

Provenance in personal documentary: My Mother's Village

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Provenance in Personal Documentary:
My Mother's Village

Aaron Burton

A thesis submitted for the degree of
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My Mother's Village is a personal documentary response to *The Sri Lanka Series* (1980), a series of ethnographic films produced by the author's anthropologist mother, Sharon Bell, and filmmaker father, Geoff Burton. Four women, a community of fishermen, and a dance instructor were the 'subjects' of their three films. The feature length film *My Mother's Village* revisits the same participants in Sri Lanka and pursues the original themes and issues, such as economic conditions, the status of women, colonialism, religion, ritual, and inter-generational change. *My Mother's Village* explores how both the filmmaker and participants are navigating heredity and inheritance.

Supplementing the film, the exegesis component, *Provenance in Personal Documentary* interrogates the conceptual underpinnings of the creative research. 'Provenance', the key concept informing the production of *My Mother's Village* is a fine art term specifically 'repractised' and retheorised here. It is hypothesised that cross-disciplinary personal documentary production is a fertile environment that responds to increasingly accessible technologies and progressive interpretations of what contemporary 'documentary' means. This research project responds to the lack of a critical framework for interpreting and developing inter-disciplinary documentary praxis. The experimental methods employed in the provenance of *My Mother's Village* extend to the adoption of an auto-ethnographic and auto-biographical mode of storytelling in this exegesis. This marriage of creativity and scholarly research is further reflected in the relationship between the exegesis and corresponding personal documentary film production.

The provenance of *My Mother's Village* reveals an historical convergence of 20th century documentary traditions of photography, cinema, and visual ethnography. The convergence of these traditions in the contemporary art context echoes Walter Benjamin's observations of the shifting nature of art in the 20th century. Provenance, in Benjamin's revolutionary context, transgresses the 'aura', market valuation, and ownership of art objects to a dynamic understanding of processes, intentions, and storytelling throughout artistic production. This investigation finds that personal documentary modes account for this shifting paradigm in visual arts and offer ethical and creative methodologies for inter-disciplinary visual research. In the current global technological landscape of data-streams and personal media devices, provenance encourages a sensuous topography of encounter, contingency, boredom, and experiment.

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Abstract

My Mother's Village is a personal documentary response to *The Sri Lanka Series* (1980), a series of ethnographic films produced by the author's anthropologist mother, Sharon Bell, and filmmaker father, Geoff Burton. Four women, a community of fishermen, and a dance instructor were the 'subjects' of their three films. The feature length film *My Mother's Village* revisits the same participants in Sri Lanka and pursues the original themes and issues, such as economic conditions, the status of women, colonialism, religion, ritual, and inter-generational change. *My Mother's Village* explores how both the filmmaker and participants are navigating heredity and inheritance.

Supplementing the film, the exegesis component, *Provenance in Personal Documentary* interrogates the conceptual underpinnings of the creative research. 'Provenance', the key concept informing the production of *My Mother's Village* is a fine art term specifically 'repractised' and retheorised here. It is hypothesised that cross-disciplinary personal documentary production is a fertile environment that responds to increasingly accessible technologies and progressive interpretations of what contemporary 'documentary' means. This research project responds to the lack of a critical framework for interpreting and developing inter-disciplinary documentary praxis. The experimental methods employed in the provenance of *My Mother's Village* extend to the adoption of an auto-ethnographic and autobiographical mode of storytelling in this exegesis. This marriage of creativity and scholarly research is further reflected in the relationship between the exegesis and corresponding personal documentary film production.

The provenance of *My Mother's Village* reveals an historical convergence of 20th century documentary traditions of photography, cinema, and visual ethnography. The convergence of these traditions in the contemporary art context echoes Walter Benjamin's observations of the shifting nature of art in the 20th century. Provenance, in Benjamin's revolutionary context, transgresses the 'aura', market valuation, and ownership of art objects to a dynamic understanding of processes, intentions, and storytelling throughout artistic production. This investigation finds

that personal documentary modes account for this shifting paradigm in visual arts and offer ethical and creative methodologies for inter-disciplinary visual research. In the current global technological landscape of data-streams and personal media devices, provenance encourages a sensuous topography of encounter, contingency, boredom, and experiment.

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Section I Introduction

Whether one is of the Left or the Right, one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one's provenance. And one will have to look at others the same way.

Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, 1931 (1999: 520)

Here and now

Between 1976 and 1978, my mother, Sharon Bell, conducted anthropological field research in Kanewala, a Sinhala Buddhist village roughly 35 kilometres southeast of Colombo. Her thesis is titled *Women and Wage Labour: The Impact of Capitalism in Southwest Sri Lanka* (1986). Coinciding with her research she produced a series of three ethnographic films, *The Sri Lanka Series* (1980). These films were shot by a small crew, including my father, Geoff Burton, who was the cinematographer and co-director. Four women, a community of fishermen, and a dance instructor became their subjects and friends. In "The Village" my mother was affectionately known as *sudu-nona* (the white lady), and in response to her persistent curiosity, villagers would often remark that she must have been born Sri Lankan in a previous life.

I was born a few years after the films were completed and am now roughly the same age as Sharon when she conducted her fieldwork. I completed an undergraduate degree in documentary photography, and am continuing my praxis through the moving image. Like my mother, I am in the pursuit of knowledge through academia. Like my father, I am engaged in the art of visual storytelling. Taking cue from my provenance, I have the privileged opportunity to re-visit the communities where my mother lived, and focus my lens on the next generation of cultivators, fishermen, dancers, and family friends. I want to see how they, like me, are navigating heredity and inheritance. By producing my own film, *My Mother's Village*, and through the interrogative opportunity of an exegesis, I aim to develop a conceptual framework for progressing and articulating a personal documentary

practice that fosters experimental cross-disciplinary forms of knowledge production.

On the South Coast of New South Wales, about an hour's drive south of Sydney, Austinmer has become an affluent village, sprouting from a thin stretch of land between the South Pacific Ocean and the Great Dividing Range. The leafy escarpment peers out over golden beaches and glistening rock pools, lending the impression we are forever on Australia's 'porch'. It's quiet. Rainbow Lorikeets occasionally pierce the reflected sun dancing in the stone birdbath. Drying leaves, pods, or red flowers, depending on the season, patter the varnished decking my father proudly constructed around our resident Illawarra Flame Tree. Not his first deck. Nor his last.

My parents bought this ageing weatherboard church and converted it into a spacious modern home in 1995. During our adolescence my brother and I inhabited the Sunday-school hall out back while mum and dad's domain was where mass and matrimony once took place. My brother and I slept in lofts on either end of our hall, perched above a space conducive to the leisure of teenage boys - boasting a pool table, Playstation and couches. I still reside in my end.

Dad should be on his way back from the vineyard now, near Canberra. Given it is 3:38am in London, I hope my mother is sleeping. She is currently employed with Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory. On a business trip. Actually, when she wakes she's scheduled to spend a day with my girlfriend in London, who recently relocated to pursue a unique path in higher education. These days mum spends most of her time in Darwin. Dad and our Cocker Spaniel, Karl Marx, intermittently commute between here, the vineyard, and visiting mum up north, depending on the season. My brother is married, with two cute daughters, 1 and 3. His young family resides in the Hunter Valley, producing and selling our boutique family wine, Gundog Estate. The distances between us are further than ever but our affinities are closer than words. 'Busyness' plagues all our lives, with apparent satisfaction.

I've located myself in this time and space to try to make sense of this anxiety. To try to subdue this state-of-mind that Martin Heidegger saw as key to revealing the totality of our Being. He discovered in anxiety a slipping away of our existence that forces us to confront the question 'How is it with the nothing?' (1993 [c1929]: 101). Three years, now three and a half years, to do a PhD; no lecturers or timetables, criteria or clear objectives, in other words, "How is it with the nothing?". I have a scholarship to thrive on, and a family home to nest. The perfect opportunity to welcome the kind of boredom Walter Benjamin outlined as integral to storytelling yet waning in modern societies. The kind of boredom that anthropologist Michael Taussig observes slides into anxiety, in other words, if not nurtured with creative treatment, becomes an actuality of itself:

Like boredom, this slipping away can be a terrible drag or else something we come to terms with as writers, enamored with slipping away from one's self and thereby able to open up the gap between writing and what the writing is about. (2004: 62).

Don't get me wrong, this project and PhD program have been an incredibly stimulating and enjoyable period. I've cherished my time and friendships in Sri Lanka and have thoroughly enjoyed piecing together *My Mother's Village*. But if I am to be honest about mapping the topography informing a provenance, then the fertility of boredom and isolation, as well as the alkaline taste of anxiety, ought to be unveiled. As Benjamin advocated in the true art of storytelling, and Taussig warned when straddling nothingness, this often uncomfortable space might prove crucial to a 'new mode of truth-seeking and reality-testing' (Taussig 1993: 32).

Field

The purpose of this exegesis is to develop and articulate a critical framework for informing the production and critical interpretation of my personal documentary praxis. My hypothesis is that the concept of *provenance* will provide this study with the paradigmatic foundations for critically analysing shifting modes of personal documentary storytelling. A motivation for this research is the apparent lack of such a critical framework for interpreting and developing contemporary interdisciplinary documentary storytelling. I argue that a nuanced understanding of

provenance reveals the *personal* potential of evolving documentary forms, transgressing previously divorced disciplines of film, photography, and visual ethnography. The convergence of these disciplines within contemporary art prompts a re-consideration of their historical trajectories, in particular the role of *personal provenance* across their respective storytelling modes and methodologies. Benjamin's explorations of *mimesis* in art and storytelling, retheorised in new ethnography (Taussig 1993) and contemporary art discourse (Berger 1972), offers an *intellectual provenance* for this critical evaluation of cross-disciplinary personal documentary production. In addition to 'personal' and 'intellectual' dimensions; other fundamental dimensions of provenance, as I explain later on, include 'creative', 'political', and 'material' provenance. I propose that navigating a cross-disciplinary provenance topography highlights intersections, tensions, and actively intertwines a diversity of creative and scholarly research.

