the action that needed to be undertaken.47 Frances Peters-Little has observed that the new technology of television, introduced to Australia only the year before the making of Grayden’s film, made Indigenous peoples more visible to urban Australians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.48 As for the people now living in the Warburton – Laverton Ranges area, the use and abuse of visual images of their family members on the film have been a source of shame and discomfort because of the way their families have been represented – their lives were taken out of context and have since operated to confine and stereotype their lives due to the strong association of the film images with the area.49

While Warburton Aborigines, (1957) did not allow the voice of Indigenous Australians to be heard, due to technical limitations, the film served as a catalyst for the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and the Land Rights movements of the early 1970s. Above all it foregrounded the changes that were to come in the way Indigenous Australians were represented on documentary film. It could be argued that the film began the challenge that would follow in the 1960s and radically change the ways in which Indigenous Australians were represented on documentary films.

**From Ethnography to Documentary**

Unlike the films presented in Chapter One, Warburton Aborigines, (1957), makes a significant shift in the way in which it focuses on the lives of Indigenous Australians. Rather than considering the methods used to produce material artefacts such as spears, boomerangs, pitchis, shields, and bark paintings, their supposed unique physiology or contrasting their ‘primitive’ lifestyles with white Australians, Warburton Aborigines, (1957) is concerned with the contemporary situation of Indigenous Australians. The shift from occupying a position of scientific curiosity and ethnographic discussion to one of political and social consciousness about the effects of Western occupation of the land appears to begin in Australia with this film.

The film firmly locates Indigenous Australians within the discourses of humanitarianism and social justice in way that the films discussed in Chapter One did not. It challenges the portrayal of Indigenous Australians as Rousseau’s noble savages, living at the brink of

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47 Attwood and Markus, 25.
49 McGrath and Brooks, “Their Darkest Hour,” 134-5.
extinction or living in an idyllic parallel world far removed from contemporary Australian life. The reality of the traumatic effects of cultural contact with white Australians and land dispossession were mindfuly set aside in the films discussed in Chapter One, although at points the results of this intrusion is discernible. For example, Spencer concentrated on filming ceremonies and ignored examining the effects on the local Indigenous community by the intrusion of the pastoral industry; the research Cleland and his colleagues was based on was concerned with addressing the rising ‘half-caste’ population and this is portrayed by scenes showing Cleland collecting blood; Mountford paid the Yolgnu people to reconstruct material objects they had largely abandoned and his team of scientists were disappointed with how inauthentic the Yolgnu were with regards to their dress and mannerisms; and finally Dunlop had to retrieve a family from the Mission at Warburton to re-enact the processes of Pintupi daily life with families from the Ngadjadjarra and Mandjindjdjarra dialect groups.

By contrast, Warburton Aborigines, (1957), is concerned with the very issues the other films try to ignore. The film could be categorised in Barnouw’s terms as a reportage film, a documentary film that gives explicit coverage of an incident. For this reason, Warburton Aborigines, (1957), fits into the main genre of documentary film rather than the sub-genre of ethnographic films, a definition that was more closely aligned to the films discussed in Chapter One. The film dramatically altered the public perception of the government’s care and responsibility for Indigenous Australians. The film elicited an enraged response from many constituents and perhaps and coalesced the pro-Aboriginal rights movement in Australia.

**Conclusion**

The contrast between Warburton Aborigines, (1957) and the films examined in Chapter One is that Warburton Aborigines, (1957), is one of the first widely screened films to signal a shift from representing Indigenous Australians in an ethnographic present to representing them in the political present.

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50 May, "The Last Frontier?," 179.
51 Ian Dunlop, Personal Communication, 16 June 2010.
Chapter Three

The Political Challenge, 1972

*Ningla A-Na, (1972)*

**Introduction**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Aboriginal rights became a prominent political issue in the late 1950s, more so by 1972. The engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians had been growing steadily since *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957); and perhaps because of it many white Australians had joined Aboriginal activists groups during the 1960s.

Indigenous rights groups such as FCAATSI, placed human rights at the core of their political agenda and from 1959, actively campaigned for a referendum to remove the, racially
discriminatory Section 51 (xxvi) and Section 127 from the Australian Constitution.1 After the success of the 1967 Referendum to change the Constitution a new generation of Aboriginal activists emerged to campaign for Aboriginal land rights. Many of them were university educated and urban based. The film, Ningla A-Na, (1972), is a product of this time and represents Indigenous Australians as urban with politically sophisticated voices demanding recognition of Land Rights across Australia.

Background

The failure of the 1967 Referendum to produce any immediate or practical changes for many Indigenous Australians helped to fuel the anger of a new generation of Indigenous rights activists. Up to this time, a courteous and conservative profile of Aboriginal rights activists had been constructed by individuals such as Faith Bandler, Doug Nicholls and Pearl Gibbs in ways that reflected white middle class social conventions of the time. However, Bandler and the members of FCAATSI “began to wonder if, after all of our efforts, Aborigines on reserves could even be aware that any change had taken place.”2 Similarly, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) who had also played a significant role in the Referendum campaign stated that the massive ‘Yes” vote had brought no benefits to Aborigines “though it eased the guilty conscious of white Australians in this country and overseas.”3 Indigenous activist, Kevin Gilbert commented: “the fact that, five years later, the federal government had still not even begun to tackle the ‘Aboriginal problem’ and had, indeed, spent a lot of time and energy trying to deny, ignore or white-wash the realities of it shows how strong white racist resistance to black aspirations in the Liberal-Country Party coalition was.”4

By 1972, a younger more angry and politically assertive group of Aborigines began to emerge more aggressively onto the public stage. They brought with them more radical ways of protesting, heavily influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the US, about the inequalities experienced by Indigenous Australians. One of their most provocative actions was to establish the Aboriginal tent embassy on the lawns in front of Parliament House in Canberra, the nation’s political capital.

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1 These Sections read: “Section 51 (xxvi): ‘The Parliament shall subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect of: . . . The people of any race, other than the aboriginal race in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws.’ This was to be amended by deleting the words italicised above. Section 127 stated: In reckoning the numbers of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives shall not be counted.” Attwood, Rights for Aborigines: 162.
4 Kevin Gilbert, Because a White Man'll Never Do It, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994), 18.
The film *Ningla A Na*, (1972), records the events some six months after the initial protest began on 26 January 1972, Australia Day. The celebration of Australia Day has long been a much contested and resented public holiday for many Indigenous Australians. The holiday marks the day of British colonisation when Captain Arthur Philip, with more than 700 convicts and 100 marines and sailors, landed at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. Since that time Indigenous Australians considered that they had been dispossessed of their lands.

In contrast to the films analysed in the previous chapters, in this film the voices of Indigenous people are heard for the first time synchronised with the images on the film. By the time *Ningla A-Na*, (1972), was completed, the development of synchronised sound recording strips on film had been well advanced and in this film the viewer hears the strident voices of the activists speaking directly to the camera. For this reason alone, *Ningla A-Na*, (1972), could be considered as representing a dramatic shift in the discourse about Indigenous Australians. In a similar fashion to the way the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara were portrayed in *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), this film now added the power of their voices and it was becoming more apparent that Indigenous Australians could no longer be consigned to the apolitical ethnographic present existing in some untouched primal state of cultural stasis. By the time *Ningla A-Na*, (1972), was completed, they were now firmly placed in the political present.

The flash point for the establishment of the Tent Embassy came after the McMahon Liberal Coalition Government announced it would renege on its promise to protect Aboriginal Reserve lands for ceremonial, religious and recreational use. However they would be allowed to lease the land from the government for “economic and social purposes.”5 The Prime Minister’s Australia Day Speech (1972) proclaimed: “there would be no change to land legislation in order to recognise an Indigenous right to land based on prior and continuing occupation.”6 The government acknowledged “the deep affinity of the Aboriginal people to the land”7 but that: “under Northern Territory legislation which had come into operation at the end of 1970, Aboriginal people would be encouraged to apply for leases [on their traditional land] which would be considered for economic or social purposes.”8 This announcement was highly offensive to the Indigenous population.

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As demonstrated in *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), the federal government’s ability to change the purpose of Aboriginal Reserve land use, had been destructive to the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people. The reality of the government’s actions were the shocking scenes recorded by Grayden that showed the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people trying to cope with the changing ways in which the land was being utilised by the government and as a result, restriction from their traditional land caused severe hardship. Similarly, the promise of mining to provide national wealth meant that locations such as the Gove Peninsula in the Arnhem Land Reserve were under threat from mining development. As a result of this threat to their land, the clans of the Yolgnu language group famously presented a bark petition to the government in 1963. The Australia Day announcement by the McMahon government, underscored the transient character of Reserves and Indigenous Australians increasingly demanded more permanent recognition of their right to occupy traditional land sites without the fear of removal. Additionally, the very suggestion that Indigenous communities had the opportunity to lease their traditional land, in effect pay to use it, added further insult. Together with the failure of the Referendum helped fuel the fire of protest in Australian Day in 1972.

The insensitive timing of the announcement added a feeling of despair to an already demoralised Indigenous population. The lack of significant change after the high hopes held for the Referendum, the still unresolved matter of traditional land for the Gurindji, and the failed Gove land rights case for the Yolgnu people, worked to reinforce January 26 “as a day of defeat on their calendar.”9 It was at this point that a group of Aboriginal men from Redfern, versed in the ideas promoted by African-American Black Power movement, drove to Canberra to establish the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns outside Parliament House in Canberra.10

With a beach umbrella and a piece of plastic ground cover, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorey, Michael Anderson and Bert Williams erected the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on 26 January 1972. Later, as more protesters assembled at the site, they pitched a tent to replace the beach umbrella and put up a sign, ‘Aboriginal Embassy’. The tent struck an incongruous note against the manicured lawns and stately structure of Parliament House but “drew on such deep history and contemporary sensibilities that [the protest] was far from spontaneous.”11

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9 Ibid., 273-4.
11 Clark, *Aborigines and Activism*: 238.
The originality of the protest worked on a number of different levels to send a message to the government and the people of Australia. The image created by the juxtaposition of the tent, a symbol of nomadism, temporality, makeshift accommodation and poverty,\(^\text{12}\) was set against the imperial whiteness and regularity and permanent structure of Parliament House, a symbol of power, entrenchment and authority. This image served to illustrate the disparity between the realities of Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians in the areas of housing, health, and political power.\(^\text{13}\)

Sean Scalmer has defined such public protests as a ‘political gimmick’ that presents the public with a novel piece of theatrical political performance.\(^\text{14}\) Aboriginal activist and historian, Gary Foley commented that the form and the audacity of the protest “captured the imagination of not just Indigenous Australia.”\(^\text{15}\) Over the weeks and months (9 months in total) that the protesters occupied the front lawn of Parliament House, the ‘Embassy’ expanded with growing support and widespread media coverage.\(^\text{16}\) It had moved well beyond the ‘political gimmick’. Moreover, the public’s reaction to the embassy and the government’s inability to remove the protesters revealed a humorous side. An ‘Embassy office’ was established and someone installed a letterbox out the front. Two days later the PMG (Post Master General) began delivering mail.\(^\text{17}\) As the ‘Embassy’ continued to gather more support “Tour bus operators...began bringing busloads of tourists to see the Aboriginal ‘Embassy’ on their way to Parliament House” and “Koori activists would solicit donations and distribute educational literature about their cause.”\(^\text{18}\) Ningla A-Na, (1972) was filmed during the last weeks of the tent embassy.

Italian born political activist and filmmaker, Alessandro Cavadini arrived in Australia in 1969 where he lived and worked until the early 1980s as a journalist for Nuovo Paese (an Italian newspaper in Sydney) and was a member of the board of the Sydney Filmmakers Cooperative and on the editorial board of Filmnews. It was while he was making a film about Sydney’s political underground that Cavadini became aware of Aboriginal activists Gary


\(^\text{13}\) Robinson, “The Aboriginal Embassy,” 51.

\(^\text{14}\) Sean Scalmer, Dissent events: protest, the media, and the political gimmick in Australia (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002), 7.


\(^\text{17}\) Foley, "Black Power in Redfern 1968 - 1972".

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid.
Foley and Paul Coe in Sydney’s Redfern district which was the centre of Aboriginal activism in Sydney. Cavadini quickly understood the significance of making a film about the tent embassy protest because “after his first meeting with the Aboriginal spokesperson,” he “realised that a social revolution was taking place and that political ideology was only a minor part of the movement.”

In an interview recorded at the U-matic to YouTube symposium in held in Melbourne in June 2010, Cavadini recalls:

I followed this group of young Aboriginal people, all the programs they were setting up, the breakfast program, a medical center, legal services, The National Black Theatre. You know there was an incredible energy that was sweeping basically all of Australia behind the land rights movement, and I recorded that moment in a film called Ningla-A-Na (Hungry for Our Land).

As an ‘outsider’ to the debates about Indigenous issues, Cavadini’s presence as an outsider and filmmaker may have been seen less as threat by many of the Indigenous activists with who he was interacting. However, his quick understanding that Indigenous Australians were experiencing oppression, both politically and socially and as a minority group, were more likely to live conditions of poverty, meant that the Redfern activists let him access their circle. As well as the immediate issues about land rights, Cavadini also “wanted to show the[ir] efforts to develop a new black consciousness that related to urban conditions, [which] also regenerated strong tribal and community traditions.” This impulse is reflected in the scenes shot of the medical and breakfast programs, the discussion with a group of feminists and the footage at the end of the film about the importance of the beginnings of the Black Theatre in Redfern.

It was during the time Cavadini was shooting the film in Redfern that he met Carolyn Strachan. Disappointed with the absence of Aboriginal content in the History programme at the University of New South Wales at that time, Strachan left university because as she recalled in an interview recorded at the the U-matic to YouTube symposium held in Melbourne in June 2010:

At the same time, there was a film being made in Redfern, and I was living there. The film was Ningla-A-Na, which was redressing exactly what I had been longing for throughout my whole childhood. I dropped Honours and joined the film, determined to not only study history but to

19 Cowan, "Nomadic Resistance: Tent Embassies and Collapsible Architecture Illegal architecture and protest”.
21 Foley, ”Black Power in Redfern 1968 - 1972”.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
make history, to record history, including especially an Aboriginal history that was sadly missing.
So that’s how we began our journey as filmmakers.24

Funding
Alessandro Cavadini and cinematographer Ian Stocks, worked on a very low budget, mindful that the protest had been going on for nearly six months. They understood that the protest was threatened with imminent removal and the opportunity to make the film would soon disappear. As a result, they started to make the film before they had any funding in place and as a result, the film was largely funded by private donations.25

The Film
*Ningla A-Na* (Hungry for Land), (1972), is shot on black and white 16mm film stock runs for 01:12:00 (72) minutes. From the way the film is shot with sequences of odd jerky camera movements, it appears that Cavadini was using a hand held 16 mm camera reflecting trends in film cameras becoming smaller and more portable. It appears that Strachan recorded the sound but it is unclear what type of sound equipment was employed. Music is employed intermittently in the film. When the protest marchers walk over Commonwealth Bridge in Canberra and when the Black Theatre segment is shown, some traditional didjeridoo and clapstick music is used. At the end of the film, music by Northern Territory songwriter Gloria Fletcher is used over the scene where an Aboriginal woman is making a pot on a potter’s wheel creating a calming end to the film. There are two versions of the film and the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) hold both versions in its collection. Listed as collection item 35228 (Short version) 00:45:00, this version was produced for distribution to educational institutions; high school and university levels. The longer version, listed as collection item 606447 (Longer version) 01:10:00, is held for archive purposes.26 The version selected for this analysis is the longer version, and was purchased in DVD format from the distributor, Smart Street Films, Sydney. This has the extra footage of the Black Theatre included.

*Ningla A-Na*, (1972), opens with a series of inter-titles which included the text of the General Convention of the International Labour Organisation Article 107, and part 2 which states the issues about land and the Amnesty International Report 1965, which was critical of the

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26 There is a difference of two minutes between the NFSA long version and the one purchased from the distributor. I have not seen the long version held by the NFSA but have recorded the times according to the DVD jacket cover and the collection records of the NFSA.
Australian government in its dealings with its Indigenous population. These statements firmly position the film as having a human rights agenda. This approach was also used by Grayden in his Report to contextualise the serious violations that he and members of the Select Committee witnessed at Sladen Waters (Giles Meteorological Station) in 1956. The text is accompanied by a voice over narration by Max Hensser who reads the text to the audience in a sombre monotone.

Cavadini adopted a journalistic style for making this film; that is the events were filmed as they were happening in a similar style adopted by media journalists. Given his Italian background and education at Accademia di Belle Arti, Milano his familiarity with the cinéma vérité and observational styles reflects the trends in filmmaking at this time. He records events at the Embassy in Canberra and includes footage he took of the Sydney Moratorium March held on 14 July, 1972, as well as the running of the Sydney Aboriginal Legal and Health Services, connecting the events and activities of Indigenous welfare and health workers to the bigger picture of the Embassy protests. In taking this approach, Cavadini portrays the Embassy protest as a unifying event. He shows recognition that the ‘smaller’ stories that are happening every day, services such as the breakfast programme in Alexandria serves as an example of the ongoing achievements made by Indigenous Australians. Representing Indigenous Australians in this way was a departure from the films discussed earlier and unlike them, this film places urban Indigenous groups in the spotlight, actively engaged in political dialogue and organising their own social welfare.

Like the scenes chosen in Warburton Aborigines, (1957), in Ningla A Na, (1972), Cavadini has used footage to elicit an emotional response in the audience to underline that the protest has a strong popular base of support. In classic documentary style described by documentary theorist, Bill Nichols, he seeks to place the predicament of Indigenous rights activists as a social and political issue. The voice over narration is used to state the reason that provoked the protest; Prime Minister William McMahon’s Australia Day speech that stated that mining exploration would continue on Reserve lands previously set aside for the use of Indigenous people. In the film, the narrator, Max Hensser tells the viewer that in response to the Prime Minister’s statement, four young Indigenous men from Redfern, an inner city suburb of Sydney, have set up an Aboriginal tent embassy on the lawns of parliament house in Canberra. Cavadini has no footage of this part of the protest but uses footage he took in the

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27 Cavadini, "Screening the Past Publications".
week he worked on the film in July of a large group of protesters walking over Commonwealth Bridge towards Parliament House with voice-over narration to tell the story.

As a filmmaker who was interested in recording political movements and attitudes, Cavadini must have been attracted by the semiotics of the Tent Embassy protest. The originality of this protest worked on a number of different levels to send a message to the government and the people of Australia. The film shows how the image of the tent was juxtaposed against the stately structure of Parliament House. This image was utilised by Cavadini to elicit emotions of inequality and feelings of injustice suffered by the Indigenous population. It effectively served to illustrate the disparity between the realities of Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians in the areas of housing, health, and political power. The Aboriginal Embassy protest, aided afterwards by the national distribution of the film, was to have a profound effect on not only the Indigenous rights movement but help foster a more sympathetic attitude to issues of Indigenous lands rights amongst a broader sector of the Australian public.29

As the protest becomes more heated and the police move in to dismantle the tent embassy, Cavadini uses images of the large number of police in attendance to portray them in their authoritarian role of oppressors of Indigenous people. The images of police in physical encounters with many Indigenous people would have been clearly understood, especially by an Indigenous audience, because the scenes can be understood as being reminiscent of the police involvement in the separation of Indigenous families, a practice that was not far removed in time from 1972.

The footage Cavadini shot on 8 July is remarkably ironic given that it can be understood as a representative encounter between non-Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Australians that was being acted out on a much larger scale. The camera cuts to Gary Foley, a young Indigenous land rights activist who plays a key role in the protest. A mature white woman has approached the tent embassy and talks to Gary Foley who is lying on the ground propped up on one elbow. He takes issue with her and tells her that the time of white domination is at an end. She tries to warn him of the precarious role he is about to embark on but Foley berates her and tells her to “fuck off”. (Figure 18) The editing effectively shows the level of frustration felt by the men in the group, which at this point includes activist and author, Kevin Gilbert. In a sense, Cavadini manages to maintain Foley’s rage at the woman when he cuts

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29 Foley, "Black Power in Redfern 1968 - 1972".
directly to scenes in Sydney showing Sydney Black Moratorium March. Foley’s tirade, recorded at the scene in Canberra, continues to be heard while scenes of the Sydney March are showing. Foley talks about the woman he has just dismissed, using her as an example of the ambivalent attitude expressed by many white Australians about Indigenous issues.

Figure 18 Gary Foley berating unidentified white woman. Still from Ningla A-Na, (1972).

Indeed, Ningla A-Na, (1972), portrayed this perceived indifference in more esoteric ways. Cavadini records a broadcast of the evening news from ABCTV. In one sense this stylistic approach could be understood as a way of showing how the general public were viewing the protest. However, Cavadini also implies that the general public are engaged as spectators, sitting comfortably in their warm lounge rooms away from the Canberra winter. In reality, in one of the attempts to dismantle the Tent Embassy in Canberra, Cavadini and Stokes were in Sydney making footage of the Indigenous health workers in Redfern that would be edited into the film later. They incorporate the broadcast news footage into their film so that the viewer can see the frame of the television. This technique while producing a poor quality image of the events, underlines the view that this is how most Australians are seeing the events taking place in Canberra. This segment runs for approximately five and a half minutes. They used the footage that recorded the reactions of the people in Redfern to the broadcast footage of the protest which was incorporated into the film as critical counterpoints to demonstrate the responses of Aboriginal people to the events occurring in Canberra.
In the footage of the Sydney Moratorium, other key players in the Aboriginal rights campaign such as Paul Coe, (Figure 19) an Indigenous law graduate from Sydney University; Roberta (Bobbie) Sykes, a campaigner for Indigenous rights; Dennis Walker, a member of the Black Panther movement; Gary Foley, an Indigenous rights campaigner and John Newfong, an Indigenous journalist; and Bob Maza, an actor and an Indigenous rights campaigner; and African-American actor and activist, Carol Johnson speaking to a crowd of mostly Indigenous Australians. Foley and Coe speak to the crowd from a podium outside the Sydney Town Hall.

In representing Indigenous Australians at political rallies in Sydney and at the tent embassy protest in Canberra, Cavadini’s film portrays them in a radically new way. In the film he presents them as political agents who are engaging in the dominant political discourse of the time. This film represents a major transformation from the films discussed in Chapters One and Two, no longer are Aboriginal people represented as the ethnographic Other as in Chapter One or as helpless victims as in Chapter Two. The film represents a significant attitudinal shift in the way Indigenous Australians are represented in documentary film. Moreover, the public demeanour of many Aboriginal activists shifted from the conservative outlook of activists such as Doug Nicholls, to a more aggressive and confrontational approach adopted by activists such as Gary Foley.
Paul Coe, quotes the Murdoch editorial about the Warburton Aborigines that was published in 1957 which asserts that, “Aborigines have never had it so good” and then cleverly juxtaposes it with the unfavourable statistics of the health issues that hamper the development of too many Aboriginal children. Coe’s reference to Murdock’s editorial effectively links this film with Warburton Aborigines, (1957), underlining the lasting impact of that film.

John Newfong, exhorts the crowd to protest over the incursion of the mining industry on Reserve lands that impinge on the ability of Indigenous people living in these regions to make a sustainable living. Newfong trained as a journalist and worked on leading Sydney newspapers such as The Australian, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Bulletin as well as Identity, a newspaper published by the Aboriginal Publications Foundation Inc. He was a strident activist for Aboriginal land rights and served as a member of the Queensland Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (QCAATSI) during the 1967 Referendum campaign and later in 1970 as General Secretary of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI). Understanding how to use the media effectively, he became the chief spokesperson and media co-ordinator in 1972 for the protests in Sydney and for the tent embassy in Canberra.30 The reference he made to mining interests also links the two films. In Warburton Aborigines, (1957), mining interests as well as the excision of land previously gazetted for Indigenous use for rocket and atomic testing interfered with the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara peoples’ access to water and food.31

Cavadini cuts to the Aboriginal health clinic in Redfern, that includes a voiceover by eminent eye surgeon Fred Hollows who talks about how the centre was established and that they were able to recruit about thirty doctors to run the service. But the most important parts of the film focus on how Aboriginal activists participate in the dramatic scenes around the attempts by the police to pull down the tent embassy.

Cavadini’s use of the hand held camera produced unstable camera movements that contribute to heightening the impression of chaos as the tent is finally pulled down by police. The protesters, a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists, some sitting on the ground surrounded by a ring of protesters standing with their arms linked attempt to stop them and violence breaks out. Inside the tent are a group of protesters who remain seated while the police take out the tent poles but they are obliged to leave the tent canvas. The crowd starts

31 Grayden, Adam and Atoms: 16.
chanting: “What do you want; Land Rights; when do you want it; now”. The protesters sitting inside the tent hold up their hands in a victory signal. One of the protesters holds up the sign ‘Aboriginal Embassy’. The crowd continues to chant. The protesters allow the police to leave. The protesters who had been inside the tent now lift the canvas up over their heads and hold the sign ‘Aboriginal Embassy’ at the front. The crowd cheers. (Figure 20)

Figure 20 Police dismantling the tent. Still from Ningla A-Na, (1972).

Bob Maza and Paul Coe address the camera and claim that here is a reawakening of Black Power. Cavadini represents them as men determined to make a difference in the way Aboriginal people are treated. It is here in the film in the conversation with Maza and Coe that the viewer gains a sense of foretelling not only about the success of the tent embassy protest but also about the initiatives of the Aboriginal legal and medical services and the breakfast programmes which firmly establish that self-determination amongst the Redfern Aboriginal community was beginning to be realised. Maza and Coe are represented as being at the forefront of this movement for change.

