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Jennifer Debenham, *Celluloid Subjects to Digital Directors: Changing Aboriginalities and Australian Documentary Film, 1901-2017*

Oxford and New York: Peter Lang 2020. 229 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1789974782. EUR 67,90

The moving image plays a central role in the representation of Aboriginality. In her seminal essay 'Well, I Heard It on the Radio and I saw it on the Television' (1993), Marcia Langton has underlined the power of the visual medium as a means of knowledge-creation and has addressed the demand for practices which transform the dominant modes of representation of Aboriginality. Film in Australia, in Langton's words, has a "dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people" (p. 24). Aboriginal life provided a source of fascination for the ethnographic gaze and the visualisation of Aboriginal life took part in the common construction of the Aboriginal 'Other', of a primitive world both challenging and seductive. However, Aboriginality is not a static modality, since it is "remade over and over again in a process of dialogue" (p. 33) between the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people, "whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience" (p. 31).¹

These "changing Aboriginalities" are central in Jennifer Debenham's 'Celluloid Subjects to Digital Directors: Changing Aboriginalities and Australian Documentary Film, 1901-2017'. By exploring Australian documentary films from the beginnings of the medium to 2017, Debenham reinforces Langton's appraisal of the social and cultural dynamics in the representation of Aboriginality. The films discussed in this monograph are "emblematic of the conditions in which Aboriginality was constructed, negotiated and comprehended in the public sphere, simultaneously driving and reflecting these changes" (p. 3). Debenham postulates that documentary films are particularly valuable cultural and historical artefacts to demonstrate the continually shifting relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians and the relationship between ideology and technology due to the genre's connections with science, education and social responsibility, as well as its potential to create emotional responses. Documentary films about Aboriginal people or by Aboriginal people, as a space of intercultural experience, therefore demonstrate how at different times Australians understood Aboriginality differently and hence how the films anchor the discussion of race relations in Australia. The *longue durée* approach chosen by Debenham, namely selecting films from across an extended timeframe and by a vast range of filmmakers and institutions, proves to be quite revealing in tracing

1 Marcia Langton. "Well, I Heard It On The Radio And I Saw It On The Television...": An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things. North Sydney: Australian Film Commission 1993.

changes in the representation of Aboriginal peoples, “from early ethnographic films to a recent and critical phase in the trend towards decolonisation of the documentary screen” (p. 5), it however reduces the potential for concentrated and in-depth analyses of particular shifts.

The book, presenting the second volume in Peter Lang’s new Documentary Film Cultures series, follows a lineal chronological order, structured in four parts, consisting of three to four short and readable analysis chapters respectively. Each film analysis explores the following aspects that influenced the film’s production: (a) when a film is produced, (b) the development of the film technology, (c) the broader shifts in technological and scientific paradigms at the time, (d) sources of funding, (e) the role of the films in the formation of stereotypes and attitudes towards Aboriginal people and lastly, (f) their availability for audiences at the time of their release and today. Hence, each chapter contextualises the film from a political and technological point of view, and within debates of Aboriginality at the time (e.g. the tent embassy, Keating’s Redfern speech, as well as media-specific aspects such as the establishment of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) and the television broadcaster NITV). While the study sometimes gets slightly lost in details such as biographical information about filmmakers, cast and crew (e.g. the somewhat dispensable information whether the narrator of a film was married to Jacki Weaver), the interdisciplinary approach of this study invites a diverse readership. It offers new insights for those interested in documentary film and film technological developments but who are unfamiliar with Australian politics and Aboriginal issues; as well as those proficient in Aboriginal history, but who have not previously engaged with the specificities of the medium film before.

Starting with the film ‘Aboriginal Life in Central Australia’ (1901) by Walter Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen, one of the first films featuring Aboriginal Australians, ‘Part I: Exotic Subjects, 1901-1966’ discusses four documentary films with an ethnographic attitude towards Aboriginality. Deeply entangled with the scientific discourses of the time, the ‘doomed race’ theory and Social Darwinism, the imperative of the filmmakers to produce these films (often biologists and anthropologists themselves) was based on the concerns about Aboriginal peoples as a “dying race”. Assumptions of the rapid demise of Aboriginal peoples, at least in their “authentic” and “‘pure’ form of culture” (pp. 15 f.), gave an urgency to collect as much knowledge and visual evidence about them as possible. It was the ambition of filmmakers such as Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860-1929) to shoot “with a scientific lens” (p. 26) and to make – in his case – “an accurate record of Arrernte ceremonies and activities” (p. 22) for posterity. In the second example, the film ‘Life in Central Australia’ (1931) commissioned by the South Australian Board for Anthropological Research and the South Australian Museum, documents the collection of biometric data and the praxis of scientific research conducted on Aboriginal people in the name of eugenics to provide a visual record of the methodology employed in the field and what was believed to be “scientific objectivity” (p. 39). The films endorsed a Eurocentric construction of Aboriginal ‘primitivity’, influencing the way how Aboriginal people were ‘seen’ by non-Aboriginal Australians and which attitudes towards Aboriginality developed at all