One of the more telling aspects of my research has been to compare the academic contexts of my mother's PhD and ethnographic filmmaking in the 70s and 80s with the demands of my own visual arts program. Entrenched in an Australian "sandstone" anthropology department,¹ having just returned from the field, my mother pleaded for personal narratives to be incorporated as a significant part of her thesis, her concern being that the inevitable abstraction of analysis would be at the expense of more 'honest' and 'accurate' details of relationships and experiences. Furthermore, the documentary films she produced were not even submitted as part of her PhD as, at the time, she was advised by her supervisor that they would put her examination outcome at risk. I, on the other hand, can be found staggering across the comparatively borderless art college terrain, producing a film and exegesis to fulfill my doctoral demands. Whereas Sharon was fighting to liberate academic parameters, my current stress cycles are symptomatic of having to construe methodologies and conceptual frameworks to legitimize my practice-based research, a relatively infant and experimental form of research within academia (see Smith & Dean 2009, Barrett & Bolt 2010). While I am aware of inherent tensions in the 'academic mode' of creative production (Bell 2009), I see

¹ 'Sandstone' universities are an informally defined group of Australia's oldest tertiary education institutions, in this case The University of Sydney. The term connotes prestige and tradition with an emphasis on theory rather than practice.

the combination of an exegeses and an artwork offering a capacious avenue for articulating emerging forms of 'experimental knowledge' across disciplinary boundaries.

Personal Documentary

What became clear to me early on in my undergraduate studies in art college, was the distinctly personal narrative inherent to documentary still photography. As we went around the class digesting projects, we would generally discuss our intentions, the nature and status of our subject, what our personal relationship with the subject was like, what sort of visual language or techniques we were using, and what arrangement of display or exhibition we were working towards. Our instructors and peers would mention similar work by other photographers and other resources that might inform our projects. Like the work of artists we admired, we aspired to exhibit our images on gallery walls or produce detailed monographs. Post-graduation, this remains the most ideal production scenario - devoid of mainstream editorial constraints or economic imperatives.

Traditionally, documentary photography is characterised by a humanist ideology or intention, a dependence on photographic truth, an appeal to visual aesthetics, and the personal narrative of the author and their unique relationship to subjects. Anyone familiar with the history of photography, will also be aware of the momentous influence shifting technology has had on most aspects of the genre - the aesthetics, the photographic event, the distribution of images, and on the changing epistemological orientations of what is considered an accurate or at least honest depiction of *reality*.

Coincidentally, in the second year of my undergraduate study equipment requirements for students went from 35mm film to digital SLR cameras. Over the next few years our nostalgic red rooms were illuminated by multiplying computer screens. The photographic projects we produced and researched were increasingly no longer print-based. Workshops previously spent crowding around 8x10s evolved into basking in the reflection of a projected "slideshow". Decisions regarding paper textures and print-size were now more a question of screen

dimensions and installation potential. For me, the most significant revolution of digital photography was not the lack of material film or the ease of image manipulation, rather, the annexation of time - or more accurately a *timeline* - to our apparently frozen moments.

With increasingly accessible video technology, advancements in computers and editing software, I started to apply the filmmaking techniques I learnt working with my father to my photography projects, in other words, crafting personal videos in the tradition of the photo-essay.

Efforts to contextualise my moving image practice led me to the filmmaking of Dziga Vertov, Basil Wright, Chris Marker, Agnes Varde, Louis Malle, Jonas Mekas, and Dennis O'Rourke, for example. Filmmakers whom I felt portrayed a similar subjective voice and personal perspective to the still photography tradition I was immersed in.

Hence, to identify my practice I appeal to the term *personal documentary*. A range of contemporary theorists employ slightly divergent labels. Laura Rascaroli (2009) for instance writes of a similar canon as 'personal cinema' or 'essay film' following on from influential film theorist André Bazin's articulation that "essay" in film ought to be 'understood in the same way it is in literature: an essay is both historical and political, while being written by a poet' (2003: 44). Lucas Hilderbrand (2009) and Catherine Russell (1999) both emphasise the formal and structural innovation of such visual practices with their terms 'experimental documentary' and 'experimental ethnography' respectively. They argue that uncertain or avant-garde dismantling of realist aesthetics and subject distance are necessary to addressing ongoing cultural encounters, translation, and transitions (Russell 1999: xvii). Laura Marks (2000), on the other hand, highlights the circulation and phenomenological encounter of the filmic event in her term 'intercultural cinema' and her description of the 'skin' of a film.

Marks' thesis highlights the significance of a personal approach to intercultural or cross-cultural storytelling. For instance she writes, 'intercultural works rely on

idiosyncratic, personal narratives, because these provide a slim thread back into the strata of history' (2000: 30). According to Marks, a personal approach to both subject matter and expression informs a mode of storytelling that respects and encourages partial views of the filmmaker and participating subjects in contrast to hegemonic versions of history (2000: 68).

While these theorists and others have forged significant critiques of personal documentary, in the rapidly changing contemporary landscape of visual storytelling, as Jill Bennett points out 'the object' and 'the field' are fluid and heterogeneous identities (2012: 8), there is a need for conceptualisations of documentary production in which the act of representation retains the intricacy of an emergence. Or as Stephen Muecke suggests, connecting creative production to the real itself, rather than a set of representations playing catch up (2008: np). The idiosyncrasy of each personal story, the peculiar relationships, influences, ethical and creative decisions pertaining to the documentary mode require a corresponding fluidity to their articulation and cross-disciplinary potential.

Documentary Modes

When I occasionally lecture in documentary storytelling, I tend to utilise the diagram below which illustrates pivotal agents involved in any act of representation. If the act of representation is associated with being 'documentary' the diagram is particularly useful for highlighting the unique nature of these relationships. Unlike a purely pictorial or fictional representation (if there is such a thing), laying claim on the *real*, even obscurely, demands an ethical engagement peculiar to the genre. Within documentary, each of these relational links becomes concerned with distinct dimensions such as; intentions, honesty, aesthetic conventions, verisimilitude, proximity and distance, pedigree, social implications, to name but a few. Thus the unfolding of these relationships, or *process*, becomes integral to the authenticity of the storytelling.

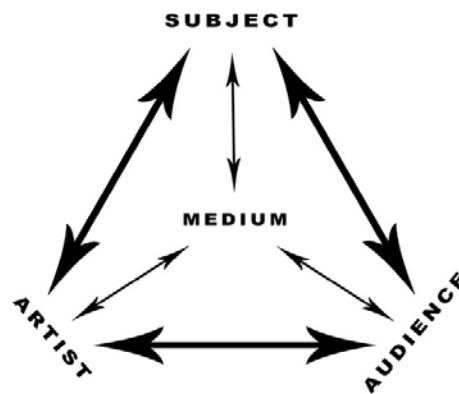


Figure 1.1 Paradigm of Representation

The closest conceptual modelling I've come across that attempts to integrate these relationships is Bill Nichols' influential 'Documentary Modes'. The four modes he articulated in 1991 offer a typology of approaches to the documentary genre - reflective of technological and epistemological milieus from which they were historically construed. His four modes include: expository, observational, participatory, and reflexive. Interestingly, I identify each of these four modes, and the historical social shifts in epistemology and technology they respond to, as emphasising particular links within the paradigm of representation.²

Within the 'expository mode' typical of "classical documentary", political propaganda, or information driven films, the instructive relationship between the 'artist' and the 'audience' can be seen to dictate the representation of the 'subject'. Discursive roots to this influential mode of production can be traced back to 1926 when John Grierson coined the term 'documentary' in praise of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* (1926). Grierson saw Flaherty's depiction of reality and the future of documentary film as a powerful tool for educating the masses and promoting social cohesion at a time when Britain was struggling through The Great Depression (Aufderheide 2007: 35). Documentary productions following the

² Nichols later published a more condensed version of his thesis as *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) in which he added two more modes: 'Poetic Mode' and 'Performative Mode'. However, in regards to conceptual development I think these modes are adequately accounted for by 'Reflexive' and 'Participatory' respectively. The additional two modes are not marked by clear conceptual distinctions and appear to be defined by their historical or chronological development. For example an early experimental documentary like Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934) was made well before the postmodern 'Reflexive Mode' of the 1980s and should therefore, according to Nichols' re-evaluation, be considered a 'Poetic' documentary, that is, despite its formal and intellectual use of reflexive techniques.

Griersonian tradition in the expository mode present information as matter-of-fact, determined historically, and external to any influence of the production (Nichols 1991: 37). Nichols explains, 'Expository texts take shape around commentary directed toward the viewer; images serve as illustration or counterpoint' (1991: 34). This mode of representation is most commonly found in journalistic reporting where disparate information is condensed or summarised into a template time frame rather than adapting to the subject addressing the audience.

To counter the authoritative positioning of the 'artist' in the expository mode, particularly the deceptive tone of World War II propaganda films, the late 1950s saw the rise of an observational approach to documentary. Returning to the Paradigm of Representation diagram, the observational mode can be understood as attempting to relay the 'subject' to the 'audience' without the apparent mediation of the 'artist'. The development of observational recording was made possible with the advent of mobile 16mm cameras and synchronous sound equipment (Nichols 1991: 33). As Nichols explains, purists of the observational mode advocate a non-interventionist approach from the outset of filming through to post-production editing, resulting in films with 'no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no intertitles, no historical re-enactments, no behaviour repeated for the camera, and not even any interviews' (2001: 110). The premise of the observational approach is to present lives as they are lived to viewers, who then make conclusions based on their own observations. Critics and producers alike engaging with the observational mode have grappled with the influence of the camera on the 'subject' and the ultimately subjective perspective of the 'artist' delivering an accurate depiction of reality.