The images of Coe and Maza fade into the image of an unidentified Indigenous woman. She is forming a clay pot on a potter’s wheel. This entrancing and gentle scene is accompanied by a song sung and written by an Indigenous woman from the Northern Territory, Gloria Fletcher. The narrator Max Hensser gives a summary of the continuing inequalities and
abuses experienced by many Indigenous people. The solemnity of his voice challenges a non-Indigenous audience to help make changes to their terrible situation.

**Reception**

*Ningla A-Na*, (1972), attracted a relatively small audience when it was initially released in 1972. It was screened at various venues through film clubs such as The Kings Cross Film Club. Carolyn Strachan organised interstate distribution of the film in 1972-3. The film was promoted for its educational value however there appears to be little comment made about the film at that time. The film appears to have had a wider audience demographic than *Life In Central Australia*, (1931) for example, because Cavadini and Strachan travelled through out Australia with the film. Cavadini recalls:

> She [Strachan] came up with a strategy about going around Australia with the film to high schools and universities, places where we could pick up on the energy that was available in Australia at that moment in political terms. So that’s what we did.

As well as exhibiting the film at venues such as schools and universities they also took the took the film to Indigenous communities such as Palm Island which later resulted in the making of *Protected*, (1975),

As part of their learning to make films about Indigenous Australians Strachan recalls:

> Our filmmaking practice evolved by sitting with our film’s audiences over and over again, paying meticulous attention to how it was being perceived. We found that every screening raised questions, and we tried to answer these in the next film we would make. We travelled a lot with Ningla-A-Na, and a lot of people who saw it, knowing very little about Aboriginal postcolonial conditions, asked us why these young men, the Aboriginal activists, were so angry.

This decision to take the film to Indigenous communities and talk about it increased Cavadini’s and Strachan’s understanding about how Indigenous people interpreted and reacted to seeing other Indigenous people protesting in such a militant fashion. It signalled a marked shift in the relationship between Indigenous Australians and documentary film and altered the way in which Indigenous Australians were represented on documentary film from this time forward. Cavadini and Strachan’s openness in listening to Indigenous people in this way forged a new space where white filmmakers and Indigenous people could strike a collaborative relationship. In doing so, many Australian documentary filmmakers facilitated

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33 *Nation Review*, 18 November 1972.
34 Cavadini, "Screening the Past Publications".
35 Strachan, "Screening the Past Publications".
opportunities for Indigenous people in deciding how they would be represented in the medium. Moreover, this new approach also gave them a stronger voice with which to tell their stories from their perspective. Although Cavadini and Strachan’s approach was not an isolated example of the changes occurring in documentary filmmaking about Indigenous people, it however is representative of the attitudinal changes occurring amongst a growing number of socially aware and politically astute non-Indigenous Australian documentary filmmakers. These include, for example, Martha Ansara who collaborated with Essie Coffey to make My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978) and Alec Morgan who worked with Gerry Bostock to make Lousy Little Sixpence, (1983) both of which will be discussed in the following chapter.

In the following years Cavadini and Strachan made Protected, (1975) with the Palm Island community which was initiated after they viewed Ningla A –Na, (1972), and then made Two Laws, (1981) with the Booroloola Community in far north Queensland. The production of both films depended heavily on the creative and technical roles contributed by members of each community. From this point, Indigenous Australians were represented in documentary films in ways that challenged their position as the ethnographic Other and portrayed them as people who were socially and politically engaged in modern Australian society.

The tent embassy protest may be envisaged as a performance; a political gimmick.\(^{36}\) Its success came from its successful staging on the lawns of Parliament House, the nation’s political capital. However, the film made important inroads into the ways in which Indigenous Australians were represented in documentary films. In this film Cavadini portrayed the protesters as confident politically astute actors who expected political changes from the federal government about land rights and reinforced the rightful place of Indigenous Australians as part of a modern Australian society. He portrayed their anger and aggression as justified emotions in the face of long term institutional and legislative ambivalence. Their power of speech and identification with concepts of the visual symbolism of the tent as an embassy in the federal capital evoked strong symbolic connections with sovereignty. A message understood by many non-Indigenous Australians. Seeing Indigenous Australians represented in this way elicited ideas that Indigenous Australians were in fact an integral part of a modern Australian society.

\(^{36}\) Scalmer, Dissent events: 42.
In the following chapter, the development of a more collaborative style of filmmaking anticipated by Cavadini and Strachan’s strategy of listening is elaborated. This methodological strategy included Aboriginal people directing and consulting as part of the process of producing documentary films about Indigenous Australians and reflects the changing political and social status of Indigenous Australians. These new practices were later channelled into developing a set of protocols now utilised by all documentary filmmakers working with Aboriginal people.
Section Three

Authentic Collaborations (1978 – 1987)

This section is comprised of two chapters which represent collaborative ventures between white filmmakers and Aboriginal people. In this section the three films that will be discussed are by Essie Coffey and Martha Ansara, *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978); Alec Morgan and Gerry and Lester Bostock’s *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1982) and David MacDougall’s *Link-Up Diary*, (1987). In their Australian context the films are significant in that their production was augmented by changes in the way filmmaking was being funded with particular attention given to independent filmmakers through the Australian Film Commission’s Creative Development Fund, as well as changes in government policy concerning Indigenous Australians and shifting social attitudes. Even though the films were made by white filmmakers, the Indigenous people are substantially involved in the making of the films and exercise a significant amount of control over the filming process. They talk directly to the camera and direct the way in which the camera is used. So they are represented on film in important new ways.
In *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), Essie Coffey directs Ansara to film the scenes she wanted to record. She talks directly to the camera in a confident and commanding way. She tells her story in her own words and contributes some of the music. Coffey in a sense presents her visual autobiography.

In *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1982) Alec Morgan and Gerry Bostock use interviews with five Indigenous people to expose their experience of the Stolen Generations, and the fraudulent financial arrangements concerning Indigenous domestic workers in the early twentieth century. The film is an example of how Indigenous Australians began to use film as a vehicle to state their case about abuse and discrimination. This film was instrumental in initiating the inquiry into the Stolen Generations resulting in the *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, tabled in parliament in April 1997. This demonstrated that film can be a powerful medium and for many Indigenous Australians a way of telling powerful stories.

In *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), David MacDougall is guided by Coral Edwards, an Indigenous activist and a member of the Stolen Generation, who is trying to help re-unite separated families with the assistance of historian Peter Read. Together they run the Link-Up organisation and asked MacDougall to make a film about the people they help. This advocacy film shows how they travelled and arranged meetings between members of families separated by government policies of assimilation. MacDougall included himself in the film making the viewer aware of his presence by his comments about how he came to make the film and his association with the people who were reuniting families. This process of separation affected not only the people who had been separated but also the workers who tried to make up for the pain inflicted on these people. MacDougall’s sensitive rendering of such an intimately personal encounter reflects his unique style of filmmaking and the reason for Edwards wanting him to make the film. The film follows the pathway begun by *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1982) and follows how government policies affect people in the ‘everyday’ of their lives.

Recognition by the Australian government that filmmaking was an important cultural pursuit meant that increasingly funding was made available in significant areas to foster the development of an Australian film industry. The establishment of a film school, later known as the Australian Film Television and Radio School, (AFTRS) in 1973 encouraged a raft of filmmakers to professionalise their skills; one of the first graduates was Martha Ansara.
Funding was made available for small budget films through government bodies such as the Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission allowing further increases in the democratisation of and in particular the documentary film industry.

Another institution established by the Australian government was the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS), presently known as the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). Established in 1962, the Institute became a major producer of documentary films about Indigenous Australians. Among them was David and Judith MacDougall who contributed to transforming the way in which Indigenous Australians were represented on documentary film. David MacDougall’s sensitivity in filming the deeply profound encounters in *Link-Up Diary*, (1987) is the primary reason why he was chosen by Coral Edwards to be involved in making the film. The films in this section reflect the social, political and institutional changes that made documentary filmmaking progressively more accessible to Indigenous Australians and in turn how they were represented on the medium.
Chapter Four


*My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978)

*Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983)

**Introduction**

This chapter will discuss two films that were made between 1978 and the early 1980s. They were selected because they forcefully represent a major shift that was taking place in the way Indigenous people were being represented on documentary film. During this period about thirty films were made about or by Indigenous people. By degrees, the films were shifting from the limited genre of ethnographic where the subjects are presented as objects to the broader genre of documentary that focuses more on allowing the subjects to take control of
The significant feature of the films discussed in this chapter is that the Indigenous people connected with the film project exercise greater control over the filmmaking process. They include directing and speaking directly to the camera. The origins of this major shift had begun in the 1970s when some Indigenous communities commissioned the AIAS film unit to make film records of important aspects of their lives under the direction of David and Judith MacDougall, Curtis Levy and Kim McKenzie. The films include: *Mourning for Mangtopi*, (1975), *Sons of Namatjira*, (1975), *The Lockhart Festival*, (1977) made by Levy; *Familiar Places*, (1980), *House Opening*, (1980) and *Collum Collum Calling*, (1984) made by the MacDougalls; and *Waiting for Harry*, (1980) by Kim McKenzie. In each case Indigenous people assertively harness filmmaking in a new way however the non-Indigenous director remained firmly in control of the process. These films provide examples where shifts in the relationship between Indigenous Australians and documentary film can be clearly perceived. This new direction in the collaboration between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous filmmakers began to commence in a more positive direction that is demonstrated in the films discussed in this chapter.

The two films selected for discussion in this chapter, *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), and *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), take the concept of collaboration into new territory. The subjects not only own the story as in the AIAS films, they also exert more control over how it should be told and how the film should be made.

*My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978)

**Background**

Collaborative film projects were becoming more achievable due to the flowering of smaller independent film companies. The less restrictive cost of camera equipment and increasing government funding through public instrumentalities, such as Film Australia, enabled independent filmmakers outside of AIAS to work on film projects that could be more flexible in their approach. The selection of *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), was based on these criteria. Importantly, it is a film produced and directed by two women, which at this time was an unusual situation for film projects. More importantly it is the first film to be directed
by an Indigenous person. The film’s subject, Essie Coffey is the driving force behind the making of the film and thus takes its place as an important stepping stone towards the practice of self-representation by Indigenous people.

In relation to the films discussed in the previous chapters, this film is differentiated by the positioning of Essie Coffey as a director of the film. Coffey not only talks directly to the camera she gives her frank and unsolicited views on her life in Brewarrina’s Indigenous housing settlement, ‘Dodge City’. She also writes and performs many of the songs used in the film and her custodianship of the land is given strength through her conviction to change things for the better. Her control of the film is apparent in the way she uses her relationship with the camera to tell her story in her way.

The films discussed in Chapter One, while concentrating the focus on the lives of Indigenous peoples, positioned Indigenous people as scientific objects that needed to be examined and recorded before their way of life disappeared. They were filmed in their habitat but unlike Coffey they were not given any voice. This was a product of the technology used as no sound could be recorded on site but added later in the studio as in Mountford’s Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950), and Dunlop’s Desert People, (1966), or an explanation of the film footage was delivered in the form of lectures as in the case of the Spencer and Gillen films and those produced by the Board for Anthropological Research under Cleland’s leadership. This distinction between the films discussed in Chapter One and the films that will be discussed the next chapters underlines not only the changes in camera technology that facilitated these developments but more importantly how in many ways the technological developments matched the changes in the political and social relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978), is also distinctive from the two films discussed in Section Two. Although there was a much greater Indigenous input into the making of Ningla A-Na, (1972), than into Warburton Aborigines, (1957), the films are more clearly defined as political advocacy films. The production crew are non-Indigenous however, they are instrumental in the films’ production. Rather, the films are produced as part of a reaction to events where non-Indigenous activists employ the films to expose the injustices of being an Indigenous person in Australia.

In the previous chapter, the way in which Indigenous Australians were represented in documentary film foreshadowed significant shifts in the ways Indigenous Australians were represented in this medium. The circulation of the images produced in the last two films demonstrated that Indigenous Australians were indeed part of a modern Australian society who wanted changes made in the ways they had been treated. The films showed that Aboriginal people were concerned about the future of their children and rejected notions that their culture was in any way a source of shame. Rather, they began to tell their side of the story to establish their will in surviving the enforcement of policies that were designed to assimilate them seamlessly into mainstream Australian culture.

In *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), the difference in representation demonstrated in Coffey’s assertion of her right to live her life in a manner she chooses. She achieves this by taking a greater part in directing the film. The consultative process described by Cavadini and Strachan in the previous chapter, is enriched in the collaboration between Coffey and Ansara. Unlike *Ningla A-Na*, (1972), where the camera was held up in front of the protesters to visually record their views, Coffey decides where and when to film and how the narrative is structured. Her interplay with the camera is more intimate. Her understanding of how to use the medium appears more sophisticated because she understands how film can put her point of view to the audience. The film represents her as an intelligent and concerned citizen. Her greater control over the filmmaking process and Ansara’s willingness to encourage Coffey’s self-representation means that Coffey can tell Ansara how she wants to portray herself, marking a dramatic shift in the way Indigenous Australians are represented on documentary film. Filmmakers like Ansara, aware of the atrocious circumstances experienced by many Aboriginal people, found that by giving the control of filmmaking into the hands of Indigenous people like Coffey made powerful stories because they were told by those who had lived the experience. As a political activist herself, Ansara understood the empowerment afforded by the collaborative arrangement between her and Coffey making a film that breaks with previous representations of Indigenous Australians in documentary film.

Coffey is the director of *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), and her collaboration with Martha Ansara, a well-known social justice advocate and a successful cinematographer and director is successful because Ansara is keenly interested in telling Essie’s story. Ansara was more advantageously positioned to attract funding through her association with the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative, underlining the necessity of the symbiotic relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists at this time to produce films.
The film’s cinematographer and co-director, Martha Ansara migrated to Australia from the United States in 1969 and quickly became involved in the Sydney Filmmaker’s Co-operative, a publicly funded body formed to promote independent filmmakers nationally and internationally. Ansara worked on films about Women’s Liberation, *Film for Discussion*, (1973); drug rehabilitation in Vietnam, *Changing the Needle*, (1982) and was active in groups about politically sensitive subjects such as nuclear disarmament and the anti-Vietnam war movement. She graduated from the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in 1978. It was while she was working on the feature film *Backroads* (1977) with Philip Noyce in Brewarrina that she met Essie Coffey and became aware of the problems confronting Indigenous female Australians. Together Essie Coffey and Martha Ansara made a film that brought national and international attention to the conditions experienced by Indigenous Australians.²

Essie Coffey is a resident of ‘Dodge City’ an Indigenous housing estate on the outskirts of Brewarrina in northern New South Wales and a matriarch and elder of the Indigenous community. She is concerned about the health and vitality of the community and about the lack of employment opportunities for Indigenous people in the area. Boredom in many instances leads to drinking, which carried with it inherent problems of anti-social behaviour and negative interactions with the police. In this respect the film does not attempt to hide or make excuses for this anti-social behaviour, rather it outlines the causes without coming to any resolutions. Essie is concerned that her people are losing their identity and therefore the film endeavours to highlight these issues.

Funding

This film was funded with the assistance of the Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission. This government body was set up 1976 to assist in the development of independent low budget films in recognition of: “the importance of a genuine film culture and the identification and development of talented filmmakers.”³

The Film

The film runs for 52:00 minutes and was shot on 16mm colour film stock with synchronised sound. The camera used was a CP-16 for sound and an Arriflex ST was used for mute shooting. No camera assistant was used. The first scene opens with the location, Brewarrina

² Fifteen years later, Coffey and Ansara collaborated on another film, *My Life As I Live It*, (1993).
New South Wales. The camera pan takes in wide angle landscape shot. This is a device used by Indigenous filmmakers to establish location and publicly acknowledge their custodianship of the land on which the filming takes place. Essie narrates that: “her people are no more” while the camera pans over scenes of rubbish. Essie narrates how her people were forced to move from their traditional land and how the Moss Creek Massacre occurred over the killing of some cattle and the ensuing reprisals on the community.

Indeed, this recurring theme of massacre becomes a common one in films made by Indigenous people in the years following the making of this film. Retrospectively, Cleland wrote in his 1931 article in the *Australian Medical Journal*, his concern about the Coniston Massacre, which had occurred only a short time prior to his expedition to Central Australia in 1931. He was concerned about how it might affect his access to and the willingness of the Warlpiri, Ngarti and Arimatyerre people to work the white scientists.

Essie addresses the audience and talks about the forced migration of her people to ‘Dodge City’ a government built settlement located out of the main town of Brewarrina in northern New South Wales. She tells how the government built the twenty-nine houses, dumped her people on the doorstep and then left them. The camera, mounted on top of a vehicle, shows footage of the town as it drives down the streets. (Figure 21) The vehicle turns into the driveway of a house festooned with washing drying on the barbed wire fence. This is the house that belongs to Essie and her family.
It is early morning and two young boys accompany Essie into the bush where she teaches them about hunting for porcupines (echidnas). It is important they know how to read the bush in an Indigenous way. The next seven scenes show how the game is prepared for cooking in an earth oven. (Figure 22) While the porcupines cook, Essie is sitting with her back against a tree, she is strumming her guitar while others in the group dose in the shade of the trees. It is a relaxing scene. The porcupines are unearthed from the oven and eaten.

It is suggested that these hunting scenes elicit an irony that harks back to the early ethnographic films discussed in Chapter One. Coffey and her family are hunting using methods that would be familiar to the audience from seeing other films about Aborigines but here they are dressed in European clothing and Essie is playing a guitar. At once the mediation between two cultures is illustrated. It also implies Indigenous agency and a capacity to integrate Western tools such as the metal axe and the guitar into traditional activities such as living off the land. In contrast to Dunlop’s *Desert People*, (1966), Essie and her family demonstrate traditional food gathering techniques that were considered so vital to the assertion that these practices, portrayed in the Dunlop films, were dying out. The use of the metal axe by Indigenous people was acknowledged as far back as the Spencer and Gillen films. The difference is that the modern devices and tools were removed from these earlier films in order to validate the authenticity of the Indigenous people, an important aspect in legitimating the value of the films as ethnographic records.
These important differences reveal more about the filmmakers and their agenda than it does about the Indigenous people captured on the film. The films discussed in the first chapter are implicated in providing evidence that the Indigenous population was truly dying out and the ‘Silence’ that W. E. H. Stanner would refer to in his Boyer lecture in 1968 is given a legitimate scientific and visual foundation. However, for Coffey and her family the method of hunting is represented as a naturalised process. The members of Essie’s group display the signs of living in the present, and as such their dress and use of introduced items such as the guitar simply reflect their contemporary situation.

The camera cuts to the house where Essie is standing at the front entrance. She introduces each member of her family as they emerge from inside the house. All up there are seventeen people, plus Zac, who is a visitor, living in the house. In a later scene, Essie is trying to get the children out of bed. Breakfast is being prepared. Some family members gather in the backyard; there is food cooking on a fire. There is a car parked at the rear of the clothes line, a pet dog wonders around. Assorted household items in various states of disrepair are littered throughout the yard. In the background three girls are playing a game.

The camera cuts to a scene where Essie is conducting a ‘survival’ class for some of her older children. She is explaining to them that it is important to know what you can eat in the bush. In a series of seven shots she identifies and explains the uses of various trees and bushes. Essie finishes the lesson by telling the children that this is a rare opportunity to learn “blackfella things” because the next day they return to school and to “whitefella” learning where they will not learn about these things. She bought them to the bush because “too many Aboriginal children are forgetting their culture and heritage she says it is most important for you kids to remember.”

The next sequence records an Australian history lesson at school, which talks about the arrival of Captain Cook. This scene provides a contrast between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education. The children are sitting at their desks listening to the teacher. He asks some of the children questions. The teacher uses the map of Australia which is drawn on the blackboard and traces the path taken by Cook up the east coast of Australia and the island known as Possession Island where he claimed the whole continent in the name of George III.

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of England. Brenda, one of Essie’s children, is asked a question about Captain Cook’s discovery of Australia but she is unable to answer.

At home the family is celebrating a birthday. The camera then cuts to the family sitting in the lounge room watching television. The television program is a story situated in a school room and the teacher is stereotypical character in a 1950s movie. The children watch the programme intently. The camera cuts to a close up of Essie. The camera studies her face and it becomes apparent the situation on television provides evidence that strongly contrasts with her own. The values promoted by the television programme are at odds with her ideology of parenting and teaching.

The next sequence is one where short sharp camera cuts are made to give the idea of repetition. Elegantly groomed with red polished nails Essie goes to a white shiny refrigerator and pours for herself a glass of orange juice. This sequence is repeated a number of times and finally Essie turns to the camera and drinks the juice. There is a quick cut to a factory where Essie is clocking on to work on the production line where whitegoods are manufactured. The irony is that she makes products which she has little prospect of ever buying for herself. This sequence has been dubbed by Essie as her “white nightmare.” It plays on the ideas of the proprietary of white middle class domestic symbols that signify

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success and prosperity, something that is denied people like Essie and her family. Essie
stares into the camera, effectively laying down a challenge to the viewer.

The camera then cuts to Essie crossing the main street in Brewarrina. In the next four scenes
Essie is seen in her role as an advisor in the Aboriginal Legal Aid Office where she meets an
Aboriginal youth with a driving offence. Essie explains to the youth that the service will
provide him with a solicitor for the court case and that there is a bail fund that can make the
payment for the fine.

In the next five scenes at the Brewarrina Hotel, she is narrating that Indigenous people in the
town were able to get credit only for alcohol. These scenes show how the problem of alcohol
consumption is destroying the lives of many people in the community. There is no
employment in Brewarrina; they are bored so they turn to grog, fighting on the streets and
end up in gaol and their money is gone. She only hopes her people will wake up to
themselves.

There are three scenes of one of the older children washing a pair of jeans by hand in a
cement laundry tub. In the backyard, a family member arrives with good catch of fish,
freshly caught from the river. Essie is proud of him and they prepare a fire to cook them.
One of the girls sits on the ground with a large dish of dough; she makes cakes that are
cooked on a hot stone. Essie and her family talk while they enjoy their meal.

Essie in voice-over asserts right to live her live her own way, living off the land. The camera
cuts to the bush, Essie walks and the camera pans following her. Credits are superimposed
over this footage. Non-diegetic country music is sung by Essie. The lyrics tell how important
her land is to her. When the credits are finished there is a final scene where Essie and her
family are walking in the bush looking happy about their freedom to enjoy the land.

This film strongly asserts Indigenous agency, especially that of Essie Coffey. It shows her as
a strong woman; someone who is rightly concerned about the people of her community. She
understands the power of the camera and uses it to tell her story from her perspective. The
film acknowledges the problems of alcohol; this issue is addressed in how she shows her
sympathy for the people who spend all their money on alcohol but her despair at the cycle of
poverty and the legal and police problems that ensue from this behaviour. The film is telling
of the dysfunctional situation experienced by many Indigenous people. No solutions are
offered to remedy the problems only that her people need to acknowledge their heritage and culture and be proud that they have survived European incursions up to this point.

While the film is noteworthy because of its accomplishment in promoting Indigenous self-representation, many scenes show Coffey’s backyard as littered with used and discarded household rubbish. Together with the scenes of drunkenness they appear to reinforce negative stereotyped images of Indigenous people living in regional townships. These communities of Indigenous people are commonly considered as inauthentic by many non-Indigenous people. As Indigenous anthropologist, Marcia Langton has noted, perceptions about: “Aborigines on the white side of the ‘rolling frontier’ lack culture, have no distinctive culture, have only some truncated version of European culture, or have only a ‘culture of poverty’.” But as the film attests, Coffey does possess Indigenous culture and she sees it as a significant ingredient for treating the dysfunction of her community and for this reason she is trying to hold on to and pass her knowledge on to her children within the social and political context of dispossession and racial victimisation.

Coffey attests that her people were treated as vermin and removed from their traditional lands to reserves and then to housing estates similar to ‘Dodge City’. Thus the social dysfunction so clearly demonstrated in Coffey’s film, is clearly explained and understood. As it will be demonstrated in the next film Lousy Little Sixpence, (1983), the effects of changing government policies, demands by farmers to extend their farming leases into Indigenous reserve lands, were undertaken with the assumption that the Indigenous population and its culture was dying out. But for Coffey, the outward appearance of her material existence continues to be understood in white terms and not as an Indigenous person who clearly has very different priorities and world view. The dispossession of land destabilizes a community and changes the meaning of identity, issues which Coffey addresses in her film.

Reception
The film received awards at the Sydney Film Festival – Winner of the Rouben Mamoulian Award for best documentary it won first prize at the Cinema du Reel in Paris and a Red Ribbon award at the American Film Festival. Since then it has been screened on Australia’s ABC Television, National Indigenous Television (NITV) on 3 December 2007 and on BBC TV in Britain and many other countries. More recently it was screened at Inner West Film Fanatics meeting at Petersham Bowling Club in Sydney on 30 March 2010, providing

evidence of the film’s continued currency and its importance in providing a catalyst for discussion. The screening in 2010 was accompanied by a discussion with filmmakers Martha Ansara and Sharon Coffey. Additionally, the film has proved a valuable teaching aide for secondary and university level programmes because it explains from an Indigenous perspective what it is like to live as Indigenous person in Australia, even today, more than thirty five years after the film was made. A study guide has been prepared and supplied by the distributor Ballad Films together with further teacher notes on the Screen Australia website. *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), is the only film that tells one Aboriginal woman’s story from her own perspective.