levels of Australian society (p. 17). The popularity of these early films shows that (particularly urban) audiences were eager to experience the 'exotic' Aboriginal image (sometimes for the first time) as much as they were interested in the exciting new technology of moving film: "the introduction of moving film in the early twentieth-century media environment profoundly affected how Aboriginal Australians were understood" (13-14).

The films of 'Part I' frame Aboriginal peoples as objects of ethnographic inquiry, ancient relics believed to be on the brink of extinction, and reinforce the view that Aboriginal people living in remote places were the only truly 'authentic' Aboriginal people despite the lived realities of Aboriginal traditions already being substantially disrupted by colonial interests such as mining. Documentary film was employed as an intermediary between science and popular culture, popularising anthropology by using film. Despite the fact that these films intentionally subsumed Aboriginal people as objects to be "observed, studied, watched, or to provide titillating entertainment" (p. 26), Debenham also alludes to the evidence of active negotiation between filmmakers and the film's subjects. Diary entries and records show that the filmmakers were surprised by the curiosity of the Aboriginal communities during the filming, e.g. the Arrernte communities not only allowed the filmmakers to record their ceremonies, but showed a keen interest in the technologies used, or even provided assistance with using resin and spinifex grasses to plug the gaps in the wooden camera body (p. 23). Their willing co-operation and eagerness in displaying their skills as well as their acute awareness of performing for the camera, Debenham reads as considerable agency on the side of the Aboriginal participants, despite the fact that these films enabled the continued subjugation and objectification of Aboriginal people. Debenham's consideration of the development of film technology and its connection to the underlying racism of the time offers revealing observations, such as the filmmakers' difficulties in capturing black bodies in the early colour film of the 1950s. Because the colour film stock used Caucasian skin tones as a baseline it needed different lighting conditions for the representation of darker skin tones. This is one reason why Ian Dunlop's 'Desert People' (1967) used monochrome film stock although colour film was readily available.

'Part II: Voices of Change, 1957-1972' presents a group of three documentary films, 'Warburton Aborigines' (1957) by William Grayden, 'The Change at Groote' (1968) by Stefan Sargent and 'Ningla-A-Na' (1972) by Allesandro Cavadini that represent the shift from an emphasis on ethnographic representation of the 'Other' to political concerns about the lived realities of Aboriginal communities. Debenham calls these documentaries 'advocacy films' with one crucial innovation: the aural shift to direct dialogue. This technological advancement of sound film (earlier films mainly included auctorial voice-over narration) gave an "aural identity to the once silent image of Aboriginal participants prompting shifts in the emotional engagement of audiences with the Aboriginal image on documentary film" (p. 75). By giving a voice to the Aboriginal peoples on screen, the films addressed political concerns about racial equality, the first film challenging the Australian government's poor duty of care for communities of the Ngaanyatjarra and Ngatatjara people, the second, the policy of assimilation and

how it affected a small remote island community in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the third recorded the last weeks of the first stage of the tent embassy protest in 1972. The latter, 'Ningla-A-Na', represents Aboriginal protesters as engaged and confrontational political agents challenging the dominant political discourse of the time. The filmmaking became more collaborative between the non-Aboriginal filmmakers and Aboriginal participants in front of the camera, enabling a larger Aboriginal involvement in the decision-making about their representation. Debenham mentions en passant that people living in Warburton (location of the first film) continue to be upset about their families' representation in the film which they believe has operated to confine and stereotype their lives. Debenham only rarely alludes to these negative outputs of the 'advocacy films' but adheres to her overall positive claim that documentary films increasingly contribute to radical changes in attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians (p. 93).