The participatory mode, the third mode Nichols identifies, in contrast to an observational approach places the 'artist' within the representation alongside the 'subject'. As a less authoritative mode of representation, the development of participatory methodologies during the 1960s and 70s is understood as reflective of a widening embrace of individual agency and the politics of post-colonial intercession, particularly evident in the films of European *cinéma vérité*. In contrast to the historical authority presented by the expository mode, and the

implied objectivity of the observational mode, Nichols identifies the participatory mode as introducing 'a partial or indefinite tone' (1991: 44). Interviews with subjects, for example, featuring the presence of the filmmaker in the participatory mode, are offered as evidence to the audience, whereas under the expository mode, interviews primarily serve as verification of the producer's agenda (Nichols 1991: 48). In addition to the influence of the camera, however, the interactive mode is often criticised for understating the influence of the 'artist' regardless of their apparent participation alongside the 'subject'.

Finally, coinciding with post-modern criticism, the 'reflexive mode' could be understood as foregrounding the role of the 'audience' and their (somewhat circumspect) relationship with the 'artist'. The reflexive mode is distinct from other modes precisely because it focuses on the paradigm of representation itself, in Nichols' words, 'speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems and issues of representing it as well' (2001: 125). Experiments with reflexivity attempt to reveal processes of constructing and extracting meaning from the text and lived experience. The ultimate pitfall of the reflexive mode, in the same vein as the other three modes, is when intellectually informed strategies become divisive tropes and are employed as conventional markers of authenticity instead of emerging out of the challenge of how to honestly depict the story. I expand on the reflexive mode and other modes of documentary in more detail in Section II, as I encounter them in the provenance of my own practice.

Nichols' four modes accurately and exhaustively distinguish fundamental approaches to documentary representation, however, a shortcoming of the framework is when documentary projects appeal to a variety of modes at different points within their narrative, and more importantly at various stages of production. For instance, in Trinh T Minh-Ha's celebrated experimental ethnography *Reassemblage* (1982), even though a reflexive mode governs montage techniques, narration, and soundtrack, the images themselves appear conventionally *expository* in their physical distance and remove from the participants in the frame. Particularly in creative and experimental approaches to documentary storytelling a methodological or critical application of Nichols' categorical modes is restrictive.

As the diversity of strategies and methodologies employed in documentary demonstrates, and through critically reflecting on my own experience, systematic analysis of documentary storytelling overlooks the unique and constantly shifting nature of these interactions and instigations, presenting a misleading hierarchy or compartmentalisation of the sensuous activity underway. While such a structural illustration is a convenient tool for dissecting agency and highlighting aesthetic trends, it also runs the risk of imposing unnecessary boundaries between those involved in an economy of difference.

Provenance

In my praxis, and for *My Mother's Village*, I am operating within an alignment of documentary film, documentary photography, and visual ethnography in the context of contemporary art. What I believe is shared by these disciplines is the individual storyteller negotiating reality in order to formulate an experientially informed story. As an art form, in Walter Benjamin's political sense, I am conferring the notion of *authenticity* to the passage of the story. The technological means are now available to craft, interact, and distribute the story from one perspective, mirroring the singular perspective of the motion-camera eye, the 'roaming' still photographer, or the isolated ethnographer or artist in their 'field'.

Traditional notions of authenticity in documentary, as demonstrated by Nichols' evolutionary model, are bound to shifting conventions of realism, as they respond to new technologies and epistemologies. As Aufderheide concisely observes, 'Challenges to conventions stake an alternative claim to authenticity' (2007: 11). Despite post-modernist attempts to undermine conventions and experiment with reflexive methodologies, questions of authenticity in documentary production remain largely limited to form and content.³

Provenance offers a critical method for establishing authenticity in a mode of storytelling tied to both aesthetics and social intervention. In other words, as

³ The concept of authenticity in documentary is discussed in more detail in Section II under the chapter heading Provenance and is a recurring theme of discussion throughout the exegesis.

personal documentary and ethnographic modes or storytelling are increasingly conceptualised within a contemporary art context, the journey or passage of the work becomes a constituent of the work of art, a process of emergence as opposed to an exclusive artefact. *Provenance* questions how the artist or storyteller incorporates the passage of their experience and 'creative treatment' into the meaning of the work itself, and connects notions of authenticity with the idiosyncratic associations and stages of creative production. Jill Bennett recently outlined a similar method for embracing 'practical aesthetics' by way of *casuistry*:

Instead of working from a body of principles or rules, it derives its theory of the case inductively, taking account of 'presumptions' about the thing in question. In contradistinction, to applied ethics, then, casuistry brings experience to bear rather than subsuming experience under a general theory imported from outside. (2012: 14)

Bennett argues that the contemporary interface between real events and aesthetics demands the 'case' and the 'event' be treated as a problematic in itself, in other words, being responsive and adaptive to the formation of an indeterminate story (2012: 27). *Provenance* similarly functions inductively, concerning itself with the idiosyncratic experience and passage of the work in question, which might have emerged from diverse disciplines, locations, or politically motivated instigations, but presents itself as an 'event', which I am equating to *storytelling*.

Within a creative documentary paradigm, dependent on the indexical nature of photography, I am arguing that an individual provenance in the *storyteller*, is not only inherent and symptomatic of interpreting film and photography, as anticipated by *auteur* theory or Vertov's 'Kino Glaz' - 'Camera Eye', but with current technology a truly individual provenance is not only made possible but potentially offers creative and ethical pathways through the production and storytelling process. In other words, *provenance* becomes the creative process. The uniqueness of the process - the encounters, contingencies, and instigations - establish the authenticity of the production.

In order to clarify the nature and scope of *provenance* as a guiding concept, I have identified five potential dimensions of *provenance* pertinent to my project: (i) *intellectual provenance* encompasses the theories and concepts that have influenced my praxis and the work itself; (ii) *creative provenance* calls attention to the genre(s) in which the work is situated and the influence of other art works and traditions; (iii) *personal provenance* incorporates family and social background in addition to psychological or emotional motivations; (iv) *political provenance* highlights significant ideologies at play, in this instance the humanitarian documentary tradition, contemporary politics, and post-colonial geopolitics; lastly, (v) *material provenance* comprises the production technology and phenomenological passage of the creative artefact.

As a creative and ethically motivated project, *provenance* necessitates experimentation and contingencies unique to the storyteller and the story. For *My Mother's Village provenance* opens up my family history, my parents' films, my creative practice, postcolonial negotiations across the North-South divide, my fieldwork experiences in Sri Lanka, inspirations and motivations, creative decisions - including exhibition and display events, in addition to *auxiliary* instigations such as academic presentations, publications, and Internet presence through online publishing and social media.

Provenance encompasses factors beyond the construction of a textual object to highlight the meaning of the actual interactions and mimetic transactions of this process. As suggested by Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), ultimately acts of documentary or ethnography become so intricate and unique that they are perhaps more appropriately defined as witchcraft or shamanism. Recently, Taussig has turned his attentions to the 'imaginative logic of discovery' and in reframing his ethnographic fieldwork notebooks as art, he observes, '[...] the notebook offers you this invitation so long as you are prepared to kindle the mystique pertaining to documents that blend inner and outer worlds' (2011: xi). In this era of reality testing and truth seeking, perhaps we ought to take Taussig's lead and embrace a degree of mysticism and uncertainty to the nature of our storytelling. Nevertheless, the question of 'being-in-time' and the nature of 'fieldwork' demand a *direction*: a

location, intention, and temporality.

Sensuous Topography

I remember during a school camp one year being introduced to orienteering, a competition of tracking down geographic checkpoints and deciphering clues with the aid of a compass and topographical map. I remember learning to read the contours of the map in order to decipher the best route to tread through the rugged South Coast hinterland. Nikos Papastergiadis has fittingly referred to the spatial dispersion and decentralisation of contemporary art practices as 'topographical' (2004). He discusses a heightened awareness of the meanings and political significance of artistic intervention and the transformative potential of instigations ulterior to the artwork to help navigate both imaginary and geographical topographies. In his words:

The consequences of this form of creative practice demands multi-linear forms of engagement and openness to unpredictable responses, for the process of dissemination and contextualization are no longer designed as apparatus that serves and promotes the originality of the art work, but become active forces in the construction of a field of aesthetic experiences and social meanings. (2004: 160)

In constructing a 'field of aesthetic experiences and social meanings', Papastergiadis is encouraging artists to actively engage with the mapping of their work, as both imaginary and located within a real geography. This shift in art practice could be understood as an orienteering exercise across Howard Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982), in which Becker outlined a sociological breakdown of the division of labour and collective activity involved in art production and corresponding interpretation of meaning.

As I quickly discovered with my orienteering group, you are only ever located on the topographical map in one place at one time. The first thing you do when looking at a map is to locate where you are, followed by an imaginary passage across the abstracted landscape. Undertaking the journey itself unveils the intricate details and sensations absent from the contoured abstraction. To pursue

provenance is to creatively engage with various nodes and contours across this journey of artistic production and storytelling.

Technology

In recent years, the technological landscape has dramatically altered our engagement with the 'art world' topography. Now more than ever before, tracks are easier to produce and more readily traced by others. Many of the diverse roles and responsibilities of artistic production identified by Becker in the 80s have since merged into the responsibility of the artist, and the provenance of works of art has opened up experimental ecologies and pathways. As Chris Marker, posing as his avatar Sergei Murasaki in *Second Life* for one of his final press interviews, responded to the question of new technologies:

To be able to make a whole film, *The Case of the Grinning Cat* (2004), with my own ten fingers, without any external support or intervention... and then go sell the DVDs I'd burned myself at the Saint-Blaise market... I confess, I felt triumphant. From producer to consumer, directly. No surplus value. Marx's dream come true.⁴

Accessible high-definition cameras, personal editing and mastering software, in addition to alternative distribution and installation opportunities, foster an increasing potential of personal provenance, and subsequently heightened authenticity based on experience. In 1931 Paul Valéry predicted what now could be readily mistaken as a 'smart-phone' slogan:

Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign.
(in Benjamin 1968 [c1936]: 219)

In this electronic age, technology provides the means for storytellers to influence the provenance of their stories, but at the same time there is an inevitability of tracks being laid on their own accord. Longstanding qualities of provenance in storytelling such as signature style or aesthetics, methodologies and motivations,

⁴ <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1143-chris-marker-s-second-life> (accessed 11 December 2012)

the pedigree of the author, perhaps even their character, and their geographic location in space and time remain crucial to contemporary documentary storytelling. But with increasing access to technology around the world, the blossoming of social networking avenues and self-publishing websites such as YouTube and Facebook, our topography has expanded dramatically. The Facebook 'timeline' format attests to widespread efforts to curate individual *provenance* through sharing, 'liking', archiving, and self-publishing material. As Bennett observes, visual literacy is no longer the exclusive domain of art history but is a technique for living (2012: 08).