**Lousy Little Sixpence, (1983)**

**Background**

*Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) was inspired by an oral history project that the director Alec Morgan worked on in New South Wales in 1980. Listening to the stories of some Indigenous Elders from northern New South Wales the recurring theme of being ‘taken away’ prompted Morgan to investigate them in more detail. He later admitted that as a white person he was then totally unaware of the experience of forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and their subsequent internment in institutions such as the Cootamundra Girls Home and Kingswood and Kinchela Homes for the boys.

Determined to have these stories of ‘Stolen’ children told, Morgan began to research film archives and found a vast amount of footage taken of the reserves along with many still photographs. The existence of these films was mentioned by Michael Leigh and acknowledged in the Introduction to the thesis. Morgan’s attempts to attract funding to make the film met with firm rejections from state and federal governments on the grounds that the proposal had “no artistic, cultural or historical value.” It took two years for Morgan to develop the project and his fortuitous collaboration with historians Heather Goodall and Peter Read added authority to the narrative of the film.

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7 Inner West Film Fanatics, "My Survival as an Aboriginal Screening".
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 12.
11 Ibid., 13.
The input of Martha Ansara, who was discussed in relation to the previous film and filmmaker John Whitteron added their cinematographic expertise to the project. Important collaboration with Indigenous playwright, Gerald Bostock who was a founding member of the Aboriginal Black Theatre Art and Culture and his brother Lester, now a mentor for Aboriginal documentary filmmakers, demonstrates Morgan’s understanding about the importance of using Indigenous voices to recount an Indigenous experience. While Morgan claims that he wrote the preliminary script, Bostock’s stamp in the narration is clearly evident in the portraying the rawness of the events referred to in the film.

**Funding**

The film took about three years to make and like *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), it was made with the financial assistance of the Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission, a body set up to advance projects made by independent filmmakers and a host of other organisations including the Australian Nurses Union. The election of the Hawke Labor government in 1983 provided the extra $10,000 required to complete the film.

**The Film**

The film runs for 00:52:03 minutes and the film sequences shot in 1982 are in colour with synchronised sound recording. The film is heavily inter-cut with black and white archive film footage as well as archive images of still photographs from the earlier time periods being discussed. (Figure 24) In the credits at the end of the film, these sequences are acknowledged as part of the collections from various Institutions such as the National Film Archive, now known as the National Film and Sound Archive, (NFSA), and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, now known as Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, (AIATSIS), and the *Guardian* newspaper (London).

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
The narration of the contemporary sequences of the film is undertaken by Chicka Dixon, an Indigenous activist who appeared in *Ningla A-Na*, (1972), discussed in Chapter Two. Other connections to that film include Alessandro Cavadini as camera operator and Carolyn Strachan as one of the sound recordists. They are joined by Alessandro’s brother Fabio and filmmaker Martha Ansara who worked on *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), is also a member of the production team. Laurie (Lawrie) Fitzgerald, a sound recordist on this production, also worked on *Coniston Muster* (1972) with Roger Sandall. The recurring names attached to these productions, underlines the interest these practitioners have in promoting the voices and stories of Indigenous people and the trust they had developed with the New South Wales Indigenous community. Furthermore, at this time public funding for independent films was enabling Indigenous stories that were previously considered peripheral to mainstream Australia, to be told.

At the present time the film is distributed by Ronin Films based in Canberra. This film distribution company specialises in films made by small independent filmmakers and supplies the copies primarily to educational institutions such as secondary schools and universities as well as special interest groups.

The film uses the visual memories in interviews with five Indigenous people, Margaret Tucker, Geraldine Briggs, Bill Reid, Flo Caldwell and Violet Shea who experienced life on
government reserves in the first part of the twentieth century. Margaret Tucker had already published her autobiography, *If Everyone Cared*, (1977), and the others had already made aural recordings of their life stories, so they were well prepared to record their lives on screen. The film provides the visual context of their lives to convey a larger story in the national narrative in telling the harrowing experiences of the five people interviewed who were forcibly removed from their families and apprenticed into domestic and farm work through the Aborigines Protection Board. When they completed their apprenticeships at the age of twenty one they were inspired to join political movements and supported the work of Aboriginal activists of an older generation such as William Cooper and Jack Patten. They helped put an end to the powerful Aboriginal Protection Board in New South Wales. Their stories are punctuated with archive film footage and still photographs which give poignant images of Aboriginal people’s lives on the reserves and give focus to their narratives. The musical scores helps to underline the mood.

Margaret Tucker grew up on the Cumeroogunja Reserve, situated on the New South Wales Victorian border near Albury in New South Wales; the same Reserve on which Doug Nicholls grew up. Nicholls was mentioned in Chapter Two in relation to the film, *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957) in which he appeared. The camera cuts to an old black and white still photograph of a young Margaret and her mother and her three sisters; they are all dressed in white dresses of the type worn in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Bill Reid, a former resident of the Pilliga Reserve in north western New South Wales, relates how they enjoyed a good social life and were allowed to participate in dances, both European style and traditional (claypan) and enjoyed the visits made by people from other Reserves. (Figure 25) There are cuts to a series of still photographs showing groups of Aboriginal men playing tunes using gum-leaves and drums. (Figure 24) He tells how they had “a pretty good life then, plenty to eat and totally independent of government funding,” which is obviously a point of pride.

The camera cuts to archival footage sequence that shows life on a reserve; a herd of cattle, a cattle race and stockyard. Over these images is superimposed the inter-title: “over the coming years, the arrival of large numbers of white immigrants from Europe would change the Aboriginal way of life forever.” A sequence of archive footage shows an unidentified
country township and the narrator tells us that: “in the 1900s many white settlers moved to the outback of New South Wales.”¹⁵

The continued dispossession of Aboriginal people is shown by footage of kangaroos being culled and replaced on the land with cattle and sheep. The sequence of archive footage cuts to scenes of white cattle drovers herding cattle near some fenced paddocks. The government was pressured by the farmers to release lands that were part of the Aboriginal Reserves. The narrator continues: “The Aboriginal Protection Board (APB) stopped Aboriginals from being able to own and use reserve lands. From now on Aboriginals would own nothing.”¹⁶

Geraldine Briggs also lived on Cumeroogunja Reserve and is one of Margaret’s sisters. She describes the futility of the work people did on the reserves. They had tried to make them an independent agricultural business. The narrator says: “In 1909 the APB placed white managers in control of reserves in New South Wales. The manager was given full powers over the lives of the people there.” This statement is inter cut with still photographs of groups of Aboriginal people and archive footage of regimented children doing exercises, receiving rations and a child has his teeth inspected and another takes Holy Communion. All of the people interviewed comment about the rudimentary education they received on the reserves. There is a cut to archive footage of the Hermannsburg Mission School in Central Australia.

¹⁶ Ibid.
Margaret Tucker describes how she was forcibly removed from her family and taken to the Cootamundra Girls Home when she was six and at the age of thirteen she was selected by the Inspectors for the apprenticeship programme. There are intercuts to still photographs of girls standing on the veranda. They are wearing white uniforms. There are intercuts to newspaper headlines about the forced removal of Aboriginal children and the Kingswood Boys Home where the inmates were trained in farm work.

There is a cut to a still photograph of a middle-class house in Sydney, indicating the type of house where Aboriginal girls like Violet Shea were assigned to work as domestic servants. (Figure 26) Archive footage shows a white family enjoying high tea in the backyard and images of the domestic work carried out by the girls, such as cooking and cleaning. The contrast between Violet’s childhood and those of the family she works for is made abundantly clear by the use of the archive photographs and footage. Violet relates how she was supposed to be paid one shilling and sixpence a week. One shilling went into a trust fund run by the APB with sixpence for me; I never saw that sixpence. Different people have said to me: “‘Why didn’t you ask for it?’ But you just didn’t do those things.”

Bill Reid reflects: “Looking back now I can see it was a type of slave labour. The missions were supplying cheap labour for the stations, housemaids; lots of the girls came back pregnant. There were so many half-caste children.” There is a cut to a series of still photographs of part Aboriginal men and women with children.
The narrator tells us that: “By 1930 about one third of Aboriginal children had been sent into apprenticeship; many ran away; some made it home.” There is a cut to still photographs of reserve buildings. “Because they could not keep the children from returning to the reserves, the APB managers were given the authority to issue marriage licences between the Aboriginal residents.”

The narrator explains that: “the APB still wanted to close down the reserves, and refused to spend any more money for their upkeep. During the 1930s sickness spread through many reserves.” Cut to a series of still photographs of Aboriginal men who became itinerant workers. “The onset of the Depression meant that for the first time many whites came into contact with Aborigines and saw the conditions under which they had been forced to live.” There is a cut to still photographs of dole queues in the city.

After they turned twenty-one the apprenticeships ceased and the narrative refocuses on the political activities of Margaret, Geraldine and Bill, in the 1930s. Some like Margaret joined the Communist Party of Australia. There are cuts to archive footage of political rallies in the Domain in Sydney and a series of still photographs of striking miners. Margaret relates how she went to Communist Party meetings; “they were very interested in the down trodden people. Well I felt my people were down trodden. I said what I felt.” There two sequences of Cinesound newsreel film, one about Margaret with an inter-title: “A Princess of an Ancient Tribe – Margaret Tucker 1935 - original sound missing” showing Margaret’s political involvement in claiming equal rights for Aborigines and the other with an inter-title; “Australian Royalty Pleads for His People – Burraga, Chief of Aboriginal Thirroul Tribe,” who ran a campaign to petition the King for black representation in Federal Parliament. There is a series of still photographs of Aboriginal activists who were calling for changes and the abolishment of the APB.

Visual references are then made to William Cooper who started the Aborigines League and to Bill Ferguson and Bill Patten who started the Aborigines Progressive Society. Cooper is shown in a series of still photographs, along with a group of Aboriginal activists and some newspaper articles. Bill Ferguson is represented by an image of a newspaper headline: “Aborigines claim citizen rights.” Together, Cooper and Patten set out to gain full citizenships rights and the scrapping of the APB. They used every possible means to broaden their support. There is a cut to a newspaper headline: “Aboriginal Broadcast” telling people about the radio broadcast.
Bill Reid tells how he became involved in the campaign and travelled in a car with a banner on it which said: “Full citizenship Rights for Aborigines”. The narrator tells the story: “APA [Aboriginal Progressive Association] members travelled to reserves all over the state gathering evidence of the conditions their people lived under. Local branches of the APA were formed. The APB responded with even tougher measures and started expelling agitators from reserves.” The film cuts to a still photograph of expulsion paperwork from Sevington Reserve near Wellington. The list includes men such as Eric and John McGuiness who later become activists along with their well-known sons. Reid says: “but the people were behind us they bought membership tickets so we could travel from one place to another.”

A Select Committee was established by the New South Wales government under Premier Stevens in 1937 to investigate the APB. Although the enquiry collapsed Reid says that things seemed to cease with the apprenticing out of boys and only three or four girls were sent out after that. There is a cut to archive footage of an Aboriginal stockman herding cattle into a yard. Reid continues: “The only boys of employable age took a job at droving and were not interfered with.” The narrator then says: “But the white managers continued to rule the reserves.” Archival film footage shows a manager handing out blankets to Aboriginal children. “Men were forced to work for little or no wages.” Other archival footage shows Aboriginal men undertaking manual labour.

The film’s narrative then refocuses on the 1938 Aborigines Day of Mourning held on Australia Day as the first national Aboriginal protest. This is overlayed by Cinesound newsreel footage of the white celebrations with a re-enactment of the landing of Captain Phillip and the First Fleet. The narrator describes how the conditions on the reserves continued to diminish and after Bill Patten visited Cumeroogunja Reserve in 1938, the residents went on strike and left the reserve. Margaret Tucker tells of her role in the Aborigines League, collecting funds and how the Trade Unions financially supported the strike. The narrator tells us that: “The Aborigines League pushed for an investigation into the cause of the strike.” Cut to a newspaper headline: “Defiant Blacks Won’t Return.” “But at the start of World War II there were stories circulated in the press that Nazis were behind the strike and support fell away.” There is a cut to archive footage showing large crowds in the Domain in Sydney.
In contradiction to the Nazi propaganda there is a sequence of archive footage showing five scenes of Aboriginal soldiers, who are volunteers at a training camp. The sequence ends with a racist slur about the ‘boys’ being torpedoed. After the war “Aboriginal organisations quickly re-emerged. Margret Tucker says: “I feel very proud of these people, they were fighters and they struggled in every way.” Bill Reid says: “It had a very big impact because if the APA hadn’t been started when it started we wouldn’t have had the organisations we have today. The narrator ends with: “Today the struggle still goes on and will go on until justice prevails because we are the first Australians and this is our land.” There is a cut to a still photograph of the Aboriginal flag as the credits roll.

In this film Indigenous Australians are represented experiencing a number of circumstances. First, as children who are unwillingly separated from their families. They were interned in institutions to be trained as domestic servants and farm labourers, victims of government administration and policies. Secondly, as young adults who become politically aware and try to make changes in the way Indigenous Australians are treated by the government. Finally as older people who want to tell others of their life experiences so that more people are made aware of the historical injustices experienced by a great number of Indigenous Australians in New South Wales in the early years of the twentieth century. The five people make visual recordings to tell the stories of their lives. The liberal use of photographs and film footage retrieved from the archives is used as evidence to substantiate their stories. In the film the people interviewed are represented as aggrieved survivors but not wholly defeated. They appear in a different manner to the way in which Essie Coffey was represented in My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978). These people are from a previous generation and are intent on talking about their terrible experiences at the hands of government authorities. While Coffey makes reference to an earlier massacre which saw her community relocated to Dodge City, she makes more assertive claims to her identity.

Reception
The film received a very positive reception. It screened for six weeks at the Dendy Cinema in Sydney. In an interview with journalist, Margret Smith, Bostock and Morgan said that the film was released about the same time as Henry Reynold’s, book, The Other Side of the Frontier, (1982) was published “and there was a hunger in the wider community to learn more about Aboriginal people, as nothing was out there.”

17 Smith, ”25 years on, classic still shocks."
For a film outside mainstream cinema, it received much attention. As Margret Smith relates in her review of the screening held at the Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2008, “25 years after the making of this film and it still manages to shock audiences.” She claims that for the distributor, Ronin Films “it remains one of its best sellers.”

The film has won numerous awards, including Australian Teachers of Media Awards, (1983); Nyon Film Festival, (1983); Margret Meade Film Festival, (1984); Toronto International Film Festival, (1984); Festival International Du Film, D’Amiens, (1985 and 1990); Hawaii International Film Festival, (1986); Cinema Du Reel, (1991); Festival De Cinema De Douarnenez, (1991) and Aboriginality – Berlin, (1993). Despite its international success, Morgan and Bostock had a hard time convincing the ABC to screen the film. They had to forward a petition to the broadcaster and since then it has screened the film a number of times, for example during National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee, (NAIDOC) week. Smith says: “the film was taken up by Linda Burney (now a Labor MP in New South Wales) when she headed the Aboriginal Education group and it became a text for schools.”

Study guides have been prepared by the Australian Teachers of Media, Screen Australia as well as the distributor Ronin Films which also provides web links to a newspaper article and the study guide.

The long term success of the film is evidenced by its role in education curricula for high school and universities studies. It is still being screened by community groups such as the Campbelltown Arts Centre in 2008 and at The Noise Barn in Brunswick, Melbourne on 18 April 2008. On both occasions the film was shown in conjunction with celebrating Indigenous artists and musicians.

These films underline the changes in the representation of Indigenous Australians in documentary films. The collaborative structure of the filmmaking process means that Aborigines began to tell stories about their experiences from their own perspective and decide how they appear in films. By telling their stories, they challenge and expose little known or understood histories and represent themselves as integral actors in Australian’s past and future.

18 Ibid.
20 Smith, “25 years on, classic still shocks.”
21 Ibid.
Conclusion

*My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), and *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), are examples of films in which Aboriginal people are represented as coping with the consequences of being members of a minority Indigenous population that has been abused and marginalised. Both films enable the Aboriginal subjects to tell their own stories of growing up Aboriginal in New South Wales in the twentieth century. Their stories are backed up with visual archival evidence. In each case there is no white person as narrator to mediate or explain their experiences. For many non-Indigenous audiences it was the first time that they had heard about these experiences that took place in their own state in their own country and in their own lifetimes. In revealing their past, the Aborigines in the film are represented as living historical documents and thus part of the Australian narrative of the past. The films revealed to a non-Indigenous audience that Aboriginal people were not outside of Australian history but an integral part of it.

An important legacy of the two films is that they jolted the wider Australian public into demanding that the government investigate the allegations of Aboriginal child removal made in *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) which eventually led to the Inquiry into the Stolen Generations formally known as *Bringing Them Home – Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*, published in 1997 and closely followed another major inquiry, the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, set up in 1987 to investigate allegations of murder and mistreatment of Indigenous people in the prison system.

These films produced a major shift in the representation of Aborigines in Australian documentary film. In each film the Aborigines looked relaxed and comfortable in front of the camera and in the case of Essie Coffey she plays with the medium in a very sophisticated manner. Their relaxed disposition to using visual media is indicative of a long association with a visual culture. Furthermore, the films also represent Indigenous Australians not as a people dying out but as survivors who experienced the dark underside of modern non-Indigenous Australia. The films also challenge white Australian’s perceptions of their own past that challenges notions of peaceful settlement.
Chapter Five

Institutional Collaborations: 1987

Link-Up Diary, (1987)

Introduction
As the second chapter of Section Three, this chapter will focus on a film made by a filmmaker attached to a major institution, the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, AIAS, now known as the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, (AIATSIS).\(^1\) The films discussed in the previous chapter were made by independent filmmakers who had to find funding from a range of different sources. The film discussed in

this chapter, *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), was made in a film unit established and funded to specifically produce documentary films about Indigenous Australians. Significantly, the locations of the films made at the Unit shifts back to remote regions of Australia, due to the influence of the original mandate developed to establish the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. However, this film breaks this trend by focusing on the stories of urban Aboriginal people.

Established as a statutory body in 1962, the operational mandate of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was “scientific and anthropological” and was “not concerned with current problems as they affect the Australian aborigine [sic].”\(^2\) The first Principal of the Institute, Frederick McCarthy, had previously worked at the Australian Museum in Sydney for twenty years as the curator of anthropology. As a result, the Institute was envisaged as a repository for the preservation of Indigenous artefacts and recording Indigenous languages and ceremonies before they died out. Recognising the important role of film due to his experience as a member of the AASEAL expedition to Arnhem Land in 1948, McCarthy set up a film unit so that images of Indigenous people could be archived and referred to at a later time for the purpose of research. As demonstrated in Chapter One this salvage approach to representing Indigenous Australians on film had the effect of apoliticising them out of mainstream Australian society.

In its early years the Institute contracted filmmakers such as Ian Dunlop to collect recordings of ceremonies primarily in northern and remote areas of Australia where it was believed Indigenous Australians were living closer to a traditional life. As demonstrated in Chapter One, Dunlop’s *Desert People*, (1966) was in keeping with this mandate, making it clear why it has been grouped together with the early ethnographic films discussed in the thesis. It will be demonstrated in this chapter how David and Judith MacDougall’s approach and methodology in ethnographic filmmaking differed from that of Dunlop. Even while Dunlop was participating in this salvage approach to filming Indigenous Australians, other filmmakers working for the Institute at the same time as Dunlop such as Cecil Holmes, Roger Sandall and Curtis Levy found it increasingly difficult to adhere to the original mandate of the Institute because they were able to observe the many social and political changes

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\(^2\) Bryson, *Bringing To Light*: 12.
occurring in Indigenous communities and the ways in which these shifts were affecting their lives.3

Before migrating to Australia from the United States David MacDougall had graduated from Harvard with an Arts degree and with his wife, Judith completed a degree in Ethnographic Film from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1968. From there they worked in Uganda and Kenya in Africa where they made To Live with Herds, (1968/1972); Under the Men’s Tree, (1968/1974); Nawi, (1968/1970); Kenya Boran, (1972/1974); The Wedding Camels, (1972/1977); Lorang’s Way, (1974/1979); and A Wife Among Wives, (1974/1981).4 The MacDougalls’ approach to cross-cultural filmmaking reflected a paradigm shift not only in scientific thinking about the Other but also reflected changes in the social and political contexts in which most documentary filmmakers were now working. The MacDougall’s methodological approach to filmmaking meant that long periods of time, sometimes years, were required in the field researching the social and political situation of the people they would represent on film.5

By the time they were appointed to their posts at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1975, requests from Indigenous communities to make films about certain aspects of their lives were becoming more frequent. These requests signalled a shift towards collaborative film projects, similar to those discussed in the previous chapter. In 1974, Levy made, Mourning for Mangatopi, (1975), that recorded a pukumani (bereavement) ceremony on Melville Island. The ceremony had not been performed for some years and in this case was to honour the son of Geoffrey Mangatopi a leading headman on Melville Island. Sometime later, at the request of Geoffrey Mangatopi, the Institute was invited to record Geoffrey’s pukumani ceremony as a follow up to Levy’s earlier film. This was the first project the MacDougalls worked on after they began to work at the Institute. Accompanied by Levy, the MacDougalls’ made Goodbye Old Man, (1977).6 MacDougall asked the daughter of Mangatopi as well as another participant in the ceremony, Thomas Woody Minipini, to provide the narration for the film so that an Indigenous perspective on the ceremony could be presented.7 MacDougall’s decision to rely on these personal accounts of Mangatopi’s life, provide one of the few examples at this time of Indigenous people explaining the proceedings of ceremonies. Another example

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3 Ibid., 45-7.
4 Ibid., 59.
6 Bryson, Bringing To Light: 59.
7 Ibid., 60.
had taken place in an earlier Institute film, *Coniston Muster: scenes of a stockman’s life*, (1972), where filmmaker Roger Sandall had incorporated substantial narration by Johnny Coniston who was one of the stockmen featured in the film.8

The MacDougalls then spent lengthy periods in the field researching film project opportunities in Indigenous communities including Aurukun in northern Queensland. Their acknowledgement of the issues that faced Indigenous Australians at this time contrasts sharply with the films discussed in Chapter One. Whereas those films actively tried to negate issues of cross-cultural contact, the films made by the MacDougalls wanted to show viewers how Indigenous Australians were actively negotiating these encounters. The communities in the Aurukun region for example, were facing forced removal from their traditional lands because of mining interests and were also in transition from missionary to government administration. The MacDougalls considered they had a rare opportunity to document the process. The community was eager to have the film crew at Aurukun because they were aware the medium of film would provide visual documentation of their dealings with both state and federal governments and the mining company.9

The MacDougalls’ observational filming strategy used at Aurukun was coupled with a strategy of advocacy, an aspect of documentary filmmaking demonstrated in the films discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Four. The use of film for advocacy about issues affecting Indigenous Australians was driving significant shifts in the way they were being represented in documentary film at this time. In an interview conducted with film historian Ian Bryson on 14 November, 1995, MacDougall recalled:

ishment.  We saw the importance of it as evidence so that if anybody questioned later what had happened the film could in some ways stand in evidence.10

The community’s recognition of the power of film, or the visual narrative, underlines their agency in the filming process. The relationship of trust developed between the MacDougalls

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9 Bryson, *Bringing To Light*: 64.
10 Ibid.,
and the people at Aurukun during their year long presence in 1977 shows how important this method was in producing a remarkable set of films.\footnote{During their time at Aurukun the MacDougalls made *Familiar Places*, (1980), a project about mapping country with Angus Namponan and anthropologist Peter Sutton where David and Judith are included in the film as participants in being introduced to country. Then Judith MacDougall directed *The House Opening*, (1980), where a cleansing ceremony was recorded showing the process of re-opening a house after the death of a family member. The wife of the deceased person, Grace Kawangka, later narrated the film explaining from her perspective describing the events occurring on the film. This is perhaps one of the earliest instances where a female director and female protagonist worked together on a film project for the Institute. And finally, *Three Horseman*, (1982) is a film about three generations of Aboriginal stockmen who worked on Ti-Tree cattle station about eighty kilometres from Aurukun.}

After the completion of the fieldwork for these films, the following year in 1978, the MacDougalls hosted the Ethnographic Film Conference at the Institute in Canberra. The Conference attracted international ethnographic filmmakers such as Jay Ruby, James Blue, Karl Heider, Peter Loizes, James MacBean, Bill Nichols and Colin Young.\footnote{Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, "Ethnographic Film Conference 1978," *Newsletter, New Series* 10(1978): 8-9.} The Conference was also attended by Indigenous Australians, among them activist and academic (now Professor) Marcia Langton; Narritijin Maymuru, an artist from Yirrkala; Thomas Woody Minipini, who narrated *Good-bye Old Man*, (1977), and directed by David MacDougall; Bobbie Sykes, one of the key protestors at the tent embassy and featured in Cavadini’s film, *Ningla A-Na*, (1972); actor David Gulpilil; and Jacob Roberts Wiyendji founder of the Council for Aborigines. They all paid particular attention to the panel, *Democratisation of the visual media*.\footnote{Ibid.} According to Bryson, the MacDougalls essentially wanted to focus on lifting the profile of ethnographic filmmakers, however the Indigenous delegates pointed out that:

They had been excluded from the production process and reflected their unhappiness with the funding situation for Indigenous filmmaking in Australia. What it also signalled was the growing interest in film and video among Aboriginal people and recognition of its power to influence opinion. Calls were made for the funding of training programs for Aboriginal people and for the provision of equipment to communities. A code of ethics was also discussed (but not formalised) for filmmakers wanting to work with Aboriginal people. It was proposed by Clive Scollay [a non-Aboriginal delegate] that the guiding principle of this code be ‘that the outcome of all filming projects amongst Aboriginal people be in the first instance of benefit and contribution to the contemporary Aboriginal society.’\footnote{Bryson, *Bringing To Light*: 65.}

The sentiments contained within this quote became the basis for the distinct shift in the way ethnographic filmmakers approached filming Indigenous Australians from this time. Since then protocols for filming Indigenous Australians have been developed by Indigenous people with strong links to the film industry. They include Lester Bostock’s, *Protocol and*
Guidelines for the Production of Film and Television on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, 1990 (revised in 1997) for the Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), and Indigenous media lawyer, Terri Janke’s, Issues Paper: Towards a Protocol for Filmmakers Working with Indigenous Content and Indigenous Communities, (2003) for the Australian Film Commission. Moreover, avenues of funding which have been mentioned in previous chapters were established, encouraging independent filmmakers to engage in new ways with Indigenous Australians.