A development that continues in the films of 'Part III: Counting the Cost, 1978-1987', highlighting the growing collaborative relationship between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal film crew as well as the thematic shift to issues of social justice. For example, 'My Survival as an Aboriginal' (1978) directed by two women, Essie Coffey and Martha Ansara, presents with Coffey one of first films directed by an Aboriginal person. The film's accomplishment is promoting Aboriginal self-representation by focussing on the life story of an Aboriginal woman. A trend that Debenham sees in general for this group of films: "they place greater emphasis on personal stories, exposing the trauma experienced by many" (p. 124). The films 'Lousy Little Sixpence' (1983) by Alec Morgan and Gerald Bostock and 'Link-Up Diary' (1987) by David MacDougall, documenting oral history of victims of the Stolen Generations and being mentioned alongside the 'Bringing Them Home Report' (1997), are regarded as earliest examples screened to a popular audience that presented personal accounts from an Aboriginal perspective. They have been vital sources to challenge and expose little known or hidden histories of Australia. Some of the filmmakers' choices, e.g. David MacDougall's problematic autobiographical approach in 'Link-Up Diary' to position himself as subject of the film, i.e. experiencing a sense of collective mourning with the Aboriginal people he films, could have been challenged more by the author, despite the film's undisputed relevance in creating awareness for the Stolen Generations.

Considerably stronger is Debenham's account of the more recent Aboriginal documentary filmmaking in 'Part IV: Digital Directors: Decolonising Documentary Film, 2002-2017'. All films addressed in this part are directed by Aboriginal filmmakers who have profited from the establishment of CAAMA film schools as well as the shift to digital film technologies that have made film production more accessible and cost effective. The democratisation of documentaries through technological developments and screening options have led to greater accessibility for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal filmmakers and audiences alike. The increasing numbers of film productions and the commissioning of films by Aboriginal people to record their histories, necessitated the establishment of Aboriginal cultural protocols for filmmaking. Protocols for telling oral histories have successfully transferred to film production employing the concept of story

managers and story deliverers. One stylistic device used by the documentary films 'Whispering in Our Hearts: The Mowla Bluff Massacre' (2002) by Mitch Torres and 'Willaberta Jack' (2007) by David Tranter is the extensive use of Western archival records of colonial authorities and juxtaposing this evidence against the community's oral history accounts (often in traditional language). Debenham argues that documentary therefore takes part in rewriting Australia's historiography, providing a visual testimonial record in order to uncover hidden histories of colonial occupation. Since the importance of television broadcasting of the respective films is addressed frequently, I was surprised that there is no mention of the highly successful documentary television series 'First Australians' (2008, produced by Rachel Perkins for Blackfella Films), which incorporated similar material and used similar cinematic techniques.

The study closes with a retrospective on the 2017 Sydney Film Festival that for the first time in its history opened with a documentary film, significantly with a documentary film by an Aboriginal filmmaker, Warwick Thornton's 'We Don't Need a Map'. The festival further included a retrospective programme, screening among others Essie Coffey's 'My Survival as an Aboriginal' and documentary films commissioned by NITV/SBS. Debenham concludes her study by pointing to the challenges of contemporary documentary filmmakers (and Australian filmmakers in general), facing cuts in funding, particularly from government sources.

Jennifer Debenham's 'Celluloid Subjects to Digital Directors' is a study about the documentary genre as much as it is about political debates and race relations in Australia. Film plays a significant role in not only providing information about the society in which they are produced but also in actively constructing a picture of that society. The study demonstrates that a decolonisation of the documentary film is only made possible by a shift of perspective towards a collaborative structure of filmmaking with Aboriginal filmmakers engaging with all aspects of film production, hence telling their own stories about their experiences from their own perspective, "making more self-assured decisions about how they appeared in films" (p. 145). Films then have the potential to be catalysts in changing the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people themselves (behind and in front of the camera) have created discursive strategies in reshaping the representation of Aboriginality. Debenham's study conclusively demonstrates and makes one rethink the power dynamics illustrated by and inherent to a medium such as film. There is no such thing as an 'innocent' medium, in correspondence to Marshall McLuhan's seminal claim, "the medium carries the message". It was the ideology of a 'dying race' that has increased an interest in screening Aboriginality at first, to preserve that what is allegedly already lost. It is an ironic and beautiful twist of history that despite these beliefs it is now Aboriginal filmmakers in charge of Australian documentaries, proving and showcasing their resilience and continuance.