In addition to 'user' generated avenues like Facebook or Wikipedia, participants of the electronic age leave a surreptitious and intricate trail of information or 'metadata' in their wake. This includes databases of information filtered by complex algorithms such as Internet 'browsing' histories or Google search trends, Amazon.com purchasing habits, and even the invisible attributes of digital files such as the data mapping of photographs and the unique history of their duplication. When I tutor students in basic photography and ask them to demonstrate shallow depth of field or frozen movement I no longer even need to *see* the image, the *metadata* tells me all their camera settings such as Exposure Mode, Aperture, Shutter Speed, Lens Focal Length, ISO Speed Ratings, and so on, demonstrating an application of theory devoid of 'imaginative logic'.

Culture

Our information rich landscaping, or 'data-stream', has perhaps made the most profound influence on topographies traversing cultural divides such as ethnography and inter-cultural documentary. Increased accessibility of technology in the 'South' can be seen to be flattening the knowledge hierarchy that once held exclusivity over 'culture'. In addition to increased access to information, the last few decades have seen dramatic increases in population movements in and between countries. Consequently, audiences have diversified and 'culture' itself has required reconceptualising to reflect globalisation.

A 'New Ethnography' presented by the likes of Michael Taussig, Michael D. Jackson, Susan Buck-Morss, and Stephen Muecke, explores culture through a speculative and experimental frame reflective of, in Muecke's words, 'a more symmetrical relationship between *Us* and *Them*, and expands that to a network of relationships without a clear control centre' (2012: 25). New Ethnography understands cultural studies as an active integration, even intervention, across cultural divides, with the ethical understanding that researchers have a hand in the composition of cultural space. The kind of fluid or sensuous articulation of an experimental ethnography is evident in Muecke's elaboration of culture in his recent collaboration with photographer Max Pam, *Contingency in Madagascar*:

The feeling, thinking body is continually criss-crossed by multiple codes, technologies, rituals and practices. We are sentient beings forming our cultures in energised articulations with landscapes, animals, bedrooms, kitchens, computer terminals and other machinery. There is fallout and loss, waste and despair, but there are also florid imaginings, sudden flares of discharge in the meaningful and feelingful encounters of bodies living in environments consumed in order to provide the energy to give *something* over and above rational requirements. This *something* is the stuff of culture. Culture is not just an unnecessary surplus or ornament to our everyday lives; it is part of those lives. (2012: 28)

Locating your own position and participating in imaginary and spatial topographies of knowing becomes crucial to experimental ethnography. Perceiving an ecology of interconnectedness in effect isolates individuals within their topography. Moreover, understanding personal implication in social formations requires being aware of the impact and influence of your agency. Therefore, in the case of Others knowing Others, *provenance* sheds light on the storyteller's 'right' to tell the story. *Provenance* questions how you got there, who you spoke with, and how the event emerged. It concerns pedigree as much as experience.

Exegesis structure & style

The remainder of this exegesis experiments with the locations and chronologies composing *My Mother's Village* and the provenance of my storytelling praxis. An auto-reflexive frame oscillates with a more scholarly tone to navigate dimensions

of my provenance topography, isolating nodes and events as an experiment in contemporaneous storytelling. Visual and literary sources referred to throughout the exegesis are not necessarily marked as 'case studies' or objects of independent investigation, but rather, are seamlessly integrated in an attempt to relay the blurring between *creative* and *intellectual* provenance.

The exegesis is divided into four sections. This first section introduces my practice, the intentions of my research and underlying concepts. The remaining three sections are laid out in the traditional cinematic terms of 'pre-production', 'production', and 'post-production'. While these headings roughly refer to the development of *My Mother's Village*, its production and surrounding research was not undertaken in such a linear trajectory. Hence, these headings more accurately denote thematic investigations and discussions that would traditionally fall under each stage of production. This dissociative logic reflects a non-linear mode of production open to contingency and multitudinous pathways.

The section 'pre-production' introduces integral relationships, primary materials, creative influences and research parameters to the project. My mother and father's three ethnographic films, comprising *The Sri Lanka Series* (1980); *Four Women, Dancers Were Only Allowed to Dance*, and *Fishermen of Duwa* are critically reviewed, with attention paid to their *material*, *creative* and *personal* provenance.

The chapter 'provenance' maps a convergence of documentary photography, cinema, and visual ethnography in contemporary art from the vantage point of being seated at my desk with an Internet browser; demonstrating the profound implications of what Bruno Latour refers to as the 'data-stream', and offering an experiential navigation through our current information and storytelling environment. The significance of provenance in personal documentary is identified through a historical trajectory across academic and creative disciplines, reflective of epistemological, technological, and phenomenological encounters with visual storytelling. Walter Benjamin's observations in 1936 of the shifting nature of art in the 'age of mechanical reproduction' and his explorations of 'mimesis' through

'storytelling' provide an intellectual groundwork for understanding the material and ontological convergence of cross-disciplinary visual research.

'My family and Sri Lanka' offers an autobiographical account of my family's ongoing relationship with Sri Lanka. I critically reflect on my memories growing up with occasional family holidays to the island and our visits to "The Village". This predominately *personal* provenance accounts for the interceding three decade period between *The Sri Lanka Series* films and *My Mother's Village*. My 'awakening' to my family's curious relationship with Sri Lanka, however, was catalysed at the age of 17 through my role as assistant editor on my mother and father's film *The Actor & The President* (2000), a further manifestation of their personal and political Sri Lanka mosaic in which I was beginning to play a conscious role.

The *creative* and *political* provenance of *My Mother's Village* has been informed by a critical investigation into the history, role, and status of the documentary genre in Sri Lanka and efforts to locate documentary modes of visual storytelling within the burgeoning Sri Lankan contemporary art scene. The chapter 'Sri Lankan Documentary' explores potential influences, in particular the 'creative treatment' of similar themes and locations within existing stories and artworks. As one of the few avenues in Sri Lanka where contentious political issues have been interrogated - surveying Sri Lankan visual art offers a window into personal and social struggles in the nation's postcolonial history. Ethically and intellectually, it is important for my research and filmmaking to be communicating with 'the field' itself as opposed to reporting back to an Australian institution. Hence, in order to produce *My Mother's Village* with a Sri Lankan and English speaking audience in mind, being aware of the history of documentary in Sri Lanka provides avenues for a dialogue with the local documentary storytelling tradition. Furthermore, surveying Sri Lankan documentary contextualises *The Sri Lanka Series* amongst documentary films produced about the nation's society and culture over the same period, and highlights the series' historical significance and rare *creative* provenance. With the recently transformed *material* provenance of the three films into digital form, it is appropriate to re-inject my mother and father's films into this under acknowledged history of inter-cultural storytelling in Sri Lanka.

Section three 'production', relays personal experiences and issues raised from my fieldwork and filmmaking in Sri Lanka. By way of scholarly articles or 'post-scripts' my mother has published regarding her experiences in the field, I am able to contrast various issues she raises with my own experiences and attempt to creatively respond to her critical reflections through my visual storytelling.

'The art of boredom' revisits Benjamin's observations on the significance of *boredom* to storytelling, of particular relevance to cross-cultural immersion and understanding. Seemingly absent from contemporary existence, I discover boredom dwelling in the aesthetics, methodologies, and physicality, in other words throughout the *intellectual*, *creative*, and *material* provenance currently intersecting documentary and ethnography as fine art.

Rather than attempt a detailed report on the production of *My Mother's Village*, the chapter 'fieldwork' adopts an ethnographic frame to expand upon events or nodes from my experience and critically reflect on a selection of applied 'strategies'. These include my encounters with participants, re-screening the films, conducting interviews, and observational recording.

The final section, 'post-production' draws out creative instigations that I feel are significant to the provenance of *My Mother's Village* and are not necessarily self-evident in the film itself. The initial chapters of this section expand on the importance of boredom in informing the *intellectual* and *material* provenance of contemporary personal documentary. Correspondingly, the chapter 'installation experiments' outlines two art gallery installations I produced in Sri Lanka as potential manifestations of my research project but due to specific shortcomings ultimately formed supplementary stories to *My Mother's Village*. 'The Edit' discusses noteworthy creative and intellectual decisions behind the final single screen narrative such as how *The Sri Lanka Series* has been quoted, the use of sound and narration, and the importance and challenges of bi-lingual subtitling. The conclusion, 'Provenance in the future tense', critically reflects on the production process and final version of *My Mother's Village*, its successes and

limitations. Provenance as a conceptual framework is evaluated for further development and cross-disciplinary potential. An additional 'Post-Script' chapter provides a critical evaluation of the research project following an extensive screening tour of *My Mother's Village* in Sri Lanka.

Section II Pre-Production

The Village

From: Sharon Bell
Date: 9 January 2010 2:12:45 PM AEDT
To: Aaron Burton

The directions to Kanewala are:

Travel from Colombo along High Level Road through Piliyandala to Pokunuwita Corner (Pokunuvita Handiya) which is on the Panadura-Horana Road. (If you reach Horana you have gone too far.) Once at Pokunuwita (about an hour+ from Colombo) people will be able to point you to Priyanthi (who uses the name Nujika, surname Aluthge, or her mother Aluthge Chandrawathie). You can introduce yourself if needs be as 'sudu-nonage puttaa' (the white lady's son).