At the time David MacDougall admitted his naïvete about the degree to which “everything Aboriginal was politicised” in Australia. This politicisation of Aboriginality has been clearly demonstrated in Chapters Two, Three and Four. By tracing the process over a long time period, it has been demonstrated how significantly these shifts have effected changes in the relationship between Indigenous Australians and documentary film. MacDougall set about making changes at the Institute and began a filmmaking program to train Indigenous people.

Two Torres Strait Islander men, Trent and Dimple Bani, were the first participants. They produced, The Importance of Torres Strait Islander Singing and Dancing, (1979). Soon after, four new trainees were appointed; Anne Pratten, Coral Edwards, who would later feature in MacDougall’s film, Link-Up Diary, (1987); Wayne Barker and Ralph Rigby. Coral Edwards, a member of The Stolen Generations, made It’s a Long Road Back, (1981), a film about tracing her family that eventually led her to establish Link-Up, an organisation that helps Indigenous families separated by government intervention to re-unite. Wayne Barker made, Cass: No Saucepan Diver, (1983), a film about his grandfather who was a pearl

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15 Lester Bostock, The Greater Perspective: Protocol and Guidelines for the Production of Film and Television on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities, 2nd Fully Revised ed. (Sydney: Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), 1997).
17 Bryson, Bringing To Light: 66.
19 Bryson, Bringing To Light: 66-7.
diver in Broome. Since then he has become an independent filmmaker and owns Gunada Productions located in Broome, Western Australia.

Responding to new challenges the MacDougalls then refocused their filmmaking efforts on projects located in south eastern regions of Australia in an effort to represent a more diverse picture of Indigenous Australians. The films they made were Collum Calling Canberra, (1982/1984); A Stockman’s Strategy, (1982/1984); A Transfer of Power, (1982/1986) and Sunny and the Dark Horse, (1982/1984). All these films focus on an Aboriginal enterprise cattle property called Collum Collum in northern New South Wales. Again the MacDougalls played an advocacy role for the Aboriginal people living and working on the property. The Aboriginal Land Fund was changing the ways in which the land could be utilised and the Aborigines wanted the negotiations between them and the Aboriginal Land Fund visually recorded as a document.

Link-Up Diary, (1987) was the final film made by David MacDougall before he resigned from the Institute in 1991. He wrote, directed, filmed and produced the film. The film also represents an endpoint to the ways in which Indigenous Australians were being represented and how they were involved in making films at the AIAS film unit.

**Link-Up Diary, 1987**

**Background**

Indigenous filmmaker and activist, Coral Edwards and historian Peter Read met when Read was conducting an oral history of the Wiradjuri people of central west New South Wales in the late 1970s. During the interviews he found that many Indigenous people, institutionalised in government run homes such as the Cootamundra Girl’s Home, did not know anything about their birth families. One of the women he interviewed was Coral Edwards who had been a resident of Cootamundra Girls Home where Indigenous girls were trained to become domestic servants. Using government records stored in the New South Wales State Archives, Read helped her to locate her birth family. It was from this initial research that he developed his idea of the ‘stolen generations’ which led to the appointment of an inquiry to investigate

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22 Gallasch, Dreaming In Motion: 24.
23 Bryson, Bringing To Light: 69-70.
the removal of Indigenous children from their families, a practice that was carried out from the 1920s to the 1960s in New South Wales.24

In 1983 Edwards and Read established the Link-Up group after Edwards, invited him to come with her to meet her newly discovered family. MacDougall also mentored Edwards through the new Indigenous film programme established at the AIAS shortly after the resolutions made at the 1978 Ethnographic Conference. She made a short film about her experience, *It’s a Long Road Back*, (1981),25 and along with the films, *Link-Up Diary*, (1987) and *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), these three films form a testimonial canon about the stolen generations that were made in the 1980s. However, it was the association between Read and Edwards and their trust in MacDougall’s skill to sensitively portray what was a deeply emotional process that caused her to press for MacDougall to make *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), in association with the AIAS.26 It appears that all of them understood the historical significance of what they were doing and therefore the importance of visually recording the work of the Link-Up programme.

In an interview with film historian, Ian Bryson, MacDougall stated that in relation to the film *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), he saw *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), “as a kind of observational answer to that kind of documentary construction [*Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983)] as well as getting at the subject in a different way.”27 Although the film is created by David MacDougall, it is the people from Link-Up who direct the narrative. They control much of the dialogue through their conversations with the people they visit as well as the members of the Link-Up team and effectively use MacDougall’s ‘observational’ approach to capture the emotional pain of the stories presented. His interest in making the film was based on some preliminary research that he and partner Judith had started in relation to the effects of the government’s policy on separating Indigenous families and his close association with both Coral Edwards and Peter Read.28

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25 This film made by Edwards has not been considered for discussion in this thesis for two reasons: it has not been as widely viewed as MacDougall’s and access to a copy was not possible at the time of the film selection process. The film may have been withdrawn from sale due to the observance of cultural protocols.
27 Bryson, *Bringing To Light*: 72.
28 Ibid., 71-2.
Link-Up Diary, (1987) could be considered MacDougall’s first urban film. Until then he had made films about Indigenous peoples in Africa and Australia who lived in communities that were remote from major cities. However, in Link-Up Diary, (1987), MacDougall allows his audience to participate in this observational mode in an urban environment, letting the viewer see ordinary people experiencing extraordinary circumstances.

MacDougall’s technique of portraying himself as a participant and member of the Link-Up team is also a way of engaging the viewer so that they feel present at the meetings as well, heightening the viewers’ awareness of the pain experienced by the Indigenous people affected by these policies. Documentary film historian Lucien Taylor has noted that both David and Judith MacDougall’s “first person presence is . . . a quiet feature of all their films” and their autobiographical approach “is a response to the fact that there remain vast areas of our emotional life which are either inaccessible to non-fiction film or whose representation in third person documentary would raise profound ethical and epistemological problems.”

The film was made in a similar style to a film MacDougall worked on previously in Uganda, To Live With Herds, (1972). In what MacDougall terms “a low-energy level” film, he endeavours to “give a sense of being present in a Jie compound, a situation in which few of our viewers would ever find themselves.” Similarly in Link-Up Diary, (1987), he uses this style to draw the viewer into sharing the emotional journey being experienced by the Link-Up team and the people they are trying to help. Rather than singling out dramatic scenes, MacDougall believes this low energy level approach to filming helps to position the seemingly inconsequential aspects of everyday life as being of greater importance in explaining how people think and feel because of their very “anti-subject matter.” The long and static shots of the people the Link-Up team visit as well as shots of the team talking in the car and at the hotel create a contemplative mood and as a result reaches out to the viewer at intimate emotional levels so that they share in the grief of separation and re-uniting. This was aided with the use of small scale camera equipment and battery powered microphones that helped to minimise the technological intrusion as much as possible.

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30 David MacDougall, Transcultural Cinema, 200.
31 Ibid.
By using small scale equipment, MacDougall blended in as part of the Link-Up team. His autobiographical approach to filming could help into him fade the camera into, if not an invisible entity, at least one that was less unobtrusive to the film’s subjects. In this way he also positioned himself as a subject of the film too. The use of artificial lighting, large cameras and sound equipment would have been imposing, resulting in a loss of the intimate atmosphere so important in the representation of the people in the film. MacDougall was able to achieve a sense of presence in the living rooms of the subjects which was an important aspect in representing the film’s subjects as people struggling to cope in a highly emotional confrontation. His quite presence achieved by the use of small scale equipment would have been less threatening to the subjects. In this way the subjects were more likely to normalise the presence of the camera and in turn appear less self-conscious in the film. This approach was important for MacDougall to represent the subjects as being average urban dwellers seeking answers to questions about their ‘lost’ families. His approach achieves a poignancy that increases he viewers’ empathy with the subjects, personalising the impact of the trauma caused by the forced separation of Indigenous families.

The importance of this film lies in its portrayal of a journey, both as a road trip and as an emotional one, as film historian Catherine Summerhayes has observed: “Link-Up Diary can be considered a journey of exposure,”³³ that also skilfully includes the viewer in the dynamics of each of the meetings as well as the conservations between the Link-Up workers. The film gives the viewer an impression of gentleness that belies the trauma occurring in the lives of the Indigenous people affected by family separation; it is the trauma experienced by the Indigenous people in the film that necessitates this approach by the filmmaker and the Link-Up group and why Coral Edwards believed that MacDougall was the best filmmaker available to accomplish such a task in representing the subjects in this way. The empathetic approach to filming sensitive scenes is a highly developed by MacDougall as he draws the viewer in to share the trauma felt by the Indigenous families.

**Funding**

The film was produced under the auspices of the AIAS film unit. The film is now distributed by Ronin Films, a distribution company that specialises in films with particular educational value.

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The Film

*Link-Up Diary*, (1987), runs for 00:00:00 minutes and was shot on 16mm colour film stock with synchronised sound recording.

The film opens with still archive photographs of Aboriginal families and children. The narrator, David MacDougall, explains how Aboriginal children were separated from their families. The use of train and typewriter sounds over the archive photographs help to relate how these instruments aided in the separation of Indigenous families.

MacDougall tells the viewer: “The film is a diary of a week long journey that I made with the three staff members of Link Up, a small group which is helping those families find one another again. In the process they are trying to restore the broken links in Indigenous history.” 34 We are introduced to the three staff members Peter Read, Coral Edwards and Link-Up trainee, Robyn Vincent. (Figure 27)

![Figure 27 Coral Edwards, Peter Read and Robyn Vincent. Still from Link-Up Diary, (1987).](image)

Standing outside the Link-Up office, MacDougall tells us how his journey started at the office in Canberra. The film was to represent the work they had been doing for the past five years. Peter Read opens the door and MacDougall enters the office. Coral Edwards and Robyn Vincent are working at desks and talking on the telephone. Peter Reid is talking to somebody on the telephone and acknowledges the filmmaker’s presence to the person on the

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other end. (This inclusion of the cameraperson is an important aspect of MacDougall’s filming practice – that is to acknowledge and incorporate the voice and presence of the camera and sound people)

The Link-Up team then travel in a car from Canberra to Sydney to meet people who have contacted the organisation. Link-Up was started by one of the key workers, Coral Edwards, herself an Indigenous child separated from her family when she was only six months old and brought up at Cootamundra Girls Home. It was this experience that led her to founding Link Up.

Peter Read, a white historian who has studied the Indigenous people of New South Wales explains how they use the archive records to aid in the search to re-establish the links that were broken under the state welfare authorities such as the Aborigines Protection Board (APB). Peter helped Coral find her family. Robyn, the new trainee, was adopted into a white family and only recently found her birth family. David explains that it is Robyn’s first week at Link-Up as a trainee.

The camera cuts to the group meeting outside Peter’s house and they travel in the car to Sydney. David says this is routine for the group, they spend one week out of two travelling. David runs the camera inside the car so that the viewer becomes part of the conservations they have on their journey. This technique of filming in the car denotes that the whole process that is being undertaken is a journey; for them as well as the people they have arranged to meet. David narrates saying: “Few whites know much about Aboriginal history, most preferred not to think very much about it.”

They organise to see a man whose daughter had come to them some time earlier – she was adopted and wanted to find her parents. Coral says: “We’ve found out the mother has died. So we are going to see her father.” Coral goes to the father’s, Willie, house and Coral checks with him about having the meeting filmed. She asks him if he is interested in meeting his daughter Susan. He agrees and the group visit Susan later in the afternoon.

At Susan’s home the group tell her the information they have about her birth family. They know her Mum’s name and that she died in 1975 but they do not know how she died. They tell her they have just met with her father. The film footage of the meeting is deeply emotive and conveys to the audience the deep seated pain experienced by Susan and how it affects...

35 Ibid.
members of the team. Coral’s sensitivity helps Susan to come to terms with the reality of finding her birth family.

MacDougall’s low key approach is predicated on filming the “inconsequential events” that “one would witness in ordinary experience.”36 His strategy in using this approach in representing Indigenous Australians in this manner portrays them as sentient human beings who feel pain and anguish about the past. The intimate relationship he constructs between the subjects and the film’s audience draw on fundamental human emotions shared by human beings everywhere. This helps dispel any notions of them being positioned as the Other or being considered exotic in any way, rather they display the common traits of humanity.

They take Susan to meet Willie. Willie and Susan talk and Coral stays with them for a short time to make sure they are OK and then she leaves them to talk on their own for a while. Susan discovers from her father that her Mum died of tuberculosis (TB). Willie talks about what happened to him after his wife died. (Figure 28) Willie says he has been reunited with all his children now – I’m happy he says. As their meeting ends Susan and Willie embrace and say goodbye. As they walk back to the car Coral reassures Susan.

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Retiring to their hotel, Peter, Coral and Robyn go over the events of the day and reassure themselves it was good to get Willie and Susan to meet so soon. Coral says waiting is the worst thing as you start imagining all sorts of things. Peter recalls how difficult it is because people don’t know what to say. Robyn reflects on her experience of meeting her family. (Figure 29) In an interview with Catherine Summerhayes twenty years after the film was made, Peter and David admit that getting Susan to meet her father so soon was probably a “bloody stuff up” but in those days we thought it was the best way.37

The week long filming includes visits to more families that the group help out with reconnecting to their families. Much of the filming takes place in the car and is interspersed with the meetings in the homes of families they are assisting to reunite. The conversations in the car are reflexive and capture the gentle but insistent mood created by the filmmaker. This is a film that does not shout at you but sensitively puts forward the anguish that is apparent at many of the meetings. There is a conversation about the laws regarding the removal of Aboriginal children. Peter gives a quick overview of the historical time line under the

Figure 29 Robyn Vincent and Coral Edwards showing the emotional strain of reuniting families. Still from Link-Up Diary, (1987).

Aboriginal Protection Act of New South Wales 1909 and notes that after 1950 it was more likely that Aboriginal children were fostered or adopted into non-Indigenous families.

After visiting three more homes they return to Susan’s house with the information Peter had collected from the archives, assuring Susan that Willie is truly her birth father. They leave Susan’s home and head to one more visit at Cronulla before they head home to Canberra.

The emotional toll on the group is significant (Figure 29) and they stop off at the beach for a time to recoup their thoughts. They don’t say much to each other they just sit on the beach for a while. Coral says you think you become immune but you don’t. By the end of the week it becomes “one great sadness.” She says, “imagine there had been a battle, and a battlefield, the battle is finished and everyone is starting to move away but there’s all the wounded still lying on the ground back there. Well someone has got to go back there and pick up those wounded and bring them back with us because they can’t be left there.”

The car travels down the road back to Canberra.

The pensive mood created by the filmmaker belies the rage that the workers feel as they carry out their work. The great sadness that Coral talks about, the anger Peter feels as he talks to David in the car about how most of the information held in the government archives is accessible to Indigenous people if they knew it was there. However, because of the mistrust most Indigenous people have of government authorities they do not realise that they have every right to access these public records about themselves. The film produces an aura of quiet and methodical determination on the part of the group which includes MacDougall because of the way he quietly includes himself in the film. In this case this film benefits being made by a non-Indigenous filmmaker, because of the strong emotional toll it takes on the Link-Up workers. As filmmaker Frances Peters-Little contends that:

> filmmaking or storytelling can be a very personal thing, and that there is an attainable middle ground, for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film and television makers to be capable of telling Aboriginal stories, on the proviso that they make the conscious decision to avoid the pendulum swing between the noble and the savage representations.

*Link-Up Diary*, (1987), portrays a particularly human edge to the separation of Indigenous children from their parents a process that is now known as the Stolen Generations. The film is significant in that it is a forerunner to the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry into stolen children.

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38 MacDougall, *Link Up Diary*.
tabled in the federal parliament in 1996. It differs from the film *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) in that it is more intent on looking in greater detail at the inter-personal dynamics of the Link-Up team workers and their sensitive exchanges between themselves and the people they are trying to help. It focuses more on the emotional cost to the team, that is, those working to restore the balance of injustice inflicted by the state welfare authorities on so many Indigenous families. As Peter Read states in relation to the closing of the government reserves:

> I’m an historian but I realise what a determined and comprehensive effort there had been on the part of the APB [Aborigines Protection Board] really to prevent [Indigenous] people from having this association with each other. The decision was taken to send everybody off the reserves and it had consequences not only because everybody lost their birth place; but they also had all those generations separated; this is way back in 1910 when the dispersals as we call them really began in earnest after the Protection Act was passed in 1909 – the families were being driven off reserves everywhere. It wasn’t just about losing a birth place; it was losing contact with those people who could tell you where you came from.40

This film differs in the way Indigenous Australians are represented in documentary film to the way they are represented in *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983). While both films treat the same subject matter, the approach taken by MacDougall exposes a more intimate side to the policy that separated Aboriginal families. The people in his film appear more vulnerable because they are shown dealing with trauma on a personal level of engagement. In *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), the focus is on exposing the widespread practice of forced child removal. It takes a broader view and examines the role of institutions and the government agencies involved in the process. The heavy reliance on archive material creates a distance between the viewer and the subjects of the film. Even in the interviews with the five people, the intimacy is not achieved on the same level as in *Link-Up Diary*, (1987). *Link-Up Diary*, (1987) represents the victims of this policy as individuals who simply want to be re-united with their families. They are represented as people on a journey of discovery. The inclusion of the Link-Up team and MacDougall in this journey makes their experiences shared because they and the viewer are taken on the journey too. In this way *Link-Up Diary*, (1987) represents Indigenous Australians in documentary film as individuals trying to deal with the fall-out of having their lives having been interfered with by government agencies. The personalised trauma is skilfully conveyed in the way MacDougall approaches the topic.

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40 MacDougall, *Link Up Diary*. 
Reception

*Link-Up Diary*, (1987), was first screened “in the Old Playhouse Theatre in Canberra to an audience of 1200 people” shortly after its release in 1987. The film’s reception was more muted in comparison with *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) which is more readily linked to the Stolen Generations. However, it is *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), that leaves the viewer with a sense that these events are not contained within their historical context as portrayed in *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) but rather it tells the viewer that the effects are still being keenly felt in the wider Indigenous community. In this respect the film, is more disquieting. From the time Peter Read published his paper, *The Stolen Generations* (a term he coined) in 1981, the three films, Edward’s *It’s a Long Road Back*, (1981); *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), and *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), provide visual accounts of government policies that continue to impact upon the lives of many Indigenous people across Australia. As part of the Stolen Generations discourse they helped to heighten popular awareness of the situation and are intimately connected with the establishment of the inquiry into the Stolen Generations.

Conclusion

Today *Link-Up Diary*, (1987) is primarily used in educational institutions to provoke debate and to portray the everyday reality of Indigenous people affected by the past policies of the state welfare authority, the APB. It contributes to debates about the representation of Indigenous Australians in documentary film by showing how the policies which led to the separation of Aboriginal families affected individual people. The new insight it offers provides a space for empathic reflection of how Aboriginal people cope with the ways in which government agencies interfered in their lives.

*Link-Up Diary*, (1987), addresses the issues of the Stolen Generation in a more contemporary way than *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), which relies more heavily on presenting archival film footage and still photographs. MacDougall does employ these montages to a small degree in the opening scenes of *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), but only as a device to contextualise the narrative and provide evidence of the longevity of the effects of the APB practices. Importantly *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), appears to ask the viewer to be involved in the journey that requires a more sustained emotional commitment to understand the ongoing problems faced by many Indigenous people today; it deals more squarely with the contemporary “battlefield” and the people who go back to pick up the wounded.

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By using the allegory of a battlefield, Edwards encapsulates the type of work the Link-Up team does and at once identifies the reasons why *Link-Up Diary*, (1987) represents its subjects in the manner it does. The film is contemplative and intimate, drawing the viewer into understanding the lives of the subjects in the film. MacDougall wants the viewer to identify personally with them, to feel their pain and anguish, to advocate for them and to raise awareness that many Indigenous Australians dealing with the traumatic effects of family separation in their everyday lives.

The film provides a ‘conversation’ space with the Indigenous people portrayed in the film and reaches audiences to provoke a more intimate consideration of their plight. The Link-Up team is positioned as the ambulance drivers and councillors for the wounded affected by the draconian state welfare system that made many efforts to erase Aboriginality from Australian society. The victims and their rescuers continue to suffer the consequences of those policies.

The film also represents an endpoint in Australia about collaboration between white filmmakers who are professionally trained in ethnographic filmmaking techniques and Indigenous people who want their stories told within a broader national narrative. Overall MacDougall’s work is significant in changing the direction of ethnographic filmmaking in Australia and in promoting collaboration with Indigenous communities but it also reveals the limitations of the collaborative process. *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), is an intimate film, but its collaborative agenda is limited. MacDougall knows how he wants to make the film. He is willing to follow the protocols but maintains control of the camera and equipment. However, the time for Indigenous filmmakers to take control of the presentation of their stories had now arrived.
Section Four


The three films analysed in this section represent some recent work of Indigenous filmmakers. They are: *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002); *Willaberta Jack*, (2007) and *Samson and Delilah*, (2009). Each has been made by filmmakers that were trained in programmes run by organisations such as the Aboriginal owned and run media production company, Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, (CAAMA) or in programmes targeting talented Indigenous students at the Australian Film, Radio and Television School in Sydney or at the ABC.

The increased opportunities for Indigenous people to step into filmmaking have dramatically changed the ways in which Indigenous Australians are represented in documentary film. In the previous section, it was demonstrated how Indigenous people became involved in the filmmaking process. In contrast, the films selected in the following chapters, the filmmakers
control the directing, writing and cinematography of the films as well as many of the technical and post production roles, such as editing, needed to produce a film.

Each of the filmmakers discussed in the following chapters were aware of and employed important cultural protocols when they made their films. In the past, infringements of these important considerations have been neglected or ignored, causing much grief for the people and relatives of those represented in the film. The heavy responsibility for Indigenous filmmakers to observe these protocols correctly is apparent in the interviews I conducted with the filmmakers and they go to great lengths to ensure accuracy and integrity.

Director Mitch Torres was asked by the Jarlmadangah Community near Derby in Western Australia to present their views about an incident that occurred in 1916. *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), is a visual document of the testimonies presented by community members. They wanted to make evidence available to younger generations of their community about the how the incident was experienced by them because government records of the crime conflicted with their memory of what occurred. The use of documentary film as an evidentiary record is a way Indigenous Australians have found is an effective vehicle to present their side of the story not only to their communities but also to a white audience.

In David Tranter’s, *Willaberta Jack*, (2007), the use of a single narrator as well as the two community elders who tell the story is used to present an historical event from a different perspective. Tranter’s sparse use of actors and his imaginative use of sound effects and bold camera direction is a result of his opportunity to be trained at the CAAMA production studio in Alice Springs. Funding for these ‘on-site’ training houses means that many Aboriginal filmmakers are able to learn their craft in locations closer to their homelands and in an environment sympathetic to their cultural needs.

In Warwick Thornton’s, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009) Thornton presents the plight experienced by many Indigenous children in contemporary times. Like the two other films analysed in this section, Thornton wants to show what it is like to be a child of a dysfunctional Indigenous community and how this impacts upon their chances of living in a ‘strong’ and ‘straight’ way. The lives of these children have been affected historically and contemporaneously by government policies and interventions, prejudices and misunderstandings. Thornton’s film makes a social statement about both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia’s neglect of these children.
Indigenous filmmaking demonstrates that all Indigenous Australians belong to a vibrant and dynamic society. Despite the negative representations of Indigenous Australians presented by the mainstream electronic and print media which focuses on poverty and violence, filmmakers, such as Warwick Thornton addresses these representations from an Indigenous perspective as in *Samson and Delilah*, (2009). Each of the filmmakers I interviewed demonstrated that they have a strong sense of who they are and appeared confident in their resolve to represent Aboriginal stories from an Aboriginal perspective as a way of subverting and transforming the dominant discourse.
Chapter Six

Films That Re-Write and Re-Right History: 2002 - 2007


Introduction

As we discovered in the previous chapter, the 1980s and the 1990s were watershed decades in the steps toward self-representation of Indigenous people on documentary film. *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), demonstrated the continuing effects of the Stolen Generations. To redress these inequalities, the ABC (1987) and SBS (1991) established Indigenous production units to complement the Indigenous programmes commenced at the Australian Film, Television
Radio School (AFTRS) that began in 1975. Indigenous film production houses, such as Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) were formed with public funding in Alice Springs in 1988 and were in keeping with the recommendations of the 1978 Ethnographic Conference referred to in Chapter Five. By the year 2000, these initiatives had begun to blossom in ways that now promised a rich source of films that enabled the dialogue about Australian historical narratives to be viewed from a fresh perspective. The two films discussed in this chapter were produced after 2000 by directors who were trained at CAAMA and or the ABC.