Early 2010 was the first time I visited "The Village", Kanewala, without my mother and father. I took the cheapest option of a public bus from Colombo,⁵ and upon reaching Pokunuvita Junction I followed mum's advice to simply ask around for Priyanthi and declare '*mama sudu-nonage puttaa*' ('I am the white lady's son') and villagers will immediately be able to point me in the right direction. This wasn't the case. Bemused storekeepers shrugged with furrowed eyebrows, 'Who?' they responded in English. I buckled to the convenience and called Priyanthi's mobile to request she pick me up from the junction. Bouncing around potholes on the back of her scooter, Priyanthi laughed when I relayed Sharon's instructions, 'No, it's not like that anymore' she replied.

⁵ It's worth noting at this time my mother's advice and the travel advice given by the Australian Government was to avoid public transport in Sri Lanka, buses in particular. During the three decade conflict buses were frequently subjected to Tamil Tiger suicide bombings. However, numerous well informed local contacts were adamant that danger had passed and it was now safe to travel on public transport.

Priyanthi

A few years ago Priyanthi opened an Internet café on the main road by her village. Her business was located directly opposite the small grocery store that appears in *Four Women*, where she and her older brother are seen dropping off their mother's string-hoppers (rice noodles) on their way to school. This radical transformation from string-hoppers to Internet over three decades was the initial catalyst for me to pursue a contemporary follow-up to Sharon and Geoff's Sri Lanka films. In the year since my first visit in 2010, however, the Internet café failed to prosper and Priyanthi was forced to close the business and instead open a *kade* (small grocery store) beside her house to service her neighbourhood's daily needs; eggs, rice, dhal, and other items in their smallest possible quantities. Nevertheless, the social and political reasons for the Internet café failing were in many ways more profound and revealing than a straightforward narrative of urbanisation - a story I now appreciate as peculiar to all manner of villages around the world.

Priyanthi's assistance in my research and filmmaking cannot be understated. She was already familiar with *Four Women* and thought it would be a fantastic project to revisit the same families again. She immediately knew where all of the surviving participants from *Four Women* could be found. She also managed to locate the families involved in *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance*. A further interesting twist to our production process was that when Sharon and Geoff were travelling around the island they would often take the then five year old Priyanthi and my sister Tegan along with them. For *My Mother's Village*, Priyanthi toured once again to the same communities but this time she was often the one conducting interviews, demonstrating inherited qualities from her 'self-adopted' mother, Sharon.

What Priyanthi and I may also have inherited from our mothers was the relationship of dependency Sharon identified as integral to village life, which had evidently transgressed my mother's ethnographic observation to become a reality in her personal relationship with Priyanthi's mother, Chandrawathie (see Bell 2004). 'Mutual exploitation' between researcher and participant, as Crick suggests (1999: 176), is perhaps too malevolent a description, 'collaboration' or 'agreement'

also seem inaccurately contractual and misleading. But in the same way Chandrawathie would refuse payment from Sharon for string-hoppers in the 1970s, Priyanthi refused payment for the help she provided me with the film, and I would plead to at least cover travel and food expenses. But in times of need, an unexpected medical bill or family difficulties, Priyanthi would often turn to me and our mutual dependence came full circle.

The nuanced details of Priyanthi's background and the story of the collapse of her Internet café were the initial impetus for me to pursue the lives of all the original participants from *The Sri Lanka Series*. Some of the revealing aspects to her story, including the Internet café, were too convoluted or technically flawed in their recording to be incorporated into the final narrative of *My Mother's Village*, but their significance to my project's motivations and thematic direction, in addition to Priyanthi's formative role in the production, in other words her role in the provenance of *My Mother's Village*, compels me to expand on a few of those details here.

Priyanthi has two daughters, Suhari (8) and Sudani (4), and her husband Mahesh is a Floor Manager at a five star hotel near Colombo. Naturally the two girls are demanding of their mother, and their grandmother is not always fit enough to look after them. Hence Priyanthi had difficulty keeping her Internet business open for long enough hours to turn a profit. Located on the main road she told me she didn't feel safe working without a man around and was afraid it might get robbed, so resorted to employing her nephew as security. However, the pivotal reason the business collapsed, as Priyanthi would discover, is because the most demanded product was pornographic videos for mobile phones. Priyanthi recounts how young men would often come in and ask when her husband would be returning and shrug off her offers to help, then she knew they came to ask about videos. Pornography is illegal in Sri Lanka and Priyanthi refused to sell it, and therefore her business collapsed. So, underneath the single, small example of the urbanisation of a village is revealed an intricate dynamic of gender, economic, social, and political circumstances.

Priyanthi and Mahesh live with their two children on their own land in a large comfortable house about one kilometre away from Priyanthi's mother. Chandrawathie remains in the same house where she was interviewed under the shade of the eaves for *Four Women*. Priyanthi and Mahesh were able to afford their own house and land, and fridge, and stereo, and television, and plastic furniture, because Mahesh worked at a hotel in Dubai for a couple of years immediately following their marriage. Returning to Sri Lanka to be with his young family, like many homes across the island, the second story remains perennially incomplete as Mahesh's local wage fails to provide enough to complete the construction.

During our time together Priyanthi would often express the frustration of returning to village life, and of being stuck at home to care for the children. Prior to marriage she had developed an uncommon and promising career path. Upon graduating from hotel school she was employed at a German owned tourist resort south of Colombo. While working there a holidaying German family took a liking to her and offered a stint abroad as a nanny and office assistant. She now speaks fluent German.

My mother lost contact with Chandrawathie and her family for a number of years, and in 1996, while Sharon and Geoff were in Colombo to negotiate permission from the President to film *The Actor & The President* (2000) they were greeted by a young woman, referring to them as 'mother' and 'father'. A few years later Sharon was able to recruit Priyanthi as an interpreter and assistant for a World Bank project reporting on higher education. Following her entrée into organisation administration, Priyanthi was able to attract consecutive roles in various NGOs and institutions around Colombo.

Growing up, like many women of her generation coming from the village to the city, there remained a great deal of pressure to fulfill traditional obligations of getting married and having children. Following a warning from her doctor that her body might not be able to have children further down the track, with some haste Priyanthi married and had two children. Hence, Priyanthi straddles a challenging

position between two worlds, that of the Colombo career-driven woman, as opposed to the traditional expectations of life in the village as a mother and wife.

At the time of filming in 2011 Priyanthi's ambitions were to continue to run her *kade* until the children were a little older and more independent, and then return to work in Colombo or overseas. However, since then her frustrations at being stuck in the village became too stifling and she has returned to work in the German holiday resort where she first found employment, and at least with a greater degree of happiness, she now struggles to balance family and work demands.



Figure 2.1 Priyanthi's family at the front of their house and *kade* in Kanewala, 2011. Photo by Author.

Primary Materials & Parameters

Primary materials informing my pre-production engagement with *The Sri Lanka Series* include: the three 55 minute films comprising the series,⁶ still photographs taken by my father in Sri Lanka during the production period, in addition to Sharon's PhD thesis and published reflections on her fieldwork. Sharon has also offered her diligently kept fieldwork journals, and while going through her archives she presented me with a revealing hand-written letter addressed to her supervisor. The letter outlined personal tribulations from her first week in Sri Lanka. When I saw it I immediately thought what an amazing insight such letters would offer, especially in regards to foregrounding personal dimensions of her fieldwork that she has since critiqued as lacking from her films and thesis (discussed in the later chapter 'My mother's postscripts and the Academy').

Upon asking to see the rest of her letters, Mum hesitantly agreed but said she would need to go through and check them first. At that point I also took a step back and asked myself whether I ought to interrogate them. I wondered if delving into her personal letters would in some way undermine the decisions she made in regards to writing and publishing her stories. I also didn't want to intrude in areas of her private life that could jeopardise our present relationship in some way. I came to the conclusion that either I access all of the letters and honestly investigate my mother's personal history in Sri Lanka or respect the privacy originally intended and focus on published material. I already had more than enough material to consider and concentrating too much on the personal dimension risked detracting from the Sri Lankan participants' narratives. To ignore the letters was a difficult and possibly contentious decision but it is important to consider that throughout the entire project I have remained in constant communication with my mother and father, relaying ideas and recounting events.

During the production of *The Sri Lanka Series* Geoff exposed dozens of rolls of medium format black and white negative and colour transparency still

⁶ Sharon and Geoff anticipated four films to *The Sri Lanka Series* however the fourth production, *The Exorcist*, was never completed due to the untimely destruction of the 'rushes', film workprint essential for editing, by a colleague.

photographs. As 'film stills' they predominately consist of portraits of participants and activities featured in their films. Occasionally a frame would reveal an intimate moment with my mother, caught between 'takes' perhaps. Overall, these high quality considered and deliberate photographs present an interesting contrast to the ageing colour, flickering dust and scratches of the motion films. Unfortunately, most of the black and white negatives are missing and all that remains are contact sheets. Dad is convinced they are somewhere but despite our efforts most of the negatives are nowhere to be found.

To welcome the personal photographs and not the private letters is an interesting distinction. Firstly the box of contact sheets and loose film was openly handed to me in the unguarded manner of 'these might be useful'. Many of the images are private and portray intimate moments between Sharon and Geoff, but their privacy as far as my access is concerned is more akin to all the other family photographs thrown into boxes and occasionally framed on our walls. Perhaps it comes down to fundamental differences in the nature of personal photos and personal letters. I interpret the images of these contact sheets as almost celebratory - as statements "for the record" or family archive. Whereas I imagine the original intentions of private letters were to relay any manner of concerns or feelings to be received and responded to as part of an irresolute narrative. Or perhaps Benjamin's observations mark their difference, the mechanical apparatus Geoff employed produced an object made for reproduction and mimesis, whereas the hand written words are caught up in obscure traditions of privacy.

The other significant omission from the parameters of my investigation is during the months that Geoff was in Sri Lanka, my sister Tegan, his then five year old daughter from a previous marriage went along with the crew. Tegan has a joyful and loving presence in many of Geoff's stills, and apparently had a memorable time living in the village, going to school, rapidly learning to converse in Sinhala, and becoming close friends with Chandrawathie's daughter of the same age, Priyanthi. I have intentionally left Tegan out of my frame because I feel her inclusion would confuse the narrative and is not directly related to this journey. That is to say,

Tegan also has significant personal connections and experiences through Geoff and Sharon's filmmaking, but they are another story.



Figure 2.2 An example of Geoff's black and white contact sheets. The young girl on the left is Priyanthi, and on the right Sharon is bathing Tegan at a well in Kanewala.

The Sri Lanka Series

As mentioned in the introduction, for a period of two years, from 1976 to 1978, my mother conducted anthropological fieldwork in Kanewela, a small predominately Sinhalese Buddhist village 35 kilometres southeast of Colombo. Her resulting thesis is titled *Women and Wage Labour: The Impact of Capitalism in Southwest Sri Lanka* (1986). Supplementing her doctoral research she produced *The Sri Lanka Series* (1980). In 1978, my father, Geoff Burton, an ABC trained cinematographer, photographed the films in 16mm colour. Both he and Sharon are credited as the Directors of the films. They had met collaborating through the University of Sydney's Anthropology Film Unit, now somewhat ironically, on a film questioning the rite and ritual of marriage among young Australian adults. With funding from the Australian Film Commission and the University of Sydney, Sharon and Geoff were able to employ Leo Sullivan as a sound recordist, purchase enough film stock, and as a small crew travel between the three subject communities, spending significant periods of time in each. The three films were later edited in Sydney with Stewart Young.

When Sharon first engaged with Sri Lanka for her doctoral research it was more a matter of political contingency than intellectually motivated selection. She has since offered the following account of how she ended up on the island:

When I chose, in the mid 70s, to undertake fieldwork I took the advice of learned colleagues and shied away from the increasingly politically fraught territory of Australian Aboriginal communities. I was unable to gain a visa within a reasonable, or even predictable, timeframe to work in my second territory of choice, Indonesia. Ironically, I subsequently spent much of my time amongst academic and bureaucratic colleagues in Sri Lanka (a place I had never previously visited but the site of my supervisor's first fieldwork) justifying my presence in their then feisty, isolationist, socialist state. (2004: 4)

Her supervisor had previously conducted research in Sri Lanka and suggested contacts for her to pursue. The title of her thesis hints at the ideological drive motivating her intentions; regardless of nation state, Sharon was passionate about highlighting the inequality and hardship dealt on women.

Historical context

Politically and economically the 1970s were a significant period in Sri Lanka's history. Life was difficult at the time for most Sri Lankans, poverty was growing in rural areas and the failing economy couldn't provide enough opportunities for a rapidly growing population (see Peebles 2006: 119-121, 140-145). Despite achieving Independence in 1948, political power largely remained in the hands of an English-speaking elite. Persistently stifling social conditions gave rise to a radical organization, Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP or People's Liberation Front) comprised predominately lower middle-class Sinhalese youth. The JVP promised a socialist revolution and a Sinhalese-dominated society. Their most pronounced insurrection in 1971 was brutally suppressed with more than 16,000 suspects arrested and estimates of the corresponding death toll range from 1,200 to over 10,000 (Peebles 2006: 120).

In addition to the JVP in the south of the island, and in response to ongoing racial discrimination, Tamils in the north and northeast began to envision the creation of an independent state. Terrorist attacks and riots were becoming more frequent. In 1983, five years after *The Sri Lanka Series* was completed, war broke out between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan Army. The almost three decade long conflict dealt widespread trauma and stifled economic development until the violence climaxed in a bloody finale in 2009 and 'Victory' was controversially declared by the Sri Lankan Government.⁷ While it should be noted that none of the original participants of the films are from the Tamil-speaking minority population, *The Sri Lanka Series* is however historically significant because it explores everyday life prior to the outbreak of civil war.

The nation's economic development was dramatically shaken in 1971 when the then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, introduced a 'socialist experiment' by way of a five-year plan, reflecting the influence of post Cultural Revolution China and the threat of violence from the JVP. As historian Patrick Peebles outlines:

⁷ Both the LTTE and Sri Lankan army are alleged to have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. Many of the allegations against the Sri Lankan army occurred during the final months of warfare (see Weiss 2011).

The five-year plan proposed radical land reform, limits on agriculture and urban property ownership, ceilings on disposable income, compulsory savings, and the reduction of subsidies. These were intended both to provide revenue for development and to transform society. (2006: 140)

However, there was little support for Bandaranaike's development programs, leaving those who had given up their assets resentful of the government and its apparent corruption and excessive regulations.

The late 1970s marked the reversal of socialist inspired policies and the beginning of economic liberalization. When J. R. Jayawardene became the nation's first president in 1978, he introduced a series of economic reforms by way of development strategies and political expediencies, summarized by Peebles as:

[...] liberalization of trade and foreign investment; correcting prices by devaluating the currency and increasing interest rates; privatization of state-owned enterprises; deregulation of the domestic market; and balancing the budget. (2006: 143-144)

The immediate effect of these reforms was to encourage aid donors. Sri Lanka received so many grants of foreign aid that it became the highest aid recipient per capita in the world (2006: 144). But the greatest success of liberalisation came in export processing zones, or 'Free Trade Zones' (FTZ), offering investors complete foreign ownership, tax and duty incentives, and subsidized service rates. Sri Lanka's garment sector would become their largest source of foreign exchange.⁸ Garment and textile factories were offering employment opportunities for unskilled young women and men struggling to survive through traditional ways of life.

The Films

The first film in the series, *Four Women* (1978), is the only film to directly correspond with Sharon's PhD research, and the only film of the series to be produced by Roger Sandall and the Department of Anthropology Film Unit. The other two films arose out of separate funding from the Australian Film Commission.

⁸ Garment and textile exports grew from less than US\$10 million in 1977 to \$1.2 billion in 1992 to \$2.4 billion in 2004 (Peebles 2006: 145).

Curiously, neither mum nor dad remember ever scripting the films or writing detailed proposals. In *Four Women*, the same four women featuring in Sharon's thesis candidly discuss the social and economic hardships within their families and village society. *Fishermen of Duwa* (1980) follows the traditional annual migration of a community of net fishermen from their east coast village of Duwa to the west coast beaches of Mullaitivu. In addition to their fishing vocation, the film focuses on the annual Passion Play performed by this devout Catholic community. Lastly, *Dancers Were Only Allowed to Dance* (1980) enters the village of a low social caste group in Sri Lanka, the *batgam* caste, and explores their caste-determined occupations as drummers and dancers. The film features a traditional dance instructor, Juse, and his efforts to overcome the grim social reality of his village, inequalities he attributes to exploitative British colonial legacy.

For a long time *The Sri Lanka Series* only existed to me as VHS reproductions, with characteristic tape flicker and husky soundtrack. To make the films more readily accessible I had prints we discovered in storage telecined (digitized) to professional quality video files. The thirty year old 16mm prints were in surprisingly good condition but naturally the colours had degraded and the reproduction bears the dust and scratches typical of the life of a screening reel.

Despite the present day viewing flaws the beauty of Geoff's cinematography and camera work is clearly apparent. Throughout the series he has made the most of golden light and long shadows in dawn and dusk hours. The interviews are softly lit by the shade of verandahs, huts, or perhaps even a coconut tree. His camera is invisible in the sense that you don't notice it moving or changing frame. It is the kind of camera work that demonstrates a mastering of the craft. The frame is steady, incredibly so given shooting was almost completely hand-held, albeit with the help of a tailor-made metal body brace. Even the rapid dance sequences, rowing with fishermen, and dynamic ritual scenes are steady to the point of not noticing Geoff is there. He tells me they felt handholding would render the images less staged, that it would aesthetically suggest spontaneity, and would also be less intimidating for the participants, allowing him to get physically closer with the wider angle lens he was favouring at the time. In addition to seamless camera

movements liberated from tripod positions, a diverse range of framing in each scene appeals to classic cinematic conventions and again masks any evidence of the camera's presence.

Interestingly, once I paid critical attention to Geoff's camera framing and movements I was amazed at how he seemed to know exactly when to zoom in for a close-up or change frame during interviews. I was amazed because for the most part he wouldn't have been able to understand what was being spoken in Sinhala. When I put this to him he humbly remarked that on top of intuition gained through experience, he and mum discussed what questions would be asked prior to recording so he could anticipate when a significant comment was coming up. However, judging from his timing I believe it is the result of years spent looking through the lens and comprehending the movements and mannerisms of how people communicate regardless of what language they speak.

The structure of *Four Women* is distinct from the other two films in that it is presented as four individual chapters, between ten and fifteen minutes for each of the women. *Fishermen of Duwa* and *Dancers Were Only Allowed to Dance*, on the other hand, open with introductions to the communities followed by various thematic investigations by way of interviews and observational material before both concluding with elaborate public performance sequences; a religious precession and a theatrical play.

In the opening of *Four Women* Sharon's voice-over outlines the conditions facing the inhabitants of the village chosen for her fieldwork, Kanewala:

Very often, a man can only continue to cultivate a small plot of land if his wife or children can earn some sort of supplementary wage. Under these circumstances people seeking work are forced to commute to nearby industrial and urban work centres. During my stay of two years in the village I came to understand the desperate situation of the majority of the people. But it was the close friendship with four particular women that affected me most.

Sharon's relaxed drawn-out oration might be reflective of the '70s 'hippy' mood but it also reflects the crew's unhurried approach to producing the films. Long

periods of 'immersion' with the participants and communities of all three films result in surprisingly candid responses to questions and probing on camera. As Sharon would later claim, it was their ethnographic manner of participant observation that set their interactions and storytelling apart from other documentaries of the period (see Bell 2004).