The establishment of the CAAMA production house in 1988 played a significant role in promoting the self-representation of Indigenous Australians on film. Initially established as a radio broadcaster, the management of CAAMA responded to the introduction of the Remote Commercial Television Service (RCTS), a satellite delivery system of telecommunications. Many Indigenous communities living within the satellite footprint were concerned about the unfettered flow of non-Indigenous programming into their communities, much of which was
culturally offensive. Equally important was their concern that it would be transmitting in English rather than the local community languages. Indeed, one prominent community member from Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara pointed out in 1985 that: “unimpeded satellite transmission in our communities will be like having hundreds of whitefellas visit without permits every day.”1 CAAMA made a successful bid for a television licence that ensured Indigenous community control of incoming content in the Central satellite footprint area. (Figure 30)

In the documentary film which traces the establishment of the CAAMA group of companies, A Story About CAAMA, (c2005?) the then Chief Executive Officer, Cilla Collins, said that: the film production unit began making community announcement productions about “alcohol, petrol sniffing, bath time and healthy eating so we could get black faces in television.” In the documentary film made in 1991 Satellite Dreaming, Paddy Stewart, a member of the Warlpiri Media Committee explained: “We use our local TV to show Dreamtime stories told by old men, or for custodians to teach about the land and that’s why we make our own television.”2 Depending on the content of the films made in remote communities, many are sold to CAAMA to be broadcast on Imparja Indigenous television. CAAMA Productions also assists with post production, editing and language translation for those films requiring subtitling.3

The manner in which the satellite was established meant that many remote communities established individual media companies, such as the Warlpiri Media Association in 1985 at Yuendumu. The close links with CAAMA ensure that programming and film production is centred on language and cultural maintenance as well as promoting filmmaking as a viable career option. Warwick Thornton, David Tranter, Mitch Torres, Francis Jupurrurla Kelly and Rachel Perkins are some of the notable filmmakers to have benefited from traineeships offered by CAAMA Productions. Perkins and Thornton also graduated in 1996 from the Australian Film Radio and Television School (AFTRS).

The two films analysed in this chapter, Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre, (2002) and Willaberta Jack, (2007), were made by Indigenous filmmakers who were trained at the ABC and or CAAMA Productions. Both films address episodes where the

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1 Wendy Bell, A Remote Possibility: the battle for Imparja television (Alice Springs, NT: IAD Press, 2008), 86.
3 Dena Curtis, Personal Communication, 8 June 2007.
justice system failed Indigenous people and as such these events have carried scars into the present.

The significance of the national broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, as well as the Indigenous run CAAMA Productions in Alice Springs, in promoting Indigenous participation in the filmmaking and media industries has been profound. Both the filmmakers discussed in this chapter and the one following have benefitted from the public support of these important cultural institutions. As a national broadcaster, the ABC has developed policies about the employment of Indigenous Australians. The ABC initiated programs under their Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) with a co-ordinator of Aboriginal Employment and Training and the establishment of an Aboriginal Programs unit in 1987.\footnote{Michael Meadows and Helen Molnar, "Bridging the Gaps: towards a history of Indigenous media in Australia," \textit{Media History} 8, no. 1 (2002): 15.} One of the first productions made at the Film Unit, \textit{BabaKiueria}, (1987), in which Mitch Torres played the part of the reporter, was a parody on the classic ethnographic films, discussed in Chapter One. As a national broadcaster the ABC screens on-going programmes such as \textit{Message Stick} which adopts a pan-Aboriginal perspective and is conscious of attracting a considerable non-Indigenous audience. When I interviewed \textit{Message Stick} host Miriam Corowa at the ABC studios in Ultimo, Sydney she explained:

I think the key is education too. It really is the key. I feel the interest we’re seeing in programs like \textit{Message Stick} from schools around the country is really promising; because the kids are finally starting to learn about this stuff, to appreciate and understand it to participate; they’re having Indigenous people come in and tell stories and do dances, explain stuff and getting kids involved. That is the key, you know, when people start to own this as part of who they are and that’s when people will start to care and value.\footnote{Miriam Corowa, Personal Communication, 1 July 2009.}

As well as producing \textit{Message Stick} in-house, the ABC also buys material from Indigenous production houses such as CAAMA.

CAAMA Productions was established in 1988 in Alice Springs by the CAAMA media group that started as a small radio station in 1980. The function of the production house was to provide commercial film and material for the recently established Indigenous television station Imparja Television, the first Indigenous owned television station in Australia. Located in Alice Springs, a regional town with a large Indigenous population, its role as an ‘on-site’ production house makes it more accessible to Indigenous people wanting to become involved in media and film production. Although it receives substantial public funding, it is one arm of an Indigenous owned group of companies. CAAMA Productions runs courses in
filmmaking and media production on a more informal basis that is more suitable to local and ‘out-of-town’ trainees.


Background
This film is representative of the type of work produced by an Indigenous filmmaker who has successfully moved through training programs established by government funding programs and initiatives to encourage the participation of Indigenous Australians in broadcast media. Mitch Torres was employed as a journalist at the ABC for more than twenty years and her move into filmmaking and working at CAAMA Productions was a result of her political activism in Indigenous and environmental issues. Through her career as a journalist, she quickly learned to understand the power that information and knowledge can give. Importantly, she realised how film as a medium could be utilised to harness that power and how it could be used to bring about change and awareness.6

Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre, (2002), by Mitch Torres runs for 00:52:37 minutes and traces events that occurred in 1916 when three Nyikina men were shot dead in retaliation for an assault on pastoralist, George Wye. As part of the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri clans in this region of the Kimberley, and a Jabirr Jabirr woman, Mitch Torres tells their story on film through the voices of Jarlmadangah community elders, Johnny Watson and Peter Clancy. (Figure 31) In the conversation I recorded with Mitch Torres in 2007 she indicated that the film was commissioned by the Jarlmadangah Community and was produced in conjunction with the memorial ceremony featured at the end of the film.7 She is related to members of the community although she does not live with them. She worked closely with elders Johnny Watson and Peter Clancy who told the story to her so that it could be recorded on film.

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7 Ibid.
Many Indigenous elders realise the importance of film as a way of legitimating their oral histories, land custodianship and in the formation of clan identity in a colonial environment that appears to place more value on written records rather than oral history traditions. The consulting historian for the film, Dr Maryanne Jebb, has worked with communities such as Jarlmadangah to mount legal cases over land rights claims.\(^8\) The community was established in 1987 by elders John (Johnny in the film) and his brother Harry Watson who wanted to create an environment in which strong family ties, traditional language, law and culture were taught to their children. Now the community is “often hailed as ‘a model community’ for its many social and cultural achievements.”\(^9\) The community also has two websites one titled, *Stories from Jarlmadangah*, which displays stories relating to the people living at the community and the other *Jarlmadangah Community*, which was still under construction in August 2012. This type of interaction with technology and accepting visitors to the

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\(^8\) Dr Mary-Anne Jebb has worked with the Jarlmadangah and other communities, recording oral histories. She is the author of *Blood Sweat and Welfare*, 2002; *Movanjum: 50 years community history*, 2009. Currently she is employed by the National Native Title Tribunal as well as working as an independent consultant in history and cultural mapping. [Accessed 12/11/2012].

community demonstrates their solid understanding of what film and technology can do to enhance their lives. Making a film to state their historical narrative is a part of recognising how they fit in with the broader historical narrative and is instrumental in establishing their identity in the contemporary milieu.

**Funding**

The film was funded under the auspices of the Film Finance Corporation a government body established to encourage the production of film projects such as this. The film also had the production assistance of SBS Independent, an arm of SBS Television and is part of its mission statement that works to support the production of films with Indigenous content and themes.

**The Film**

This documentary film is the story told about the Mowla Bluff Massacre, which occurred in 1916, demonstrates the clashes between white written records and the oral history traditions of the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri peoples. The use of black and white film by Torres indicates to the viewer which sections are re-constructions of historic events and matches her incorporation of archival material which is also in black and white. The colour segments remind the viewer that these sections represent contemporary times, such as in the interviews with members of the community who tell their stories about what happened in the past.

The film opens with black and white film footage. The camera is our eye as it travels quickly over the landscape revealing the site in which the narrative is situated. Non-digetic music, that is, music not heard by the people in the film, is traditional Nyikina and Mangala music and is played as a subtitled voice-over describes a killing site.

The story begins with a black and white reconstruction and using archival photographs which describe a chance encounter in 1916 between two men from the Nyikina and Mangala clans and Nicholas Kardamity, a non-Aboriginal resident of Fisherman’s Bend near Broome in Western Australia. Kardamity reported to police in Broome that the two men had gunshot wounds that had been inflicted several months earlier at Mowla Bluff Station. Subsequently a doctor removed the embedded bullets from the men and an enquiry was undertaken into the allegations against pastoralists George Wye, George Lovell and Jack Tighe and two policemen Police Constables Jury and Watson. Apart from the initial inquiry of the wounded Nyikina and Mangala men discovered in Broome, there appears to be no further inquiries made of them. The report, which was released two years later, did not substantiate the claims
made by the Nyikina and Mangala men. The film reproduces archival records of the correspondence between Broome police station and the Commissioner of Police in Perth to establish the context of the narrative.

The narrative then switches to using colour film when the viewer is taken to the Jarlmadangah Community today where a number of them tell their side of the story to the camera. The stories relate to the bad treatment experienced by the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri whose families worked on Mowla Bluff Station in the early decades of the twentieth century. They include stories of abuse and rape that the women suffered under the station manager George Wye and his colleagues, George Lovell, Jack Tighe and George Layman who are described as thugs who regularly made trouble for the Aboriginal people working on the station.

The incident that started the shootings, which took place in September 1916, was George Wye’s demand for a Nyikina man to hand over his pet dingo that he used to help him hunt food. Wye hunted for dingo scalps and wanted to add this dog to his collection. The Nyikina man, Nyimba, refused to give up his dog and Wye threatened to shoot him. But Nyimba was quicker and hit him on the neck with a boomerang, knocking him from his horse. Other Nyikina men with Nyimba speared him in the legs. Wye’s horse galloped back to the station and the other white men were alerted.

The consequences of this event ripple through the district and the shooting of Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri people are portrayed in the film as indiscriminate and unprovoked. White men from the station use the incident as the rationale to rid the area of any Aboriginal people. This is given authority by the inclusion of PCs Jury and Watson who participate in the shootings, bringing the number of white men in the posse to five. Groups of Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri men were taken off in chains and executed and then burnt until their bones could be broken up and made difficult to find. The women and children were treated in a similar fashion being told to collect wood and then realising too late that they were to be shot and burnt too.

The film then traces the process of the enquiry conducted in 1918 and how it found no evidence to confirm the reports made by the two Aboriginal men. However, the police enquiry accepted the reports lodged at the time of the incident by the two police officers, Jury and Watson. With no conflicting evidence, except that of the Nyikina and Mangala men, the inquiry was quickly forgotten by the authorities. In the film this process is represented by
archive stills of the correspondence between the various levels of the police enquiry. However Johnny and Peter tell the viewing audience the stories have been passed down in their families since that time. Another enquiry conducted in 2000 did not find any new evidence of the incident. This juxtaposition between oral histories and the archival records has in the past made Aboriginal voices silent.

Torres employs the technique of using black and white film to cover the re-enactments of historical events and uses colour to denote the present. These are intertwined with archive film footage and still photographs from archives such as the Film and Sound Archive and the National Archives of Australia. Torres employs camera cuts to birds, rocks and the river to signify them to act as witnesses to the atrocities perpetrated on the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri people. The implication is that if the landscape could speak they would be able to tell the truth about what happened to the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri people. Their continued presence in the contemporary colour footage indicates that they carry knowledge of all the stories about the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri people because they are also an integral part of the part of the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri country.

Through the storytellers Johnny Watson and Peter Clancy, the audience hears about how the perpetrators covered up their crimes. Throughout the film the retaliation for Wye’s assault is
portrayed as not confined to the perpetrators who never seem to be found. Rather, the police, along with Lovell, Tighe and Layman, decided to take three Aboriginal men who had gathered with their families for a ceremony near a creek. The posse put the three men in neck chains and took them away and executed them. The film cuts between the storytellers’ visit via helicopter to the site of the massacre which is shot in colour. (Figure 32) The importance of landscape here is underlined by the long camera shots of the location that publicise the ownership of the story to an Aboriginal audience. The landscape places the narrative semiotically and mnemonically for the Aboriginal people who hear the story. The closer relatives of these people can make legitimate claims to the land; the film becomes their ‘written’ record of the event that took place in this location.

The film concludes with the community gathering for a ceremony at Mowla Bluff Station in 2000. (Figure 33) A memorial is erected so that all our people will be remembered. This demonstration of agency is considered as important for the well-being of the community. If white written records do not exist of these shootings then the families of those people killed will ensure they are remembered. The use of a memorial cairn and inter-title at the end “Lest We Forget” places the death of these people in the context of war because they use the allegories of ANZAC and those symbols of white loss in battle to demonstrate they have
legitimate fallen in their warfare of survival in their historical narrative. This is a cathartic moment for the community.

**Reception**

In 2002, *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), received the Tudawali Award and was screened at the ImagineNATIVE Film Festival in Ontario Canada in 2004. It has screened on the ABC’s Message Stick programme in 2003. The film is distributed by Ronin Films which specialises in the sale and distribution of educational films. It provides a link to a study guide prepared by the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) and is suitable for upper primary through to university level education.


**Background**

David Tranter began his career as a sound technician trainee at CAAMA Productions in Alice Springs. His training enabled him to work on the successful *Nganampa Anwernekenhe* series produced by CAAMA Productions with cinematographer Warwick Thornton that include titles such as *Rosalie’s Story*, (2003), about Rosalie Kunoth-Monks who starred in Chauvel’s feature film classic *Jedda*, (1955); and instructional videos such as *Karli Jalangu*, (2004), about making boomerangs and *Crook Hat and Camphoo*, (2005), about making spears and *Living Country*, (2005), about the impact of a proposed nuclear waste dump in close proximity to Alice Springs. In the interview I conducted with David Tranter in 2007, one of the reasons he gave for being a filmmaker was that: “we should be telling our own stories and document our own history too.”

*Willaberta Jack*, (2007), portrays a story that is owned by his family that has been passed from one generation to the next. Tranter was concerned about making the film because:

> there’s a lot of . . . Aboriginal elders that participated um not participated, but were involved in this thing that happened in 1929 and, um, with making the documentaries you wouldn’t want to tread on other people’s toes or you know, upset another family group or you know, we try to keep everything level and not to disgrace another one’s family and stuff like that because there where so many old people involved in what happened in the past . . . it was a different world we were living in with those particular days.

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10 David Tranter, Personal Communication, 8 June 2007.

11 Ibid.
Tranter’s comment and concern underlines the difficulties many Indigenous filmmakers must negotiate when they present stories on film. A story belonging to a clan of which one is also a member carries the risk of being the anthropological ‘insider’ and any betrayal of cultural protocols and false testimony would attract social stigmatisation and exclusion. The filmmakers have a duty to represent the people in the story in respectful and truthful ways.

**Funding**

*Willaberta Jack*, (2007), was developed with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission (AFC) Indigenous Unit, the film was also supported through the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records Program of the Department of Communications, Information and the Arts.

**The Film**

*Willaberta Jack*, (2007), directed by David Tranter runs for 00:25:00 minutes. The storytellers are Donald Thompson, a senior Alyawarre man and Alec Peterson, who are custodians of the story. They narrate the story in Alyawarre dialect which is sub-titled in English. (Figure 34) The film also includes narration by English speaking Paul Henness.

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The film is about Willaberta Jack an Aboriginal man working on a pastoral property near Hatches Creek in the Northern Territory in 1929 who murdered a white pastoralist Bill Henty in self-defence. Henty accused Willaberta Jack of harbouring a run away Aboriginal boy and tried to enter the house that Willaberta Jack was minding for his boss, Dan Curry who was away on business in Darwin. In the ensuing altercation Henty was fatally wounded and Willaberta Jack fled into the bush. After some months avoiding police patrols, Willaberta Jack turned himself in at a pastoral station. He was arrested and sent to Darwin for trial and acquitted of the murder. However, a group of white pastoralists, friends of Henty decide to avenge his death and gave Willaberta Jack flour laced with cyanide poisoning. Willaberta Jack died from ingesting the flour he had made into dough cakes.

To tell the story, Tranter uses archival still photographs in a similar manner to that used by Torres to help legitimate the oral history evidence to a western audience. Tranter has used the court records to prove that his kin Willaberta Jack was innocent and freed by the court of the charges. Throughout the film the reconstructions are shot in colour and are interspersed with black and white archival material.

Tranter’s purpose in making the film was to re-tell an historical event from an Indigenous perspective because: “documenting stories like from the past and stuff well, you know, there are a lot of people who say “oh that’s the past don’t bring it up,” ya know, but it’s important for us to bring that stuff up because it’s our history, you know.”13 The film succeeds in telling the story from an Aboriginal perspective and reminds the viewing audience that the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous pastoral workers on the frontier could be tenuous and many Indigenous people were victimised. The film was intended for a wide audience and although the narrative is full of violence, the film never makes visual images of these acts but cleverly uses sound and images of the landscape and camera cuts to establish the violent relationship between Willaberta Jack, and his murderers, Henty and the boy Philomac.

The film is narrated by Paul Henness, who was the project officer for the Northern Territory Film Office and currently the president of the Film and Television Association of the Northern Territory, located in Alice Springs. It appears that his association with the filmmakers at CAAMA and the suitability of his voice for the narration led Tranter to select him for the role. The story was filmed in the landscape where the events unfolded in in 1929

in Arimatyerre country in the Northern Territory. Tranter’s film differs from that of Torres’ in that he relies more heavily on reconstruction of the past through imaginative use of sound and clever juxtaposition of cutting camera shots and fades between shots to blend the visual narrative with the aural narrative, although like Torres he also uses archival photographs, which are in black and white to support the story.

Significantly, it was only the year prior to these events that the Coniston Massacre had taken place nearby in which large numbers of Arimatyerre people were killed. Moreover, the events portrayed in Tranter’s film were occurring at about the same time the SABAR scientists from Adelaide University were making their annual field trips into this region. The film they made, *Life in Central Australia*, (1931), is the recording of their Cockatoo Creek
visit in 1931 and was filmed only two years after Willaberta Jack was murdered by Henty’s friends. Cleland’s concern about gaining the cooperation of the Arimatyerre at this time was well founded.

Because of Tranter’s expertise in sound recording, the film tells the story through a soundscape that evokes a deep emotional response in the viewer. Sounds of chains dragging on rocks and over dirt tracks, sounds of the bush at night give ideas about how scared the boy Philomac was under the whip of Harry Henty, and the almost suffocating chaos that Willaberta Jack feels in his mind when he is being transported to Darwin for trial. (Figure 35) All this Tranter does with sound and quick camera cuts between the animals that inhabit the landscape and archival pictures of Willaberta Jack’s family, the land, the river and the birds squawking; all the elements are brought together to create a tension so tight the viewer has no choice but to understand the turmoil that was in the mind of Willaberta Jack at that time.

Apart for the scenes, that bookend the film, where the fore-arms of the actor are shown, and in the making of the dough cakes, no actors appear in other parts of the film. However there are scenes in which the storytellers talk to the camera in Alyawarre dialect language which are sub-titled for a wider audience. (Figure 36) This indicates the language group from which the story originates and is an important aspect of the storytelling which stamps the narrative’s genealogy. The re-enactments are made by the careful use of camera shots and sound and the

Figure 36 The Storytellers Donald Thompson and Alec Peterson. Still from Willaberta Jack, (2007).
clever use of shadows to identify the characters in the narrative. After the Indigenous stock-hand, Philomac, escapes from Harry Henty one night while out boundary riding, Henty rides off in a rage to retrieve him. Philomac passes close by to the house of stockman, Dan Curry whose house is being looked after by Willaberta Jack and his wife while Curry is away selling Wolfram (tungsten). Henty accuses Willaberta Jack of hiding Philomac and tries to enter the house where Willaberta Jack’s wife is hiding. In self-defence Willaberta Jack shoots Henty and the other Indigenous stockman travelling with Henty rides off back to the station. Willaberta Jack takes to the bush and for three months he is pursued by the police.

The narrator fills in some of the details. Eventually, Willaberta Jack tired of being on the run, turns himself in at a near-by pastoral station. He is arrested and charged with murder, then taken to Darwin for trial and is acquitted. However, on his return home, associates of Henty supply Willaberta Jack and his wife with poisoned flour and other rations. The rations were accepted by Willaberta Jack who thought the white men were being sorry for his arrest. The significance of the scenes at the beginning and at the end of the film is made clear. Willaberta Jack made the dough cakes from the poisoned flour and ate them and died. The unresolved situation of Willaberta Jack’s wife who did not eat the poisoned dough cakes is that she seems to have been unable to make any charges against those men, thereby demonstrating the limitations of the white justice system for Aboriginal people.

**Reception**

*Willaberta Jack*, (2007), was screened on ABC’s *Message Stick* in 2007 and was nominated for Best Documentary at the Winnipeg Indigenous Film Festival in Canada. In the same year it screened at the Garma Film Festival and the ImagineNATIVE Film Festival in Canada as well as the Aotearoa Film Festival in New Zealand. It is part of the CAAMA Collection distributed by Ronin Films. Although to date there appears to be no study guides available, this film has been added to list of educational films distributed by Ronin films, who specialise in promoting films with educational merit.

**Discussion**

In 2007 I visited the Central Australian Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs, and conducted interviews with three filmmakers; David Tranter, the director of *Willaberta Jack* (2007), Dena Curtis the film’s editor and Warwick Thornton, the film’s cinematographer. I also interviewed director of *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), Mitch Torres in Broome, Western Australia. The interviews covered subjects such as
stereotyping, the protocols of filming in Indigenous communities and some of the problems encountered by making permanent recordings of people. The interviews revealed that filmmaking provides Indigenous communities and individual filmmakers with opportunities to relate stories and events from an Indigenous perspective. These opportunities provide a space for political and artistic expression and the films can be distributed to audiences at local, national and international levels. Indeed many of the films produced by these Indigenous filmmakers have been awarded high accolades in international film festivals such as the Sundance Film Festival in the United States, ImagineNATIVE Film Festival in Canada and Cannes in France.14

For Mitch Torres and David Tranter, the purpose of filmmaking is not simply producing a ‘celluloid’ version of a story, dance or song. The process is mediated by cultural protocols, where particularly in remote communities film production is more likely to be governed by strictures of ‘ownership’, and kinship associations. In the films selected for discussion here, both stories were managed for the filming process by the community employing the concept of story managers and story delivery. Film anthropologist, Eric Michaels who worked with the Warlpiri people in the early 1980s outlines how this language group organised storytelling for film based on traditional protocols.

In relation to the Warlpiri people living at Yuendumu, he said that: “it is the genealogy of an item – not its individual creation – that authorizes [sic] it.”15 The economic value is not in the item itself but the knowledge of its genealogy, which may be interpreted as its history of knowledge transference and therefore its authenticity, through acknowledgement and consensus, by the community.16 This concept can be extended, with qualifications, to the practices of storytelling in other Indigenous language groups such as the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri people where community elders were in charge of the storytelling and the filming of the narrative.

In similar ways, Michaels found that when the Warlpiri people made films, a far greater number of people came to work on the film than were apparently required, only later to realise that each person had a role to play in the telling of the narrative. Simplistically,

16 Ibid.
ceremonial events require two sets of participants, Kirda (which roughly translates as Bosses or Owners) and describes the relationship between patrilines and Kurdungulu (that roughly translates as managers; workers; mailmen; policemen; trustees) that are related through matrilines.\textsuperscript{17} This means that “Kirda have the right to perform stories but only in the presence of Kurdungurlu who have the responsibility to know (but not to perform) the story and provided an equally important function and responsibility as witnesses who authorise the telling and make sure it is correctly performed.”\textsuperscript{18}

The protocols are not specifically outlined in the two films discussed here because it is an assumption that Indigenous viewers have ‘common sense’ knowledge of these systems of knowledge sharing and transference. Because these aspects of a film are not culturally relevant to a non-Indigenous audience, the acknowledgment is confined to the Indigenous communities. The filmmakers confirmed that the protocols were followed throughout the production of the films because the Indigenous groups involved in the making of the films would be very aware of which individuals held the specific telling and managerial roles.\textsuperscript{19}

For Torres and Tranter there is an understanding that reality is tied semiotically to the performance being filmed, so its ‘truthfulness’ is of great importance. These protocols have been transferred to the production of films because for Indigenous audiences, the medium of film offers a visual ceremonial telling of the story and the same rules apply to filmmaking as with traditional forms of storytelling. The importance of semiotic and narrative correctness is due to the strong and active links between the speaker of the narrative and the genealogy of the narrative.

The process and negotiations that lead to the production of a film also become part of the genealogy of the narrative. The genealogy is not only about who the story is about and therefore who is cast in the role of teller and manager but it is also about how the story is handed on to new generations. How the narrative was ‘performed’ by the storytellers, the community’s involvement, what negotiations needed to take place to allow the film to be made, now become part of the genealogy of the narrative. The making of the film also becomes incorporated into the history of the story and its telling. The incorporation of these processes surrounding the film’s production into the story’s narrative is important in

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 102.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Tranter, Personal Communication 8 June 2007; Torres, Personal Communication 18 June 2007.
confirming the ownership and location of the story. The importance of location plays an important role in the ownership of a story.