The handful of images we glimpse of Sharon throughout the series are revealing of her amiable and compassionate demeanor. Apart from the sparse but informative narration, she is only occasionally evidenced in the frame. Every so often we catch her petite pale figure in a white strapped dress engaging her subjects on the edge of an establishing wide shot. Comprehending the role of women in *Fishermen of Duwa*, a mid-shot presents Sharon quizzing a fisherman's mother, the subtitles read 'Was it difficult?'. The ageing grandmother responds that previously she had earned so much from fishing that she was able to provide dowries for both of her daughters. The elderly woman goes on to explain that the youngest was married with one haul of fish and a lorry of dried fish. We return to Sharon's face but this time with a smiling close-up clearly enunciating a Sinhala phrase, 'Is it hard for the women?'. 'No, it's not difficult' the grandmother responds, 'If the men get fish they'll provide for us'. In *Four Women* Sharon's genial close-up addresses 34 year-old Chandrawathie, 'What did you think marriage would bring?'. To which the young mother laughingly responds 'We had hopes about our future life together.' Later, Sharon's interrogative smile confronts a giggling 18 year-old Mala, 'Why haven't you learnt crafts as your mother did?'. Mala struggles to get a word in under her mother Joscalin's response, in those days nobody went to school, she states, instead they stayed at home: cooked rice, ate breakfast, collected firewood, drew water, and then they had time to practice crafts. Joscalin and her daughter Mala corroborate that now there is no end to study, no free time. However, in *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance* we fail to see Sharon at all. We gather her presence through the occasional voice over and interviews in Sinhala - to which my Sri Lankan friends now turn to me in surprise, 'Is that really your mother speaking?!'.

Evidently, Sharon finds common ground in *Four Women* and *Fishermen of Duwa* relating to the women. Her physical absence from the frame in *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance* might reflect the absence of women from that narrative, although more accurately responds to offering a stage for the protagonist Ranhotige Juse to tell his personal story. Sharon's presence in *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance* is most warmly felt during the interviews with the twelve year old boy Palitha, in which her voice adopts a gentle inquisitiveness and maternal tone.

In addition to the role and status of women the three films explore ethnographic issues and themes of: economy and employment, family inheritance and heredity (or inter-generational change), colonial legacy, tradition versus modernity, as well as religion and ritual.

Three of the featured women in *Four Women*, Chandrawathie, Alice, and Joscalin all engage in physically demanding labor for meagre rewards; cooking string hoppers, tapping rubber, and paddy harvesting. The simple lives of these women are contrasted with the hopes and ambitions they express for their children, perhaps most revealingly articulated through Joscalin's 18 year old daughter Mala, whose time is consumed by studying, extra-curricular tuition, and tutoring neighbourhood children for a small income. A further contrast to the physical hardship of these women is presented through Mrs Hettiarachchi, who comes from a wealthy family background and whose life is framed by an arranged marriage to her successful politician cousin. Mrs Hettiarachchi has evidently enjoyed a life of plenty alongside demanding social obligations and village patron responsibilities, she raises with Sharon how villagers would often come to their doorstep in times of need or for employment and she feels obliged to do her utmost to help them.

At the opposite end of the social strata, Juse in *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance*, expresses his frustration at no longer being able to make a living from his family's background trades of traditional medicine, ritual performances, and exorcisms. After marrying and building a house in the low-caste village of Pelpitigoda, he set out to overcome traditional caste determinates by way of

running local dance classes. Juse outlines how village drunkards would heckle him while conducting classes and how debilitating economic circumstances prevented most of his students from even being able to register for dance examinations. He blames the British, and the legacy they left behind, for the engrained social inequality still felt by the common population. Nevertheless, Juse is positive about the future direction of Sri Lanka, remarking that high caste people like his student Palitha now want to learn how to drum and dance too.

While Juse perceives signs of change in the socio-political landscape as positive for the people of Pelpitigoda, for the fishermen interviewed in *Fishermen of Duwa*, the problem of attracting low paid seasonal labourers is their main concern. Nimal Kurera, the youngest of the featured fishermen, presents a voice of dissatisfied youth. Inheriting his father's share in a fishing net ten years ago, Nimal is disgruntled about the *Madhal* fishing technique and the ungrateful workers they are forced to deal with. As stunningly captured at dawn in *Fishermen of Duwa*, the *Madhal* technique involves rowing a net out from the shore, laying it around the perimeter of the fisherman's allotment of sea and heaving it back in from the beach. Nimal believes the technique is archaic and he intends to buy a power boat, 'something with a future' he remarks. In addition to the strain of employing labourers, the fishermen also confront an ever diminishing catch. Nimal explains that when he first started they caught fish that they don't even see anymore, and blames a national failure to protect fish breeding grounds.

The mutation of traditions is beautifully explored through various rituals in all three films. In *Fishermen of Duwa* the final ten minutes of the film is devoted to the annual Passion Play. The play is inspired by the famous Oberammergau production in Germany, for which the community bands together to perform the final days of Jesus Christ's life. In *Duwa*, like the fishing nets, acting roles in the play are for the most part inherited and individual characters can be performed for decades before being handed on. In contrast to the active preservation of Catholic traditions in *Duwa*, in *Four Women* the Buddhist exorcisms performed by Chandrawathie's husband Thilaka are increasingly sparse and difficult to earn a living from. In *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance* Juse shares similar sentiments that

traditional exorcisms no longer offer a viable living. However, the increasing popularity of traditional dance in *peraheras* (large religious processions), embraced by growing nationalism from the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, is seen as offering expanding opportunities for dance troupes and those with traditional knowledge. Accompanying images of chanting prayers at the local Buddhist temple, elderly Alice provides a poignant conclusion to *Four Women*, remarking:

Old people are the ones who come to temple most. They are about to die and they want to gain merit in order to be re-born in a better place. No-one wants to go to hell, we want to be well off, we want to eat and drink, have good clothes and live in a country like yours.



Figure 2.3 The crew of *The Sri Lanka Series* at a beach camp near Mullaitivu, 1978. From left to right, sound recordist Leo Sullivan with his partner Suzanne Blackmore, Geoff Burton, Sharon Bell, and Tegan Burton with Bisomanike. Photo by Keith Robinson.

Provenance

noun

- a. The fact of coming from some particular source or quarter; origin, derivation.**
- b. The history or pedigree of a work of art, manuscript, rare book, etc.; *concr.*, a record of the ultimate derivation and passage of an item through its various owners.**
- c. *Forestry*. The location in which tree seed is collected. Also, seed from a specific location**

The Oxford English Dictionary 2nd ed. 1989

& New Oxford American Dictionary Version 2.1.3 2005

Ever since my philosophy lecturer scoffed at the habit of first year students opening their essays with a definition, his chin permanently strung above the horizon and gaze fastened to infinity, I've made a conscious effort not to stoop to such predictability. He insisted we should assume the reader was well aware of the meaning of words. I have since come to appreciate the avoidance of this superficial etymology. It can easily patronize the reader, suggesting even though they might think they know the meaning of the word, *in fact*, they do not, or at least not the *complete* meaning. Secondly, the habit runs the risk of debilitating language, of preventing words to shift or possess multiple interpretations.

Hence, I offer a seemingly conventional definition of 'provenance' in order to unleash it from the dungeons of museum archives and brush strokes of Old Masters, to explore how an expanded understanding of the term might offer a conceptual framework pertinent to contemporary art production, in particular towards a nuanced understanding of my own documentary praxis. In order to map my own creative provenance, located at the convergence of photography, cinema, and visual ethnography, from the here-and-now of my desktop, I re-encounter personally influential stories from these three disciplines, presenting an historical topography contoured by technology, epistemology, and affect.

An end to provenance in the age of mechanical reproduction

To locate 'provenance' in a fine art context, the International Foundation for Art Research Provenance Guide offers a definition beyond mere historical record and pedigree:

The provenance is also an account of changing artistic tastes and collecting priorities, a record of social and political alliances, and an indicator of economic and market conditions influencing the sale or transfer of the work of art.⁹

A cursory Google search reveals provenance in present day fine art circles to be particularly concerned with gaps in the ownership of European art between Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the end of World War II in 1945.¹⁰ Innumerable galleries, museums and institutions around the world have recently initiated their own 'Provenance Research Projects', as most of them are titled, troubled by the history of their collections and perhaps hoping to confirm legitimate title. Close to home, the Provenance Research Project at the Queensland Art Gallery for example, states:

The subject of Nazi art loot has become highly publicised in recent years following allegations that some objects confiscated or looted from individuals during the Nazi/World War Two era, and still unaccounted for, can be found in the collections of museums around the world. There has been concern that these institutions are making no attempt to identify those objects or return them to their rightful owners.¹¹

Against this backdrop of interrogating the passage of artworks during World War II, a tragic irony can then be seen in Walter Benjamin's profound predictions for 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'.¹² Tragic and ironic because he took his own life fleeing from the same "aura" that guided systematic Nazi plunder.

⁹ http://www.ifar.org/provenance_guide.php (accessed 31 May 2012)

¹⁰ It is estimated that over 20% of the art of Europe was looted by the Nazis, see *Documenting Nazi Plunder of European Art*, Greg Bradsher, <http://www.archives.gov/research/holocaust/records-and-research/documenting-nazi-plunder-of-european-art.html> (accessed 3 June 2012)

¹¹ http://qagoma.qld.gov.au/research/provenance_research (accessed 31 May 2012)

¹² In a final stand against repatriation to Nazi hands, Benjamin committed suicide in 1940.