In *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), and *Willaberta Jack*, (2007), the landscape was used extensively to provide semiotic messages about place. Landscape plays a pivotal role in the legitimation of the ownership of the narrative because in Indigenous culture the landscape is a living entity, one that gives direction and acts as an anchor point from which law and reality are sourced. By employing panning shots of landscape and the ‘acting’ of birds, water and topography the filmmakers effectively send messages to the audience that create deep emotive empathy, not only with the people featured in the narrative but also the importance of the landscape in the film narrative. The landscape legitimates the truthfulness of the narrative and the custodianship of country and provides an important political and social context to the narrative. In a similar manner, Essie Coffey’s film, *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978), used panning shots of the landscape to strengthen her claims of belonging and ownership of the land; this also legitimates her role of leadership in her community.

*Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), and *Willaberta Jack*, (2007), make extensive use of the archives to assist in the story telling. In this respect they use conventional tropes of documentary filmmaking in similar ways used by Morgan and Bostock in *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983). The legitimation of events from a white perspective relies on written records as evidence and is often at odds with the tradition of oral history methods practiced in Indigenous communities. Both filmmakers employ the written records of white people to help support the evidence they have in their oral histories. Importantly in Torres’ film, the oral history as remembered by the Nyikina, Mangala and Karajarri people, claims that the written evidence is absent or purposefully corrupted to hide the true narrative of events about the massacre. However, this has the effect of showing how the two types of history can work together. The incorporation of two methodologies used in Western historical practice, underlines the Indigenous understanding of the visual cues important for aligning semiotic indicators from Indigenous storytelling, for example, the landscape as well as Western forms of legitimation such as written records. Like Western filmmakers they rely on the associative images drawn from archive photographs and film footage to underline key points in the historical narrative.
By using Western methods of scholarship the filmmakers help to confirm the truth of Indigenous story to an anticipated largely non-Indigenous audience. The archive records help to facilitate memories that would be familiar to a wider audience but it is a question of whose memories these archive films and photographs try to represent. They cannot represent the memories of the Indigenous people involved in the story because the records were produced by government bodies, which in 1916 and 1929 Indigenous people had no access to this type of written information. It may be possible that some individuals may have had access to newspaper reports; however the archive records appear to serve the purpose of confirming the Indigenous narrative and to make a case for the benefit of contemporary non-Indigenous and Indigenous audiences. It is difficult to identify where the filmmaker’s inclusion of Western archive records is part of the enculturation process or in fact a more ingenious attempt at underlining the one dimensional element of Westernised records. Clearly, the filmmakers discussed here have been exposed to documentary films on broadcast television and during their years at school and it would be considered a ‘normal’ method of putting together a documentary film. They qualify their approach to filmmaking by integrating cultural protocols into their filmmaking craft. Like all the films discussed in this thesis, the films discussed here can be read as cultural artefacts, objects produced within specific cultural ideologies. Similarly, an audience will read the films in ways that will be largely determined by their cultural perspectives. It is for these reasons Indigenous filmmakers to go great lengths to satisfy their Indigenous audiences knowing if they succeed there they will also satisfy non-Indigenous audiences.

In the 2007 interview with David Tranter about his ideas about filmmaking I asked him how he saw making films as a way of telling things of interest to Aboriginal people. He remarked that:

Oh since television is around I think its important for Aboriginal people to participate in making television too, you know, if we don’t do it well how are we going to know about making television, you know, white people are participating in it; well we should be participating in it too. . . . You know we should be telling our own stories and document our own history too.20

The comment underlines Tranter’s enthusiasm for making documentary films. The importance of recording history from an Indigenous perspective means that the historical narrative is enriched with other ways of interpreting the national narrative because he and

20 Tranter, Personal Communication 8 June 2007.
other Indigenous filmmakers can draw on these previously less known accounts of Australian history.

Tranter felt that it was important for his people to make films. For him he said that: “because he liked to tell the stories that belong to different people.” He explained that: “people like to make movies and write scripts based on events.” This comment underlines the enthusiasm that I encountered when talking with filmmakers like Tranter.

Conclusion

The films discussed in this chapter represent two examples of Aboriginal documentary filmmaking. Both films use family oral histories to relate the story from an Aboriginal perspective, which contest excepted white histories that are based on written records. Until Aboriginal filmmakers like Torres and Tranter presented these histories on film the minute details of the narratives were known only to the clans who hold the stories. By presenting their stories on film, Tranter and Torres have opened Indigenous interpretations of history to a wider audience, underlining the importance of adding narratives from differing perspectives to enrich the overall national historical narrative. Adding Indigenous narratives to the national collection has become a contentious issue for some sections of the white community.

Indeed Indigenous versions of historical events contest the white settler mythology of peaceful settlement and the mystical disappearance of Indigenous people. In reference to historian Ann Curthoys’ comments about the absence of Indigenous people from the Australian historical narrative, which she believes represents more a twentieth century understanding of the colonial past, she also notes that the conflicts between settlers and Indigenous people were replaced by a more palatable narrative of conflict between the land and the settler. It is a certain type of psychological disposition that appears to be inherent in the narratives, songs poems and popular fiction that create a positive image of the settler and in the instances referred to in both the films, pastoralists are represented as agents that are intent on ‘taming’ the land. Part of the process is eradicating the elements that prevent their economic success, including the intrusion of Aboriginal people who want to inhabit the land but who have a vastly different approach to the ways in which the land should be used. Curthoys argues that this narrative reversal, where white settlers have claimed the land for

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
themselves and who are “at home”, have come to resent the intrusions made on them by Aboriginal people who are perceived as nomads and whose “hold upon the land is tenuous and undeserved.”

The Aboriginal people represented in both films reposition them as the intruded upon, disrupting the historical mythology of the brave and resourceful settler who simply wants to eke out a living on the land; land that can at times be cruel and unforgiving. It is the unforgiving land that creates the idealised narrative of white settler Australian-ness. The convenience of placing the land as the object of conquering allows the invisibility of Indigenous people to be perpetuated as we have seen demonstrated in the films presented for discussion here and in the previous chapters.

What Indigenous filmmakers achieve by making films that present their version of the historical narrative is to disrupt the white settler mythology. The growing acceptance of multiple historical narratives in Australian historiography stems from feminist movements in the 1970s but also the inclusion of Indigenous rights movements influenced by the decolonisation of the African continent and the civil rights movement in the United States. Put together, they can be considered as being a catalyst for changes in the way Indigenous people in Australia were being represented. The move to self-representation has enabled contemporary Indigenous filmmakers to present histories that disrupt white mythologies and they therefore create a space where the Indigenous perspective of settlement and colonisation can be considered. Other documentary films such as *Ripples from Wave Hill*, (2008); *Freedom Rides: Charles Perkins*, (1993) *Vote Yes for Aborigines*, (2007) and *Embassy Days*, (2007) follow similar themes and what they achieve is to produce a pantheon of Indigenous heroes who played instrumental roles in Australia’s history; empowering Indigenous Australians.

Like documentary films made about white explorers and freedom fighters, these films try to fulfil a role in bringing these conflicts to the attention of a wider audience. In that sense, the films made by Indigenous filmmakers follow the conventional documentary style codes of the genre, however it is the off camera protocols combined with the manner in which scenes, landscape shots and the construction of some aspects of Indigenous narrative forms that make important differences to the people represented in the film and to those behind the camera.

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24 Ibid., 14.
Having control over film production is understood as being essential to promote cultural strength and identity.

The two films discussed here as well as the others mentioned above have all been screened on the ABC’s *Message Stick* Program ensuring a substantive non-Indigenous audience. Each of the films is included in many libraries in educational institutions, where they are used to provoke discussion and inform a significant section of the student population. Unlike the film made by Essie Coffey that portrayed her contemporary situation and the effects of cultural dysfunction brought about by dispossession, the purpose of the films made by Tranter and Torres demonstrate the role Indigenous people have played in Australian history. Their purpose is to circumvent the invisibility of Indigenous experiences in cross-cultural conflicts and to counter-narrate an embedded mythology about white settlement.

The ability to revisit and re-write and re-right history using film as a medium is a powerful tool for Indigenous people and an important vehicle of self-representation. Unlike the ethnographic and documentary films discussed so far, these films use Indigenous ‘insiders’ to direct the process of asking questions of the people who facilitate and provide a wider audience for the storytellers, the people who provide eyewitness accounts and ultimately decide how the film will be edited and presented and perhaps distributed. Cultural protocols mediate to a large extent the way the storytelling is performed and the filmmaker is responsible to ensure that the finished production is satisfactory to the community. The filmmakers have a lot invested in the film project because if they do not adhere to the cultural protocols, they will not be allowed to enter the community again. This is especially important to Aboriginal filmmakers like Mitch Torres and David Tranter, who are part of the communities to which these stories belong. The importance of self-representation for the community comes from the ownership of the story and the public announcement of this is made through the film.

Both the films discussed in this chapter are directed and photographed by Indigenous film crews. The production companies, Mayfan and CAAMA Productions both Indigenous run companies, demonstrate the expertise Indigenous filmmakers have achieved in a relatively short time frame. As the films demonstrate, the medium of film can be used to convey the collective memory of people previously silenced and for many communities, the filmmaker can provide an outlet for the expression of long silenced grief which can be cathartic for the
community; this is especially evident in *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002).

The films demonstrate the way in which film is used by Indigenous communities to tell stories that relate their histories. The oral history method of keeping histories in Indigenous communities has been a contentious issue for white Australians who rely on documents and written records to provide evidence. When atrocities against Indigenous communities were committed in isolated areas the Indigenous oral accounts rarely satisfy the demands of Western methods of record keeping. In many instances the communities have kept these histories amongst themselves because their eye witness testimonies were not always valued as evidence.

The films also highlight the importance of protocol and particular elements in Indigenous storytelling that help the community to formalise their custodianship of the land and the story itself. The strong semiotic and narrative correctness of a story has important connections with community identity. The oral narrative has a genealogy.

Finally, the films underline the important contribution Indigenous filmmakers are making to Indigenous communities and more broadly to the Australian historical narrative. Both the films discussed in this chapter gave accounts of historical events that were seen from a different perspective to the white accounts that are on record in official archives.
Chapter Seven

Legacies of Colonialism: Living the Realities: 2009

*Samson and Delilah, (2009)*

**Introduction**
The previous chapter which focused on the establishment of Indigenous centred production houses such as CAAMA and independent productions companies such as Mayfan demonstrated their pivotal role in the development of talented Aboriginal filmmakers such as Mitch Torres and David Tranter. It also discussed the ways in which Indigenous controlled documentary film production has offered new representations of Aborigines. This chapter takes the argument further by reading the feature film *Samson and Delilah, (2009)*, written, directed and filmed by Warwick Thornton as a documentary film.
The chapter argues that although *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), has been defined in Western terms of filmmaking as a feature film, it could also be considered as a documentary film representative of the complex practices and approaches to filmmaking deployed by some Indigenous filmmakers today. By an odd irony, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), is set partly in Arrernte country, the site of the first film considered in this thesis, *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901) made by Spencer and Gillen in 1901. In *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), the director Warwick Thornton, is not only aware of the visual connection with Spencer’s and Gillen’s *Aboriginal Life in Central Australia*, (1901) but he also employs some of the devices of visual anthropology, similar to those used by ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall in *Link-Up Diary*, (1987) discussed in Chapter Five. This chapter explores two important aspects of documentary film as revealed by Thornton in *Samson and Delilah*, (2009); as well as the political aspects, some anthropological devices have been deployed; and the political context in which the film was made. Put together, they support the argument that it could be read productively as a documentary film.

Thornton’s life could be considered as the subject of a conventional documentary film. Born in Alice Springs in 1971 and a member of the Kaytej nation, he admitted to Steve Dow from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, (SMH), April 29 2009: “Until he was 13 he was a lost kid who was drinking, smoking, thieving and fighting.”¹ His mother Freda Glynn, co-founder of the CAAMA media group, sent him to boarding school for two years at the Benedictine monastery at New Norica two hours north of Perth in Western Australia.² Thornton recalls:

> He found himself picking olives with a lot of other “country black fella” kids and facing the rigour of school and religious observance. Somehow I went from street kid to going to church twice a day. It was like lockdown, you were in the middle of nowhere. Yet he was surprised how the monastery affected him. “I actually found it really uplifting because I found structure and I found self-respect.”³

Returning to Alice Springs at the age of sixteen, he landed a job as a radio announcer at CAAMA’s Radio station 8 KIN playing songs requested by Aboriginal prison inmates.⁴ A reference to this program is made in the concluding scenes of *Samson and Delilah*, (2009). When the opportunity of a cinematography traineeship was offered at CAAMA in their newly established film unit in 1988, Thornton enthusiastically applied himself to film craft and then

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² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
later graduated from the Australian Film, Radio and Television School (AFTRS), Sydney in 1997.

As a director, Thornton has made over thirty films during the fourteen years between graduating from AFTRS and making *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), demonstrating that he is a prolific filmmaker whose work often alternates between the big screen and television. As a cinematographer he has at least thirty titles including the feature film *Radiance*, (1998); as a documentary filmmaker he has made at least twenty-five films including the series for SBS, *The First Australians*, (2008) and *My Brother Vinnie*, (2006). As director of short feature films, he has made fourteen films including *Stranded*, (2011), and as writer/director he has made at least fifteen films that include the short feature films, *Mimi*, (2002) and *Nana*, (2007). Both these films portray aspects of the exploitive industry in Aboriginal art. As well he wrote and directed the short feature film *Green Bush*, (2005), an autobiographical account of his experience working in an Aboriginal community radio station. Also as director and cinematographer, he has made six films including the documentary film *Rosalie’s Journey*, (2003) about Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, the young Aboriginal girl chosen for the lead female role in Charles Chauval’s, *Jedda* (1955).

In the Introduction to the thesis, Renov’s four functions of documentary film were articulated as a way of understanding its purpose: to record, reveal or preserve the phenomenon of our lives; to persuade and promote by using music and certain semiotic images; to analyse or interrogate a problem or issue; and finally to express an opinion or argument. How then does the feature film, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), meet these criteria for consideration as a documentary? Further, Stella Bruzzi has argued that changes in technology and the socio-political context in which documentary films are now made, require a renewed understanding of the different ways that filmmakers and their audiences respond to documentary films. How then has Thornton found a way of addressing these shifts?

In the Introduction, Nichols and Renov stated that documentary films have the ability “to make us see timely issues in need of attention” and it was argued that along with Beattie, that documentary film was strongly linked to the socio-historical narrative because it often participated in creating it. This important point was demonstrated Chapter Six in the analysis of the documentary films by Torres, *Whispering in Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre* (2002) and by Tranter, *Willaberta Jack*, (2007). Could it be argued that Thornton is also

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attempting to represent this point in *Samson and Delilah*, (2009)? Indeed, in the Introduction, Loizos’ observed that some documentary film directors often included the elements of narrative, suspense, closure and continuity, commonly found in feature films, in their own documentary films. Given Thornton’s experience as a director of both feature and documentary films, it could be argued that he deploys these aspects in every film project he works on. There is no doubt that all of his films are politically and socially provocative and in this regard *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), is no exception. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the key reasons why the film has been so highly acclaimed is the way it cogently represents some grim aspects of contemporary Aboriginal society.

To make the case, this chapter will argue that Thornton deploys a range of anthropological practices that have been developed in recent years in the representation of Indigenous Australians on film. They include the recognition of cultural protocols about how and what he is able to film when Aboriginal people are the subject. This issue is made starkly clear in the way he selected the Aboriginal children who appear in the film. Their selection was determined by their moiety group, that is, their ability to form a relationship like the one portrayed in the film. The importance of cultural protocols is borne out in his documentary film, *Rosalie’s Journey*, (2003), which is the story of Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, the young Aboriginal actor who featured in *Jedda*, (1955), the first colour feature film where the main protagonists were Aboriginal people. Ironically this film was also made in Central Australia.

In Thornton’s documentary, Rosalie tells of the immense shame she felt at having to work on the film. She says that she was unhappy with the whole experience of acting because her very close association with Robert Tudawali violated her “grandmother’s law” and not only affected her performance but continued as an ongoing source of shame. Indeed, she was never asked if she wanted to do the film. Thornton understands the cultural protocols about pairing actors and knows that for an Aboriginal audience, it is important that the film provide an authentic cognitive reading for an Aboriginal audience. By adhering to this cultural protocol, Thornton also satisfies another anthropological practice, that of the authenticity of the subjects. If Thornton had not adhered to cultural conventions of matching skin groups of the characters, the film would not be considered ‘real’ by his Aboriginal audience and the message of the story would have been weakened or even lost.

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Another anthropological practice Thornton deploys is the way he filmed his subjects using ethnographic techniques similar to those employed by ethnographic filmmaker, David MacDougall. They included long measured shots of the subjects as well as minimal dialogue so that every move of the protagonists can be studied and analysed. Like MacDougall’s film, *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), discussed in Chapter Five, Thornton has used a similar “low energy” approach to filming his subjects. This close attention to detail also allows the audience to become voyeurs giving them licence to gaze at the ‘Other’ in much the same way as earlier ethnographic films. In *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), Thornton makes the audience decode the body language of the protagonists so that *they* tell us their story.

Thornton was developing the plot and planning the camera sequences of the story for *Samson and Deliliah*, (2009), around the time that the Howard government’s Emergency Response Intervention (ERI) was being implemented in the Northern Territory in 2007. The ERI was developed in reaction to allegations of widespread child abuse amongst Indigenous communities. In an interview with a representative of the *American Eye* on the occasion of the film’s premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Arts in the US in October 2010, Thornton reflected upon the reception of the film in Australia noting that:

> People were desperate for information about what was going on. The news outlets, the ABC, the five o’clock news and the Murdoch papers weren’t giving much information about what was happening. . . People were desperate for the Indigenous side of the story.⁷

Thornton’s comment underlines the film’s ability to accurately reflect the real life conditions experienced by many Indigenous Australians and further supports the case for reading *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), as a documentary film. The way in which it introduces white Australians to the lived realities of many Indigenous Australians is facilitated by allowing the audience a privileged view of Samson’s and Delilah’s lives. The rawness of the film’s representation of the narrative makes it confronting and powerful. Thornton also found that it was not unusual to have men come up to him after a screening of the film to say:

> that’s my story. Fifty year old men, they told me, I did that in the 70’s, went into town, I sniffed and got into trouble, and I had to go out to country, to my homeland to clean myself up. These people connected to the film and felt empowered by it.⁸

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⁸ Ibid.
In putting these arguments together, there is a case for reading *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), as a documentary film. Thornton considers that *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), reveals how hard life is for Aboriginal children but it also reveals their beauty, resilience and strength under extraordinary circumstances. Furthermore, he believes that:

Indigenous cinema is about telling true stories that have the long-term goal of changing Australia and encouraging Indigenous people to address issues that need their action.9

These elements align with definitions of the documentary film genre set out in the thesis Introduction. Beattie, for example, defined documentary film as “representing the observable world,” in that the “documentarian draws on past and present actuality — the world of social and historical experience — to construct an account of lives and events.” More importantly, it is “embedded within the account of physical reality” and “at the center of all non-fictional representation, namely, that a documentary depiction of the socio-historical world is factual and truthful.”10 Although Thornton uses actors to depict the protagonists in the film, he chooses them according to Aboriginal cultural protocols so that they align with culturally developed semiotics. Moreover, Paul Rotha considered that documentary film is defined: “not by subject or style, but approach. Documentary approach to cinema differs from that of story-film not in its disregard for craftsmanship, but in the purpose to which that craftsmanship is put.”11 Thornton’s purpose in making the film was to lay open the experiences of young Aboriginal peoples today. He considers that: “a film’s success can be determined by how much it changes the world, creates understanding and affects policy.”12 His response probably provides the strongest argument for reading *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), as a documentary film within the context of this thesis.

Interviewing Thornton at the CAAMA studios in Alice Springs in July 2007, I asked him if he felt that making films was similar to more traditional methods of storytelling. He replied:

Filmmaking is a natural progression from where we were pre-contact, you know, sitting under a tree and an old man telling a story whether it’s, you know, a dreaming story or a just story from that day you know something they did that actual day. It’s like well basically doing the same thing just except we are using, you know, technology different you know mediums to do exactly the same thing, basically. It’s interesting that traditionally in the morning at dawn the old men would um and the old women would actually at their camps you know scattered around would

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12 “Australian Centre for the Moving Image”.

actually start yelling out about what they did yesterday and what they are doing today and what should happen today sort of setting down a bit of a program for the day you know I find that really interesting that sort of dawn everybody’s lying in their camps you know, and that everybody is just sort of listening its sort of like the first radio broadcast, you know what I mean, of the news of the day happened at dawn. And I like that idea and that’s kind of what we are doing today with documentaries and with drama you know, just a different format a different medium. Rather than yelling it out at dawn we’re putting it on video tape and broadcasting it.13

Thus it could be argued that Indigenous filmmakers like Thornton tend to blur the classificatory genre boundaries between fiction and documentary. Aboriginal storytelling and narrative structures have the ability to become widely adopted by Aboriginal people to record important community stories, a point made in earlier chapters. For example he says: “I’m not strictly documentary, I am not strictly radio and I’m not strictly drama, you know what I mean, whatever it takes to get it across that’s what you want to do.”14 It would appear that the story and its message is the most important issue for Thornton. This resonates very strongly with the concept of the post-Griersonian documentary paradigm with its increasingly elastic boundaries, referred to the Introduction. These boundaries are challenged by non-Indigenous filmmakers but more so by Indigenous filmmakers, who challenge these boundaries more strongly because they have access to cultural paradigms that do not always fit easily within Western definition parameters. As discussed in Chapter Six, Thornton like Torres and Tranter, also believe the truth of the story lies in its effectiveness and authenticity. In this context, *Samson and Delilah, (2009)*, can be read within an anthropological paradigm, where ethnography and the observance of cultural sensibilities as well as authenticity are paramount in the telling of a story. The currency of the Intervention at the time when Thornton was developing the film, demonstrates his political acumen in identifying and representing the real life experiences of contemporary Aboriginal people. By employing these devices, Thornton challenges a reconsideration of the ways Aboriginal people have been represented on documentary film in the early twentieth century.

**Samson and Delilah, (2009)**

**Background**

Thornton completed the script for *Samson and Delilah, (2009)* in 2007. When I interviewed him in Alice Springs in the same year, he was making plans for shooting the film and searching for the teenage cast who would be the actors in the film. I asked him about how he tackled issues that were affecting people in communities and the type of strategies he used to

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13 Warwick Thornton, Personal Communication, 8 June 2007.
14 Ibid.
tell that type of a story and how he approached stories that might have culturally sensitive themes. He said:

Strategically, I try to keep my mind open ‘cause I think we have a lot of trouble to censoring ourselves, you know, going “oh I had better not do that because some blackfella in NSW,” or “my grandfather might get wild,” but sometimes the issue is more important and you need to get it out there. And so you kind of bite your tongue or you bite the bullet and you do it, you know what I mean, and so you, I try and push myself and push my people, you know what I mean, into that to get them stories across not trying not to censor myself unless its cultural unless you know its actually secret stuff, you know, I won’t go there, absolutely because that’s part of the reason for it being secret is to it for it to stay strong you know what I mean, and to let that stuff out would water it down and that’s really dangerous for our culture and that’s why we just don’t go there.15

We had talked about two documentary films, *Minymaku Way: There’s Only One Women’s Council*, (2000) and *Ngangkari*, (2002) that his sister, Erica Glynn had made about the issue of petrol sniffing in a Pitjantjatjara community. Even though petrol sniffing is not of itself culturally sensitive never-the-less it affects the well-being of a community and impinges directly on cultural sensitivities. The importance of how this addiction affects communities, not only in the secular realm but also in the sacred is underlined by his response:

Well they absolutely have, absolutely direct relationships to um secret/sacred cultural stuff because they’re actually breaking down you know those laws so they do have an absolute and that’s when you understand that you tackle the petrol and the alcohol and that sort of stuff on the basis of an overall picture that it is actually breaking down cultural laws and customs and traditions but you don’t actually go you don’t delve into which laws customs or traditions.16

In *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), Thornton’s strategy is to lay out in graphic terms the reality of Aboriginal lives affected by colonialism rather than trying to paint a picture of what most people would like to see. He says:

I’m making films for my people, about my people, you know. I try to not blame white people in my films on any issues, I always try to keep the issue revolving around us like, you know blackfellas, you know what I mean, it’s our problem and we’re sorting it out. We actually are creating the problems as much as possible. I’m a just a bit over, “it’s Captain Cook’s fault,” you know what I mean, its just so boring and it doesn’t work do you know what I mean, and actually I think people will change channels or walk out of the cinema or they wouldn’t walk into the cinema if they’re the kind of films you’re making. It’s important to me but um you know its I always make films for us but if you always make a good film for a blackfella well its gonna be a good film for a whitefella as well I guess you know what I mean.17

The difference here in representing these stereotypes in the way Thornton has presented them to the audience is that they are self-representative rather than imposed by a dominant cultural group.

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
Funding
In an interview conducted in May 2009 with Kath Shelper, the producer of the film and Rochelle Siemienowicz, a film reviewer from the AFI, Shelper remembers that Thornton had just completed writing the script when she starting looking around for finance. Sally Riley, an Aboriginal filmmaker and advocate for Indigenous self-representation on film, was lobbying the AFC (now Screen Australia) for money to fund low budget Indigenous films. Kath recalls the timing was perfect and they managed to secure the $1.6 million dollars required for the project. This included finance from the ABC and the NSW Film Office as well as the Adelaide Film Festival. Shelper reflects: “we were very lucky. We decided at the outset that we wanted to make a film in a very small way with the smallest possible budget. The fact that we weren’t looking for a lot of money made it a lot easier.”

The Film
Samson and Delilah, (2009), was released in 2009 and has a 01:36:45 minute running time. It is shot in colour with a 35mm Panavision camera.

Music is an important element of filmmaking and on this point both feature and non-fiction films share equally in utilising its effectiveness. Using music to create the mood as well as the dialogue is an important and deliberate feature of Thornton’s film and underlines Renov’s view that music serves as one of the necessary four functions of documentary film referred to earlier in this chapter. It symbolises the muteness experienced by the many children in similar situations; they have given up talking because nobody will listen and they have lost hope. While the music talks for them it also signifies the emotional state of the teenagers. For example, Charlie Pride’s country classic, “It’s a Sunshiny Day”, is full of irony. Ideally children would be waking up each morning eager to see what the new day brings but for Samson it means plunging his face into a container of petrol. It is Thornton’s use of the ironic counterpoint between the aural and the visual that makes Samson and Delilah, (2009), deliver such a powerful message.

In an interview with American Eye Magazine, Thornton was asked about the lack of dialogue in his film, he responded:

In most of my films I write the music into the script. I’m listening to songs and lyrics that empower the themes of the film . . . I love music more than language: it’s the best, it’s universal. Like the Anna Gabriel song that Delilah listens to in the film. I don’t know what she’s saying but

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18 Siemienowicz, "Samson and Delilah - Interview with Warwick Thornton and Kath Shelper".
I know it’s romantic, passionate. You don’t actually have to understand the song to be emotionally moved and uplifted, whereas with language it becomes quirky and analytical.19

The narrative centres on the relationship between two Aboriginal teenagers from a remote community in the Northern Territory and the obstacles they encounter when they leave the community to live in Alice Springs. The film begins in the remote community and portrays it as stifling, monotonous; a living death in many ways for the adolescents, Samson and Delilah. Delilah is the sole carer for her Nana, who the viewing audience discovers is a celebrated painter in the style of traditional painters of that region. The film emphasises the monotony of each day by using such devices as Samson’s brother and his band playing the same tune day after day. This is effectively achieved as every time the music is played it reminds the viewer of the monotony and the frustrations of living in such a place.

The film opens in the morning light in Samson’s bedroom; he wakes and dresses. The illusion of a contented person is shattered for the viewing audience when the mug he reaches for is placed over his mouth and nose to inhale the heady fumes of the petrol to which he has become addicted. The country music tune, Charlie Pride’s “A Sunshiny Day”, is playing non-diegetically and Thornton uses the music as irony to articulate the dire situation in which many Aboriginal children live.

Petrol addiction in remote Aboriginal communities has a devastating effect and Thornton addresses this issue in his film by showing the viewer the circumstances in which many Aboriginal children live. In the absence of responsible adults in both the community and family, the children have no support systems. In the film Thornton sets down a challenge for Aboriginal communities to be responsible for their children. His warning is similar to that of Essie Coffey’s concern about problems with alcohol in her community. In Samson and Delilah, (2009), parents are absent in Samson’s family situation. He lives with his older brother who actively resists any interest in his life and will not even allow him to play in his band. It is not until the resolution at the end of the film that the audience is told his father is in gaol for an undisclosed offence.

In literature about the incidence of petrol sniffing among boys, research has found that: “Petrol sniffing has also been linked to disrupted family structure where relationships with parental figures (particularly the father) may be poor or absent.”20 Thornton also uses the

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19 American Eye, "Warwick Thornton".
film to underline Aboriginal cultural attitudes towards petrol sniffing. In a segment on petrol sniffing on the *Catalyst* program screened on ABCTV, on 30 August 2007, medical researcher Sheree Cairney considered that: “In Aboriginal communities much mystery surrounds petrol sniffing and its effects, because there is no traditional knowledge or culturally relevant information to understand it.”

As Samson walks out to the veranda the viewer sees two men; one is playing a set of drums and the other is playing a guitar in country music style. Samson takes up a spare guitar and starts playing heavy metal style music which is at complete odds with that style of music the two men had been playing previously. They jam in heavy metal style until Samson’s brother takes the guitar away and the band resumes the country music they had been playing. This scene helps to emphasise Samson’s status as an outsider/outcast in relation to his brother and more generally with the community; a situation not uncommon in the lives of petrol sniffers.

The music his brother’s band plays is monotonous and repetitive which emphasises the type of life experienced in the community; as akin to a living death. Any contribution Samson feels he can make is resisted by his brother and, as an extension, the community. Samson’s attempt at contributing something positive is shunned making him frustrated, angry and restless. Resorting to his container of petrol is the only way he can cope with the feelings of worthlessness and tedium.

In the next scene the viewer watches as Samson walks down the dusty road of the community settlement towards Delilah’s house. Unlike Samson, she has the responsibility of caring for her ageing Nana and is not a petrol sniffer, although her life is equally tedious. The lack of family support is also indicative of Delilah’s lack of connectedness with the community. It is this community that Thornton is concerned to portray in relation to the sense of abandonment experienced by two young protagonists and the detrimental effects on Aboriginal children. Delilah and her Nana spend each day following the same monotonous rhythm set by the remote settlement. Each day Delilah wakes up her Nana and coaxes her to take her medication; she pushes her in the wheelchair to visit the health clinic; then on to the church where her Nana worships a Christian god. (Figure 37) At each place Delilah sits for what seems like an interminable time outside, waiting for her Nana to finish her routine. At their house they spend time together painting canvases to sell in galleries in towns and cities.

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21 Australian Broadcasting Corporation, - [http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/s2019179.htm] [Accessed 31/08/2012].
22 Cairney and Dingwall, "The mysterious practice of petrol sniffing in isolated Indigenous groups". 511.
Even so, there is a sense of disempowerment when the storekeeper who runs the community’s only shop approaches Delilah’s house. Delilah loathes this man for she is sure that he is taking advantage of her Nana. Kitty (Nana) and the shopkeeper talk about the paintings and he has a roll of clean canvases to exchange for the painted canvases they have produced. Delilah emerges from inside the house with a roll of finished canvases and hands them over to the shopkeeper and exchanges them for the clean canvases.

Thornton has previously tackled the issue of the exploitation of Indigenous artists in his short comedy film, *Mimi*, (2002). He looks at Indigenous art in the rarefied domain of the city art gallery, a world away from the dusty and workhouse-like conditions in which many Indigenous artists ‘manufacture’ canvases and wooden ornaments. Like Kitty (Nana), many Indigenous artists paint and receive small recompense for their artworks, while gallery owners reap enormous financial rewards.

The fashionable trend amongst non-Indigenous Australians to acquire ‘authentic’ Indigenous artworks means that galleries can charge very high prices. This is evidenced later in the film when Delilah sees her Nana’s painting in the window of the gallery in Alice Springs with a $22,000.00 price tag. Thornton demonstrates in the film how frustrating this situation is for Delilah. Even though he has shown how she spent hours painting the canvases with her Nana, she is unable to sell a canvas she has produced to the art dealer.
It refers to the idea of authenticity, a feature of the early ethnographic films discussed in Chapter One. Delilah’s inability to represent herself to the art gallery owner in Alice Springs as an ‘authentic’ Aboriginal artist like her grandmother is the reason why he dismisses her out of hand when she presents him with a painting. Clearly it is not enough to be an Aboriginal person who can paint but the commodification of Indigenous art means that a certain ‘type’ of Aboriginal person is anticipated to give the art value to the gallery owners. Realistically, either because of her youth or her lack of social acumen in representing herself as an artist can be understood as the reason Delilah is unsuccessful in selling her art. She has not followed the protocols that tag her as an ‘authentic’ Aboriginal artist. Thornton relates how in his own life he was on the streets and hungry and how he is now “sitting there with a latté. That’s why I write about these things. I’m there to keep the bastards honest!”23 The film reveals how small changes occur in these routines over some days. In this way it appears to use the techniques of ethnographic filmmaking by making close observations of the characters, documenting their developing relationship. Samson openly declares his love for Delilah, which she scorns because his addiction to petrol sniffing is one of his less endearing features. Combined with her teenage shyness she actively spurns his attention by throwing rocks at him, trying to cope with the discomfort of his attentions but at the same time enjoying the attention. Each day as she walks to the store the narrative traces their growing attraction to each other as Samson watches her coming and going, and the viewer needs to look closely to detect the hand signals they exchange in a covert acknowledgement of each other.

Each time Delilah goes to the store, the public telephone that stands near-by rings repeatedly but no-one answers it. Delilah finds it annoying and when the daily routine is repeated in the film, she stops acknowledging it at all. The ringing phone becomes important to Delilah later in the film because of her experiences but for now it seems irrelevant. At this point it is representative of the unwanted intrusion from the world beyond the community and which she finds is irrelevant to her present life.

The nature of their relationship changes one night. After putting her Nana to bed, Delilah routinely retreats to the car sitting on the blocks in her yard and plays a music cassette. The music is foreign (Mexican artist Anna Gabriel). This allusion to exotic music is used by

Thornton to indicate to the audience that Delilah has secret desires. Despite her responsibilities that ensure the dullness of her life, she can attempt escape, however fleetingly, to imagine a different reality from the one to which she is bound. As she sits back to enjoy her one small pleasure it is interrupted by Samson playing loud music on his ‘boom-box’ in on veranda of his house. Delilah is mesmerised erotically by the sight of Samson dancing under the fluorescent light. Her appreciation for him shifts, however it is qualified by her knowledge that by becoming attached to him none of her fantasies will ever be realised.

The next day Samson watches from a safe distance while Delilah and her Nana paint a canvas. Delilah’s Nana talks to her about Samson who sits on the boundary fence and her Nana talks about the future and says: “I wonder who he’s looking for”, Delilah replies: “Me.” Nana: “Speak truly, what is his name” Delilah: “That one’s name is Samson Japangka.” Nana: “That’s really good to see. Delilah: “No” Nana: “Go off you two.” Delilah: “Be quiet.” Nana: “Good one over there. Yes, yes right skin for you, off you go for you. The two of you talk. Talk together and then the two of you go off.” The two women giggle between themselves and Samson is seen some way off still sitting on the fence. Nana: “Your eyes are making me laugh.” With each trip to the store the relationship between the two protagonists strengthens. Delilah’s Nana sanctions their relationship; they are of the right skin groups, an important aspect in the choice of marriage partners in Aboriginal cultures. Samson begins to follow Delilah and her Nana to the clinic and the church each day walking a short distance behind them.

Moiety groups determine social and relationship behaviours in Aboriginal communities. When Thornton chose Marrisa Gilbert and Rowan McNamara to play the parts of Samson and Delilah, he was conscious of the importance of having them from correct skin groups. This attention to authenticity is an important aspect in ensuring a positive cognitive response from an Indigenous audience. He said:

As well if you’re matching, um, characters like if you’ve got two people husband and wife or girlfriend and boyfriend you actually, you find out their skin groups so you match them traditionally as they actually really would be husband/wife or girlfriend/boyfriend. If they are completely different skin groups you are going to have trouble you know what I mean they won’t be able to act. . . . Yeah you know in the ‘Pit’ lands if you’ve got two characters and they’re supposed to be girlfriend/boyfriend everybody on the ‘Pit’ lands knows they’re a wrong match so it won’t be real for them. . . . That’s terrible its, you know incest, so its not working you know what I mean for an audience maybe in Sydney they wouldn’t know the difference, but you know, but for the truthfulness of it who you were making the film for you know it would be the ‘Pit’ land
mobs, what I mean, it wouldn’t work you’ve gotta look at all those sort of cultural traditional things.  

As discussed earlier, this aspect of Indigenous customs was overlooked in Charles Chauvel’s 1955 feature film, *Jedda*. The casting was managed by white filmmakers who were not aware of the protocols that were broken when they cast the actors, Robert Tudawali and Rosalie Kunoth-Monks in a ‘love’ relationship. The actors were from incompatible skin groups to form such a relationship in real life. In *The Making of Samson and Delilah*, (2007), director Bec Cole records the interviews Thornton made with the two actors before filming began. They were asked what they thought about acting and being in a film and what it might mean to them. Conversations with their families helped to establish they had support. Thornton’s conversations with the producer, Kath Shelper, confirmed that this important cultural protocol was considered when the actors were being considered for the parts. The film’s premise depends on this authenticity. For example, Rowan McNamara, who plays the role of Samson, grew up in Hidden Valley, a settlement near Santa Theresa about an hour’s drive from Alice Springs. For Thornton the value of Rowan’s life experience of living in a remote settlement was important to elicit the most authentic response from McNamara when he has to respond to similar situations in the film. Thornton explained:

I think one of the most important things is your subject you know if you gonna make a film about petrol sniffing, the worst thing you can do is go down south and find some Aboriginal actors and bring them up here and teach them, you know what I mean, when you cast something like that there you would be in Alice Springs you would find ex-sniffers who know what it is like, you what I mean, that’s the strategy, you work with people who have been there and done that even in drama you know, you try not to, you know what I mean, its not like Hollywood where Tom Hanks can be a GI and then he can be, yeah, *Forrest Gump*, or a gay guy in *Philadelphia*, you know what I mean, it just doesn’t work that way here like that; here it could but you’re kind of bullshitting yourself you know what I mean and the, um, you know can get someone down south to play a petrol sniffer but really you want the realness and the rawness of it and someone who is actually gonna to add to the film and give you something as a character and as an actor you’re better off finding an ex or a petrol sniffer here that’s a strategy we try to use as much as possible.

24 Thornton, Personal Communication, 8 June 2007.
25 The film *The Making of Samson and Delilah*, (2007) was not discussed as a documentary film for this thesis even though the film is a valuable document of how *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), was made. However, the film was not made to make a political and social statement in same way as Thornton’s intentions for *Samson and Delilah*, (2009). Thornton used the camera to tell a story from his Indigenous perspective. The film made by Bec Cole records how some aspects of this were achieved. The interview I conducted with Thornton helped with the discussion of the film; this was instrumental in gaining a more solid understanding of his intention and purpose as a filmmaker. Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to interview Bec Cole who is a talented filmmaker in her own right. The success of Thornton’s film in the way it represents aspects of Indigenous life experiences has positioned the film as a valuable learning tool in educational institutions, a criterion of all the films included in the thesis. The film makes clear the contrasts between early ethnographic films and the types of films being made today by Indigenous filmmakers.
26 Thornton, Personal Communication, 8 June 2007.
The film represents how Samson is diverted from the boredom of living in a remote community and how this is temporarily relieved by his new found project of courting Delilah’s attentions. The next morning when he wakes, he takes extra care to comb his hair and he puts shoes on. He folds up his foam mattress, tucking it under his arm walks out of his house heading for Delilah’s house. At the sight of Samson coming down the road with his mattress Delilah drops the armful of firewood she has collected and heads him off at the boundary fence of her house and shuts the gate. Samson throws his mattress over the fence and Delilah throws it back at him. A struggle over the mattress ensues and Delilah’s Nana laughs at her and says: “Your husband”. Delilah is irritated at this declaration. Samson looks at Delilah with a sense of satisfaction over his victory. Delilah gives him a withering stare and she settles down with her Nana to paint.

Her grandmother’s sanctioning of their relationship gives Samson a place he has not had before. He feels like he belongs and begins to take on ‘household’ responsibilities. For example, after sitting and watching Delilah and her Nana paint for a while he gets up and adds wood to the fire. His face is alight with excitement over his new found purpose in life. He goes out into the bush, takes a bath in a soak he digs in the sandy riverbed and manages to catch a kangaroo. Triumphanty he walks back to the community township with the kangaroo draped across his shoulders. His brother temporarily ceases playing the repetitive tune long enough to call out to him, reminding him of his obligation to share the kill. Samson ignores him and continues onto Delilah’s house while his brother resumes playing. Delilah is unhappy about her new status. She is serving tinned tuna onto plates for her Nana and herself when Samson arrives with the kill. Her Nana says: “What about your husband?” Delilah gives her portion of tuna to Samson which he is happy to receive. The kangaroo is cooked in an earth oven.

This arrangement is suddenly interrupted when Delilah’s Nana dies in her sleep. The morning routine of rousing her is replaced by the rituals of mourning. Samson wakes to find Delilah cutting her hair. Quietly he rolls up his mattress and heads home to allow Delilah to mourn her grandmother. Delilah’s ‘aunties’ arrive on hearing of the Nana’s passing and beat her repeatedly with large sticks, accusing her of not looking after her Nana properly; “you were running around, you never looked after her.” They beat her badly. Their ostracism of Delilah indicates that she is barred from the community due to the observance of mourning rituals. To a white viewing audience this behaviour is perplexing. The loyalty demonstrated by Delilah in looking after her Nana seems to be unappreciated and the scene reveals another
aspect of Aboriginality that is difficult for outsiders to understand but reinforces that living in an Aboriginal community can be violent and unforgiving.

Thornton directly addresses the violence that can be found in many Aboriginal communities by giving a representative example of how it can occur. Samson finds Delilah recovering under a blanket and gently tends to her wounds. She just wants to be left alone. Not knowing what to do, Samson returns to his house and he sniffs at his container of petrol. The repetitive music played by his brother’s band on the veranda becomes too much and he attacks his brother with a large stick and smashes his guitar. His new found happiness and purpose has been ripped away from him. It’s not long before his brother retaliates and leaves Samson badly beaten. Recovering, he feels his face, evaluating the injuries he has sustained. His frustration explodes and he starts on a rampage, smashing property in the settlement.

Literature about the nature of petrol sniffing indicates that violent behaviour is closely associated with the practice. In a review of the research studies conducted on people addicted to volatiles, including petrol and glue sniffing, Sheree Cairney and Kylie Dingwall from the Menzies School of Health Research, Institute of Advanced Studies, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia have found that: “The abuse of volatiles including petrol has also been associated with antisocial personality and conduct disorders and schizophrenia.” Thornton chooses to demonstrate this at only one point in the film. An older woman member of the community protests about Samson’s behaviour; she tells him she is sick of them, and the damage he has caused during his violent outbreak. It is not difficult to imagine that she has had problems with Samson and his brother on previous occasions. Adding to his already tarnished reputation he again crosses behavioural boundaries.

Later that night he takes advantage of the opportunity to steal the Toyota car that belongs to the community. He bundles Delilah into the car and they drive away from the settlement heading for Alice Springs. At a truck stop he steals petrol from a parked car to fill a container for him to sniff. He sniffs on the petrol as he drives the car to Alice Springs. Along the way the car runs out of petrol. He wakes Delilah who does not know where they are. But they see street lights in the distance and head for the township.

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27 Cairney and Dingwall, "The mysterious practice of petrol sniffing in isolated Indigenous groups". 512.
In Alice Springs, Samson and Delilah meet up with an alcoholic, Gonzo, camped under a bridge. He shares some of his food with them and his camp site. The effects of alcoholism are in many ways similar to petrol sniffing and Gonzo is unable to teach them how to cope with life in the city. To cope, Samson seems to regress more into the petrol container than at the remote community. After seeing the art galleries full of Aboriginal art including her Nana’s, Delilah begins to grasp the extent of the exploitation they have been subjected to. This realisation makes her angry enough to steal paints and a canvas from an art shop. She tries to sell her artwork but cannot find any-one interested enough to buy her canvas. Frustrated and hungry they both participate in shoplifting for food. (Figure 38)

Their growing despondency leads Samson to regress even further in his habit and as they walk back to the camp under the bridge, Delilah is kidnapped by youths and brutally raped. It takes some time for Samson to realise her absence. Her absence upsets him but only drives him to sniff petrol more intensely to the point where he becomes unconscious. Delilah returns to the camp after her ordeal and full of self-loathing and anger she takes Samson’s container of petrol and starts to sniff.
The level of desperation continues to increase and they are both intoxicated with petrol when again Delilah goes missing because she has been struck down by a speeding car. Again it is not until Samson arrives back at the camp under the bridge that he realises she is not with him. Foggily he retraces his steps and finds skid marks from car tyres where they had been walking some time earlier. He returns to the camp under the bridge and after some days comes to the conclusion Delilah has died, he takes a knife from Gonzo’s belongings and cuts his hair in mourning for her. He sinks into a petrol induced binge in total despair. Clearly he does not want to live.

This spiral of desperation is interrupted by Delilah appearing in front of the lights of a car making her appear angel-like to Samson. Samson’s’ brother has come from the community to pick them up and take them home. Back in the remote community they are accused of stealing the car that everyone had chucked in to buy. The community woman admonishes Samson for his bad behaviour but his brother assures her that he will not be staying. Delilah is taking him to a remote outstation in her country. (Figure 39)

Outstation treatment for petrol sniffing has proved in many instances to help in the rehabilitation of petrol sniffers. The Mount Theo outstation run by the Warlpiri community helps to rehabilitate chronic petrol sniffing addicts. The removal of Samson and Delilah to an outstation in her mother’s country is the resolution that Thornton provides for the debilitated
Samson. Symbolically, Thornton returns his protagonists to country, a source of strength and spiritual cleansing for Indigenous people. Here it is anticipated he will be able to recover from his addiction.

Delilah shoulders this responsibility single-handedly, a mammoth task for someone so young. She cleans the tin shed, catches a kangaroo and cooks it and washes Samson’s body in the trough. There is some resolution at the end of the film. Delilah emerges from the tin shed with the canvas that she and her Nana had been working on when she died. She settles down to paint as Samson sits in the wheelchair listening to the radio balanced on his lap. The tune played endlessly by his brother’s band plays on the radio but this time the tune is dedicated to Samson from his father who has six months of his gaol term to complete. Samson laughs out loud. Classically as the sun is setting, he watches Delilah painting; she turns and smiles at him.

**Reception**

In an interview with film critic, Luke Buckmaster in 2009, Thornton was asked how Indigenous audiences had responded to the film. Thornton gave an account of an old man at the Adelaide film festival who

> came up to me with tears in his eyes. He said ‘that’s my story, that’s what happened to me.’ He said ‘I was a sniffer, a petrol sniffer, and I went to town and got in a lot of trouble and then I had to go right out bush to my country to get my soul strong and my head straight.’ He was crying when he was telling me this and that’s incredible bloody powerful. He was saying this is a hard story but it’s a good story. People need to know this story.28

*Samson and Delilah*, (2009), has been highly acclaimed both nationally and internationally including the Audience Award at the Adelaide Film Festival, 2009 and the Camera D’Or award for best first feature film at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2009. Other awards include Best Film, Director, Script, Cinematography, Sound, Young Actors (jointly awarded to Marissa Gibson & Rowan McNamara), an award established to recognize the work of actors under the age of twenty one and AFI Member's Choice Award, 2009.29

Importantly, the film has attracted much attention for educational purposes. A comprehensive study guide has been developed by Gary Simmons and Vyvyan Stranieri of


29 For a complete list of the awards won by this film see the film’s website <http://samsonanddelilah.com.au/reviews.php> [Accessed 05/09/2012].
Metro Magazine and the Education Shop in conjunction with Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) and Screen Australia. The guide provides a framework for students and teachers to explore the differences that exist between Indigenous children in living remote communities and Australia’s urban areas. The study guide provides searching questions for students to consider in order to begin to understand the experiences of Aboriginal children. More often, information about Aboriginal children living in remote areas like the communities portrayed in the film are often glossed over in the media and news reports. As Thornton says:

They’ve only ever seen the 60 Minutes concept of it. So that’s the importance of writing and making films, the beauty of cinema – it’s that kind of lie that tells the truth. It opens doors and gives people access. Whether they want to walk through that door is up to them.  

Discussion

Samson and Delilah, (2009), can be read as a documentary film in that it represents the stark reality of the lives of many Aboriginal children in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The film encompasses aspects of anthropological practice used in the production of documentary films. Thornton represents the characters as if they were subjects in a documentary film underlining the despair experienced by many Indigenous children in remote communities. Employing these practices, Thornton connects all the films presented in this thesis. The period covered by the thesis traces the development in Aboriginal filmmaking over the last one hundred years and demonstrates the present level of expertise. As well as a high degree of technical expertise and visual acuity, the films also demonstrate how the observance of cultural protocols, presenting an authentic cultural portrayal of Aboriginal lives and perspectives, and using ethnographic techniques of observation are incorporated into Aboriginal filmmaking practices. Importantly, Thornton’s film returns to Alice Springs where the first films about Aboriginal people were made by Spencer and Gillen, demonstrating a cyclic concept of time used in Aboriginal culture.

The incidents portrayed Samson and Delilah, (2009), are representations of what occurs in lives of Aboriginal Australians which has been demonstrated in the comments made by Aboriginal people who have viewed the film. These snapshots of life in Aboriginal communities demonstrate the dysfunctional state in which many Aboriginal people are currently living. Thornton represents the characters in this way to make it clear that Aboriginal communities need to consider what to do about helping these children. Read as a

Siemienowicz, "Samson and Delilah - Interview with Warwick Thornton and Kath Shelper".
documentary film, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009) can be seen to represent the culmination of all the films discussed in this thesis.

Firstly, it is representative of Aboriginal culture in ways that follow the style of the early ethnographic films discussed in chapter one. The film demonstrates intimately the life style led by many Indigenous children. It documents their tedious lives and the types of activities in which they participate in the everyday. It shows how they ‘gather’ food and how they live in their community environment. Delilah and her grandmother demonstrate that they engage in economic exchange when they paint canvases that are exchanged for money and they use this money to purchase goods from the community store.

In the film the actors do not speak, they are voiceless. Like the early ethnographic films discussed at the beginning of the thesis, the protagonists are essentially without a voice. The children have been so traumatised by their community environment they lose the ability to talk because they know their voices will not be heard. Samson is not allowed to play in the band and Delilah spends hours of her time painting with her grandmother and performs her carer’s duties without question and with resignation.

Early ethnographic films could not record the voices of the people on the films due to technological restrictions and for many years Indigenous voices remained silent about what they thought about the intrusion and dispossession of their country. In a similar manner Samson and Delilah are made mute by the circumstances in which they live. They have no power to express themselves and in a sense they have lost the desire to do so because of the lack of purpose in their lives. Their needs and aspirations have been voided by their abandonment by their families and their community and by the broader population of white Australians who have accepted the ‘disposable’ mantra of Aboriginality.

Secondly, the film fulfils its documentary promise by setting up a moral challenge to its audience, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Like Grayden’s film *Warburton Aborigines*, 1957, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), portrays these representations of Aboriginal children as part of an endangered generation of children. In fact, it is as if a frontier massacre has occurred in the past and is being hideously repeated, robbing these children of their potential as well as their heritage. As mentioned earlier, frontier massacre is a recurring theme and is included in all the films in some way, either overtly or implied.
In *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), the people recorded were suffering the effects of dispossession at a time when a severe drought meant that they could not sustain themselves in traditional ways because the excision of their land for the Woomera and Maralinga testing sites, restricted access to their hunting grounds. They had little choice but to ‘come in’ from the bush and accept the handouts at the Warburton Mission and to squat around the remote mining townships of Laverton and later Cosmo Newbury. The film created a strong reaction from viewers who sent angry letters to the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies. Some reviews of *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), drew attention to the adverse lives of many Aboriginal children today and is indicative of the enormous gap that still exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in Australia.

Thirdly the film provides documentary evidence of the dysfunctional state of the many settlement communities similar to the one which Samson and Delilah live. These settlement communities were referred to in Essie Coffey’s *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978). Historically, her community was massacred after an episode of sheep killing because their traditional land had been taken over by pastoralists. As a result the community no longer had access to the food sources they once enjoyed. Similarly, the theme of dispossession and resettlement was referred to in the films, *Ningla A-Na*, (1972), *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) and *Whispering in Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre* (2002).

*Samson and Delilah*, (2009), also makes reference to the Stolen Generations and the social and structural dysfunction that has plagued many Aboriginal communities both remote and urban. The principal theme of *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983), outlined the significant trauma suffered by parents and children under assimilation. This act of ‘culturecide’ has had long term ramifications and the evidence presented in *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), is testament to the longevity of the practice and the familial dissociation it causes. The policy of separating Aboriginal families, particularly the children of ‘mixed blood’ has served to intensify the development of mental illness too often experienced in Aboriginal families. Mental illness as well as alcoholism, addiction to volatile substances, such as petrol and other substances like marijuana continue to disrupt the ability of many individuals and communities to function in effective social patterns. In many instances these habits lead to committing criminal acts and child abandonment or abuse. These are issues that Thornton finds the most threatening to the future of his people.
The dysfunctional outcomes created by mental illnesses and the use of addictive substances leads to poverty and the fragmentation of families. When Aboriginal families need to be strong and work together they have been prevented from attaining any permanent changes in their lives. For the protagonists of Thornton’s film, Delilah is chained to the continuing care of Samson who, while there is some hope of him recovering, it is evident in the film that his addiction to petrol had reached a stage at which he is more than likely to remain in a disabled state. The message contained in Thornton’s film is one that attempts to reach Aboriginal people to alert them of what they are doing to themselves. It is a similar message Essie Coffey had for her people in My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978).

Samson and Delilah, (2009), also sends a strong message to non-Indigenous Australians. This ‘no frills’ narrative does not set out to lay blame; rather it documents the lives of some typical Aboriginal teenage people. Its stark reality focuses on the gap between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal children and how Aboriginal children are exposed to excessive amounts of violence caused by their and possibly their parents’ addiction and mental illness. Clearly it is not simply the fault of their individual actions that places the children in situations bad enough to turn to petrol sniffing; the phenomenon is much more complex, something that Thornton relates well to the audience.

Conclusion

By reading Samson and Delilah, (2009), as a documentary film, we can draw on many historical representations of Aboriginal Australians in Australian documentary film. Thornton has concisely touched on many of the entrenched stereotypes constructed around Aboriginal Australians. He presents them in all their complexity using thoughtful and intuitive use of his directorial and cinematic skills. He avoids laying blame at anyone’s feet, thus making his message about the reality of Indigenous children one of hope because there is still the opportunity to bring about change.

The contrast between Thornton’s film and the films analysed in Chapter One are vast. By examining the ways in which Aboriginal Australians have been represented on documentary film over a long time frame it has been demonstrated how these changes have occurred. Apart from the obvious changes in camera and film stock technologies, which have dramatically altered the way images of Aboriginal Australians have been constructed and recorded, we have been witness to other changes as well.
The shifts in scientific paradigms have also altered the relationship between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians. The early ethnographic films discussed in Chapter One portrayed Aboriginal Australians as a people already talked about as becoming extinct. Yet Thornton’s film as well as Torres’, *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), and Tranter’s, *Willaberta Jack*, (2007), discussed in Chapter Six provide evidence of their survival. Significantly, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), lays down a challenge for Aboriginal Australians to take stock of the conditions of their communities but it also challenges non-Aboriginal Australians to understand that the difficulties many Aboriginal Australians find themselves in today stem from historically enacted hostilities.

Shifts in government policies, the way in which the film industry is funded in Australia and shifts in attitudes toward Aboriginal Australians has opened opportunities to Aboriginal filmmakers. The importance of Aboriginal filmmakers having control over the filmmaking process, means that stories and histories can be viewed from a different perspective, adding authenticity to the Australian historical narrative that was previously silenced.
Conclusion

As this thesis has demonstrated, by undertaking a survey of twelve Australian documentary films made between 1901 and 2009, it has been possible to highlight the key shifts in the ways that Indigenous Australians have been visually represented over the last century. In taking this approach several important findings emerge.

The first is that the films reveal that the representation of Aboriginal Australians has been transformed from an ahistorical people on the brink of extinction to that of active participants in the Australian film industry. However until the 1960s this transformation was constrained by the dominant discourse of scientific racism. By reflecting on the influences of scientific approaches to filming Aboriginal Australians, the first section considered developments in Australian anthropology and how its discourses influenced shifts in social attitudes of white Australians toward Aboriginal people as well as shifts in government policy in relation to their legal status.

Second is that the changes in the way Aboriginal Australians were represented in documentary films between the 1950s and the 1970s were influenced by social changes occurring in Australia in these decades that were deeply influenced by the discourse of human rights. Australia’s partnership with Britain in atomic and rocket weapons testing in the 1950s was applauded until the ramifications of the tests revealed government deception and ambivalence towards Aboriginal Australians that were horrific to many Australians. The UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and the Decolonisation Committee enabled humanitarian and civil rights agendas to gain an increasingly high profile in Australia. The
films discussed in Section Two are emblematic of these changes in the political, legal and social status of Aboriginal Australians.

The third finding is that developments in technology played a significant part in changing the ways Aboriginal Australians were represented in documentary film. In the first films made in 1901, a Warwick Bioscope camera was used. The camera housing was made from wood which in the dry and extremely hot climate of central Australia, split and cracked allowing light and dust to enter.¹

Working with such cumbersome equipment, Spencer and Gillen were constrained in the way they could record the Arrernte people in 1901. However by the 1930s, the scientists from the South Australian Museum and the Board of Anthropological Research (SABAR) had access to safety film which was much more flexible to use. The camera housing was made of light weight metal which lessened the problems of fogging with which Spencer and Gillen had to contend. Cameras from this time forward were manufactured with motor drive mechanisms which fed the film through the camera automatically at the correct speed. Importantly panning mechanisms were added to camera tripods to facilitate shooting over greater areas and focussing systems had been improved. Colour film was introduced as well.

By the 1940s sprocket holes had been added uniformly to the edges of film stock making misfeeds less likely. A range of film formats were developed such as 35mm; 16mm; and 8mm films to suit different purposes from professional filmmakers to amateurs. As well as different sized film stock, cameras were being developed in tandem with these advances in that they became smaller and more accessible to the public. At this time colour film became widely used. Probably one of the first instances where colour film was used is recorded by the SABAR group in 1931 at Cockatoo Creek however its use did not become widespread until the 1940s.

By the middle of the 1950s, the technology of magnetic sound strips applied to film stock could synchronise dialogue with the images recorded on film. Cinematic cameras continued to shrink in size making them more portable and easier to use. By the 1970s film stock had developed to such a stage that even in low light situations such as the newsreel segment recorded by Cavadini in Ningla A-Na, (1972), could be filmed and incorporated into a film. In the making of My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978) cinematographer Martha Ansara was

¹ Spencer, Wanderings, 1: 374.
pictured sitting on top of a car while filming, indicating the places filmmakers could be when recording. She is pictured using an Arriflex camera at that time, state-of-the-art equipment. For this type of work cameras had to be small enough for one person to manage and also flexible enough to be able to film scenes whilst moving.

As cameras became smaller and more portable, so the film crews working on documentary films could be smaller in number and carry less bulky equipment. Sound recordists and camera people were usually the only technicians that were required onsite to make a documentary film. Because of these changes in technology the nature of documentary filmmaking also changed. This was demonstrated most pointedly in MacDougall’s *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), where he operated the camera and the sound recording because he was able to access small battery operated sound equipment that freed him up enough for him to concentrate his efforts on the operation of the camera. The less imposing physical presence of sound and camera equipment allowed MacDougall to form a more intimate relationship with the people he was filming. This in turn heightened the intimacy between the people portrayed in the films and the viewing audience; an important feature for such a sensitive film. In the last three films digital shoulder mounted cameras were used.

Of the films discussed in this thesis, *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), was the first to be filmed using a small handheld camera. In 1957 Bill Grayden used a 16mm Bell and Howell camera. It appears it was one that he owned personally as these cameras were quite popular at this time amongst amateur filmmakers. The first film selected for discussion to use synchronised sound was Cavadini’s *Ningla A-Na*, (1972). By the time Aboriginal filmmakers were in control of the filmmaking process, they were using professional digital cameras which are more likely to be carried on the shoulder of the filmmaker or easily mounted on a detachable tripod.

Changes in the ways filmmakers were able to make films about Aboriginal Australians were influenced by changes in the technology of cameras and film stock. In Chapter One it was demonstrated how in the first sixty years covered by the thesis, cinematic cameras began as bulky and cumbersome pieces of equipment. It was demonstrated in *Aboriginal Life In Central Australia*, (1901) that the camera housing was made of timber, a material more suited to mild climatic conditions. It caused constant problems for Spencer and Gillen in the hot dry climate of central Australia. The thin wooden walls split and cracked in the extreme conditions, allowing light and dust to enter scratching and spoiling the film. Other
difficulties they encountered centred on the manual film feed mechanism. Spencer did not know how fast to crank the handle which fed the film through a tiny maze of sprockets. This affected the appearance of the movements of the subjects and could significantly alter how the Aborigines appeared on the film to an audience. The intricate sprocket system on which the film was fed through the camera needed constant vigilance because the film often misfed and ruined the film. Additionally, the camera was difficult to focus and importantly for Spencer and Gillen it had no panning mechanism to follow the dancers. The film stock available at this time was made with a volatile nitrate substrate that was unstable. The extreme temperatures in central Australia meant that the film would deteriorate very quickly, hence their decision to use up all the film at Charlotte Waters. Even after the film was used, fumes given off by the chemicals could build up and cause an explosion. Spencer and Gillen had many difficulties using moving film in the field. The equipment dictated to large degree the type of film they could produce and importantly how they could film the Arrernte. In effect they took moving photographs of the Arrernte. They were unable to get close to their subjects, the action needed to be stopped frequently to change the rolls of film and to adjust camera angles.

In the space of twenty years, when the SABAR research group made *Life In Central Australia*, (1931), cinematic cameras had developed considerably. New lightweight metal housings meant that the problems of light and dust entering the camera were markedly reduced. Better lenses and focusing mechanisms allowed greater accuracy and motor drives ensured the film was fed at a correct and constant speed. The film was still liable to misfeed but was less of a problem than that experienced by Spencer and Gillen. Cinematic cameras were also mounted on tripods with panning mechanisms, increasing the field over which the camera could capture action while also reducing the need to stop the action to change camera positions. The change in camera positions was more likely to be linked with aesthetics and location. The cameras available allowed them to get closer to the subject and this closer relationship is reflected in the ways the Aborigines are represented in the film.

The cameras available to the SABAR group included a 35 mm and a smaller more portable 16 mm camera. By this time, the introduction of safety film stock increased the flexibility of using cinematic cameras in central Australia. It deteriorated less quickly than the nitrate film stock and as its name implies, did not give off the volatile gases which made the former dangerous to use and store. The development of panning mechanisms as well as the ability to vary the speed of the film resulted in recording some impressive slow motion footage at
Cockatoo Creek. These segments show Aboriginal men throwing spears and boomerangs and represent them as athletic individuals who contrast markedly with the other images of men being tested for their intelligence, being covered in plaster moulds and some women having profile photographs taken.

By the time of the Arnhem Land Expedition in 1948, colour film had been introduced and was used exclusively by Mountford and Bassett-Smith to record the Yolgnu. In *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1948), it was demonstrated how the development of cinematic cameras continued to result in smaller and more portable equipment. This is evident in the increased close up shots used in this film. Aboriginal people are represented as enjoying leisure time as well as being industrious in making canoes and going turtle hunting. Mountford used 35 mm and 16 mm cameras and could record scenes closer to water, zoom in to record men making bark canoes and follow the antics of children playing on the beach with much greater ease. The ability to record the voices of these people was still only available on separate bulky sound recording devices, still too difficult to accompany the cameraman in many situations.

In Dunlop’s *Desert People*, (1966) he rejected using colour film because he believed it did not meet the aesthetic goals he had for the film. Rather, he chose black and white film because he thought it would enhance the appearance of the Aboriginal people he filmed. Although by this time synchronised sound recording strips had been added to cinematic film, its recent appearance meant that for Dunlop, it remained too bulky to take to the remote location in Western Australia. Dunlop also used a 35 mm camera. The tripod he used had collapsible supports and he was able to mount the camera on the tripod and shoot the low to the ground shots that showed Djagamara and Minma’s families preparing food, cooking and making spears as well as extending the legs to take longer shots of the families walking short distances. This technique was enhanced by the improvements made in panning mechanisms that facilitated smoother camera motion.

Continuing improvements in film and camera technologies meant that filmmakers could change the ways they were able to represent Aboriginal Australians on documentary film. In *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957), Grayden used a camera designed for amateurs. It was a Bell and Howell 16mm camera and is only example in this thesis of an amateur camera being used to film Indigenous Australians. However with this camera, he was able to record some of the most horrifying images made about Aborigines. The size of the camera and its relatively low
cost allowed many people like Grayden to own a movie camera. These types of cameras were the prototypes of today’s handheld digital cameras designed for the amateur market.

In the film, *Ningla A-Na*, (1972), Cavadini used a 16 mm camera using black and white film stock. For the scenes of the protests in Canberra and Sydney he appears to have hand held the camera. By using unsteady camera movements he created an atmosphere that communicated the protester’s anger and the chaos of their interactions with police, showing that they were indeed political agents engaging in the politics of modern Australia.

In *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978) and *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) it appears that 35 mm safety film cameras were used. From this time, the improvements in colour film stock meant that colour film became a standard and underlined the position of Aboriginal Australians as occupying a place in a modern Australian society. Increasingly, films about the experience of Aboriginal Australians were juxtaposed against the black and white archive photographs and film footage used to increase audience awareness between earlier historical time periods and the interview footage of contemporary Aborigines. This film technique is employed at the present moment in documentary films and is demonstrated in these films as well as the films made more recently by Torres and Tranter.

For *Link-Up Diary*, (1987), MacDougall was experimenting with new equipment. His use of a 16mm camera and battery powered sound equipment was employed to reduce the size of the equipment necessary for him to film in the living rooms of the Aboriginal subjects. The importance of being able to use smaller equipment allowed MacDougall to become part of the Link-Up team blending in as part of the group of people in the room. As a result he was able to represent Aboriginal Australians as modern, average urban dwellers trying to cope with a highly emotive situation. The development of smaller cameras and importantly sound equipment meant MacDougall could achieve his aim.

The films in Section Four were filmed using professional digital 35mm cameras. They digitally record images and audio that can be edited on a computer. The cameras can be steadied on the shoulders of the filmmaker making them portable and allowing greater flexibility in the way shots are composed and recorded. They have highly sophisticated focussing and large zoom ranges which facilitate quick and flexible shots of their subjects. In *Whispering in Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002), Torres was able to use wide angle shots for the scenes the story tellers wanted her to include in the film, important for locating the genealogy of the story to their community. Then she used a smaller lens for the
close up shots with the people she interviewed. Although lenses similar to these have been available since the 1970s, the greater range of lenses available, their high quality in relation to cost has helped filmmakers to change the perspective of their subjects more readily which helps the viewer to relate to different phases of the narrative. Similarly, Tranter used sharp quick cutting techniques to convey Willaberta Jack’s fear as he was being transported to Darwin for trial to the viewer. To film *Samson and Delilah*, (2009), Thornton used a professional standard Panavision 35mm digital camera. He used it in the same way used by Torres and Tranter in the films they made. Indeed, Thornton is credited with being one of the cinematographers for Tranter’s film.

Smaller and more portable equipment also led to decreasing production costs which translated into a greater democratisation of filmmaking, important for the development of independent filmmakers and small production companies in Australia. This was demonstrated in *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957); *Desert People*, (1966); *Ningla A-Na*, (1972); *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978); *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) and *Link-Up Diary*, (1987). Added to this, video and digital technologies now obfuscate the necessity of having exposed film chemically treated in order to be exhibited, once an expensive step in making films. The contrast between Spencer and Gillen’s experience of using a cinematic camera and those of contemporary filmmakers is vast. Spencer and Gillen packed the exposed films into hessian bags that were sent back to Melbourne via camel and train. The films were processed and developed at the Salvation Army’s Limelight Studios in Melbourne, at that time the only facility in Australia able to accommodate their enterprise. Now images are recorded digitally, edited and processed into finished products on computers such as *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002); *Willaberta Jack*, (2007); and *Samson and Delilah*, (2009).

Fourth, the introduction of broadcast television in Australia in 1956 had a major bearing on how documentary films were disseminated and how they were made. The first film to take advantage of this new medium was *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957). The televised screening of this film attracted an instant audience that was far greater than small scale screenings in church halls and generated much attention to the issue of Aboriginal dispossession and Aboriginal health and welfare. The utilisation of television to disseminate documentary films has been significant in Australia and remains the primary conduit to viewing audiences. Since *Warburton Aborigines*, (1957) was screened in 1957, all the films discussed in the thesis have been screened on television. Films made before the advent of television such as
Aborigines of the Sea Coast, (1950), have also been broadcast on television as well as excerpts from Spencer and Gillen’s film, Aboriginal Life In Central Australia, (1901), and SABAR’s, Life In Central Australia, (1931) have appeared in contemporary documentary films such as the six part series, The First Australians, (2008).

The use of television to disseminate documentary films has become normalised as an accepted part of making a documentary film. For example, when I interviewed David Tranter his comment about being involved in documentary filmmaking collapsed the process of filmmaking with being involved in making television. The screening of documentaries on television is understood as natural progression of documentary filmmaking and a vital step to their distribution success. Aboriginal people appearing in documentary films understand that the film will be screened on television and that it will provide an important forum in which to tell their stories. This understanding changes in special circumstances when the film is recording culturally specific material for keeping places. The participants in the film know the purpose of the film whether it is for general viewing or community viewing before the film begins to be made. An example of this was demonstrated in the discussion of filmmaking with Warlpiri community documented by film anthropologist Eric Michaels in the early 1980s. The films discussed in Section Three, Warburton Aborigines, (1957); My Survival As An Aboriginal, (1978); and Link-Up Diary, (1987) are emblematic of this shift.

Access to broadcast television for documentary films, widened the exposure of Indigenous stories to the Australian public and in some cases to an international audience.

Fifth were the changes in the funding of documentary films. Between 1901 and 1966 the films were funded by universities, major philanthropic organisations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and government agencies such as the National Film Board (which became the Commonwealth Film Unit then Film Australia and is currently known as Screen Australia) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies). In 1957 however, the first documentary film which showed representations of Aboriginal Australians on television, Warburton Aborigines, (1957), was self-funded by a politician, William Grayden. In the 1970s, films such as Ningla A-Na, (1972), were funded by members of the public interested in advocating for Indigenous rights. This suggests that from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s documentary films which showed representations of Aboriginal Australians were vicariously funded. This changed in the 1980s with the establishment of specialist programs such as the Indigenous Documentary Fund in 1997 and the Creative Development Branch established in 1988 under the umbrella
of the then Film Finance Corporation of Australia which increasingly enabled Indigenous filmmakers to make films on their own terms. In the late 1980s, the formation of Aboriginal production houses such as CAAMA in Alice Springs 1988 and in remote communities such as the Warlpiri Media Association in Yuendumu in 1985 along with Indigenous production units at the publicly funded national broadcasters the ABC and SBS in association with Film Australia (now Screen Australia) further promoted the development of Indigenous filmmakers.

Finally, the ways in which Aboriginal peoples themselves viewed documentary film as performance is an important aspect of documentary filmmaking. Aboriginal Australians never saw themselves as passive objects or as a people without history. From the outset they understood the power of a visual medium and appeared confident in front of the camera. Rather they have wanted to tell their stories, either in ceremonial styles of storytelling, as in the Spencer and Gillen’s, *Aboriginal Life In Central Australia*, (1901) films, or as hunters and gathers as in *Life In Central Australia*, (1931) filmed at Cockatoo Creek and *Desert People*, (1966); as self-sufficient people as in *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950) or as people trying to give voice to their side of the historical narrative as in *My Survival As An Aboriginal*, (1978) or in *Lousy Little Sixpence*, (1983) or *Link-Up Diary*, (1987). The determination to tell their stories from their perspective is most apparent in the films discussed in Section Four, *Whispering In Our Hearts: the Mowla Bluff Massacre*, (2002) and *Willaberta Jack*, (2007) as well as films that want tell viewers what it is like being an Aboriginal person in contemporary Australia in, *Samson and Delilah*, (2009). These performances of the kinds of lives lived by many Aboriginal Australians and the effects of colonisation on communities portray the realities of Aboriginal lives in Australia both historically and contemporaneously.

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would believe that the situation for Aboriginal Australians has seen little improvement over the last century; and in some respects this is certainly the case. However when viewed from the perspective of self-representation it has been demonstrated in this thesis, it is clear that there have been some significant positive changes in the way Aboriginal Australians have been represented in documentary films. By focussing on the way representation has changed it has been demonstrated how the filmic process has encompassed broader issues, such as civil rights and land rights. The Indigenous film industry in Australia appears to be burgeoning at an exponential rate, even though it only represents a small sector of the Indigenous population.
Despite this, Indigenous filmmakers are keen to continue telling stories from their perspective, which in turn has the ability to empower the wider Indigenous population. By focussing the examination of the process to self-representation through the medium of documentary film the thesis has revealed how it addresses and accommodates traditional storytelling methods and the cultural protocols that accompany the visual character of an oral society.

Technological changes continue at a quickening pace and the integration of digital technologies into the lives of Indigenous people continues to provide greater opportunities for many more people to participate in making representations of themselves and their community. Particularly in remote communities this democratic platform encourages the making of visual and aural records of community members which introduces challenges to more traditional modes of knowledge transference where stricter rules may apply.

For example, the ability of mobile phones to record and download material on the internet so that it is quickly disseminated at a relatively low cost can transgress traditional modes of storytelling. The relationship between the storyteller and the genealogy of the story is weakened in respect to Indigenous law. Many communities are encountering the conundrums of storing photographs and recordings on computers and what should happen when future generations tap into these hard drives. Who should access the computer with respect to their relationship to the deceased person? Moreover, because of the ways in which images and stories are being electronically disseminated many people may be unaware that images of their family members may continue to be viewed in cyberspace.

Public funding directed to assisting media associations, such as CAAMA as well as smaller associations located within communities such as Warlpiri Media Association will assist to further develop ‘on-site’ filmmaking experiences of Aboriginal people. It was demonstrated in Section Four how important it is to ensure this continuing commitment when filmmakers such as Warwick Thornton, Mitch Torres, and David Tranter are encouraged in this direction.

The thesis has demonstrated how the disparate changes in technology, scientific paradigms, social attitudes and government policies affecting Indigenous Australians have been drawn together to show how the circumstances in which Aboriginal Australians have been represented on documentary film has changed. The changes that have taken place between the films discussed in Section One, *Aboriginal Life In Central Australia*, (1901); *Life In Central Australia*, (1931); *Aborigines of the Sea Coast*, (1950); and *Desert People*, (1966)
and the films in Section Four, *Whispering In Our Hearts*, (2002), *Willaberta Jack*, (2007); and *Samson and Delilah*, (2009) are vast. Despite the harrowing conditions in which many Indigenous Australians now live there is a growing number of Indigenous filmmakers who act as activists and advocates for their people across Australia. They are putting Indigenous faces on the television screen and the cinematic screen, demonstrating that the Indigenous population is an important and integral part of Australian society and its history.
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