While living in exile in 1936, Benjamin re-positioned art in a revolutionary context within the burgeoning sphere of mass media. He saw the potential of mimetic machinery such as photography and film to depart from the traditions and ritualism fine art had until then possessed. His thesis identified a two-fold revolution in the nature of art. Firstly, the potential of mechanical reproduction, applied to copying and replication, having the effect of dispersing "aura", that is the traditions and ritualism conferred to *original* artistic masterpieces installed or commissioned in churches, museums, or other similarly inaccessible or elitist institutions. Secondly, mediums of mechanical reproduction offered a new form and reach of representation liberated from such traditions. Benjamin saw the reproducible nature of film and photography, with their lack of originals and therefore lack of "authenticity", as appropriate to the revolutionary demands of a proletariat aesthetic and political direction, a fundamental shift in the nature of art.

In the corner of my MacBook Pro John Berger is slicing Venus' face out of a Botticelli painting. *Ways of Seeing (first episode) 1/4*, uploaded to YouTube by 'manwithaplan999' on Mar 15, 2008, emanates from my speakers:

Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, used to be a unique image, which was only possible to see in the room where it was actually hanging. Now its image, or a detail of it, or the image of any other painting which is reproduced, can be seen in a million different places at the same time...

As you look at them now... on your screen... your wallpaper is around them... your window is opposite them... your carpet is below them...

Despite involuntary memories of languid afternoon high school art classes, provoked by Berger's distinctive oration, where I first confronted him via VHS, his experiment effectively illustrates Benjamin's observations on the dispersion and fragmentation of traditional works of art through reproduction. The *masterpieces* which once belonged to a unique place in gilt frames and churches, are translocated as *images* into the context of the viewer's personal life. The material provenance of Berger's sentiments, from BBC broadcast and classroom television sets to YouTube, are evidently subjected to similar technological transgressions.

Benjamin offers a crucial shift in understanding how provenance in contemporary art practice must encompass factors beyond the art object or *artefact*. Mechanical

reproduction, by undermining notions of the original artwork, presents a radical epistemological shift towards the *intentions* and social function of artistic production;

From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics. (1968: 224)

In works of art designed for reproduction, notions of the original - in this instance a photographic negative - are presented as an emergence, a location, or an event in the process of art production. As Susan Sontag observes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*:

A painting or drawing is judged a fake when it turns out not to be by the artist to whom it had been attributed. A photograph - or a filmed document available on television or the internet - is judged fake when it turns out to be deceiving the viewer about the scene it purports to depict. (2003: 41-42)

In other words, both the production and the subsequent passage of a photographic artwork replace the ritual demands of “authenticity” inherent in the “original”. Thus liberated from hegemonic traditions, intentions and social function are engendered in multiple meanings and interpretations, and artworks enter into a political negotiation. John Berger chimes in again, ‘[...] as though pictures are like words rather than holy relics’. Technology and knowability are demonstrated to be inextricably intertwined.

Coincidentally, in 1936, the same year Benjamin was outlining his vision for the future of art, photographer Walker Evans and writer James Agee were sent on assignment by *Fortune* magazine to Hale County, Alabama. Their first steps on an arduous journey, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (2001 [c1941]). The subject of their book, as Agee states in the introduction, is the daily lives of three poverty-stricken North American cotton farming families. He elaborates, ‘the effort is to recognize the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis, and defense’ (2001:

x). Evans and Agee's 'independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity' corroborate Benjamin's observations on the nature of photography to commence an exploration into politically motivated proletariat aesthetics. Agee explains:

The immediate instruments are two: the motionless camera, and the printed word. The governing instrument - which is also one of the centers of the subject - is individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness. (2001 [c1941]: x)

The resulting images in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* present an intricate architecture of the tenants' lives. Confronting yet dignifying portraits are contrasted with clinical dissections of home interiors and aspects from the *other* side of the road - that of a passersby.

In addition to this assignment, Walker Evans was contracted by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) Photographic Unit in Washington DC, which at the time had begun compiling what would become a material archive of over 180,000 photographs produced between 1935 and 1943, with the aim of documenting economic and social realities of the Depression in rural America (Lenman 2005: 176). This was the first collection of images to be intellectually framed as 'documentary photography' (Lenman 2005: 175). As Parr & Badger note, the archive of the FSA photography unit became so significant not only because of the great photographers and their iconic images, but because the images were inexpensive to purchase and were used extensively as illustrations for both conservative and liberal press (2004: 122). Conversely, in 1938, the exhibition 'Walker Evans: American Photographs' was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, marking the first of many exhibitions at MoMA devoted to the work of a single photographer.¹³ Such inaugural exhibitions at MoMA and other influential

¹³ Henry Luce's *Life* magazine was also founded in 1936, which would refine the photo-essay form and become the 20th century's most famous magazine. Also in the United States at this time, the Photo League was emerging as an organization offering education, production facilities, and exhibition opportunities to members. In Britain the Mass-Observation (M-O) research organisation, founded in 1937, applied photography to help understand ordinary working-class people. M-O published 25 books of their projects between 1937 and 1950 (Lenman 2005: 177). In France a wave of 'flâneurs' and editorial opportunities constituted a less officially connected group now referred to as 'French humanist documentary', this incorporates the work of such photographers as Henri-Cartier Bresson, Brassai, and Robert Doisneau, which predominately concentrated on public streets and lives of ordinary working people (Lenman 2005: 178).

fine art institutions mark the beginning of an adjacent trajectory in the intellectual and political provenance of documentary, its turbulent passage as *fine art*.

In Britain, *Night Mail*, a short documentary film by the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, directed by John Grierson and Basil Wright, was released in 1936. Borrowing from Soviet cinema in its romantic homage to the symbiosis of modern machinery and workers, *Night Mail* follows the journey of a single letter on a postal train from London to Scotland (Aufderheide 2007: 34). At odds with Hollywood "fraudulence" dominating cinema theatres at the time, *Night Mail* was inline with the immerging Griersonian realist tradition of documentary filmmaking. The film places emphasis on the postal and rail workers in addition to the proletariat it passes on its journey. Conversations about teatime and family are overheard between jobs. Experimental visual techniques such as time remapping and unconventional camera perspectives are employed to capture the spirit of the subject. Due to cumbersome technology, scenes depicting the interior of the train were re-created and filmed in a studio, and the real workers of the travelling post office were directed to walk with a wide gait (Aufderheide 2007: 34). The film concludes with a delightful montage collaborating a poem by W.H. Auden, music by Benjamin Britten, and stunning images of the locomotive speeding through the landscape. But what is particularly noteworthy in regards to provenance is that by 1936, the GPO Film Unit claimed to be reaching an audience of 5 million viewers a year (Anthony 2008: 6). This under-acknowledged achievement was pioneered through a non-theatrical distribution network of schools, community groups, and various organisations outside of the American-dominated commercial cinema chains (Anthony 2008: 6).

1936 also marked the beginning of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's pioneering visual anthropology project in Bali, using imagery to access personal manifestations of culture, or in David MacDougall's words, 'visual means to explore culture as an interior state' (2005: 355). Ultimately producing 28,000 photographs and 22,000 feet of 16mm motion picture film, the project aimed to examine the influence of parent-child interaction on Balinese character development (MacDougall 2005: 355). Resulting publications and films include the book,

Balinese Character (1942), and films, *A Balinese Family* (1952) and *Childhood Rivalry in Bali and New Guinea* (1953). In the preface to *Balinese Character*, Mead outlines:

In this monograph we are attempting a new method of stating the intangible relationships among different types of standardized behaviour by placing side-by-side mutually relevant photographs.
(1942: xii)

The experimental comic strip like image sequences strike a rare balance between the ephemerality of moving images and the authority of frozen ones. On one level the contrasting subtleties of gesture and expression between frames threaten the veracity of photography, but on another level present a less certain and multifarious psychosocial depiction.

While these three historic undertakings in documentary photography, film, and ethnography are convenient origin markers for these respective disciplines, and in many regards these emerging documentary modes epitomized the nature of art Benjamin was evoking, they should however, be more accurately contextualised as part of the proliferation and diversification of visual culture in the 20th century under constant consideration and evaluation as *art*. The trajectory of these three disciplines would intertwine and clash like a Hegelian dialectic, as technology and epistemology morph and mould, to ultimately converge in the present day configuration informing *My Mother's Village*. If only for a moment.

Personal machinery and the art of storytelling

The modern era can be seen to mark the end of provenance in its traditionally linear application. As aura was diminishing and the notion of authenticity doubted, so too was the role of provenance challenged in the shifting nature of art. Authenticity in documentary was not so much concerned with the ownership of an original print as it was with the portrayal of the subject. Taking Benjamin's lead in my historic re-evaluation, in considering the evolution of the documentary genre, with its various sub-disciplines and intentions, provenance can be understood to involve a transference of origins (via mimetic machinery) and notions of authenticity (of a political nature), beyond the notion of a single material artwork

or artefact, to consider the journey and intentions of artistic production and presentation.

Benjamin's observations on the shifting nature of art were part of his wider thesis on the "mimetic faculty"; he was also lamenting the demise of storytelling. According to Benjamin, the art of storytelling was waning in the modern era, due to similar circumstances responsible for the diminishing "aura" in fine art: '[...] a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history' (1968: 87). Amongst the forces Benjamin outlined as detrimental to the tradition of storytelling were: the rise of the novel and its isolated author detached from lived *experience*; a proliferation of news from around the globe packaged as *information* with pre-digested explanations; and the social nesting places of *boredom* - time and space for listening and creative deliberation - being driven out of the modern material and social landscape (1968: 87-93).

What was being lost in this modern environment was an experiential exchange of knowledge, which, according to Benjamin, was the purpose of storytelling:

[A story] contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. (1968: 86)

Qualities of the emerging documentary form - its attestation to lived experience, intentions to "counsel" its audience, and varying degrees of avoiding authority - present clear parallels with Benjamin's storyteller. Furthermore, in contrast to pre-modern notions of the work of art, the oral tradition Benjamin refers to, by its nature requires reproduction, 'For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained' (1968: 91). Unlike the classical work of art, the original appearance of a story is not a prerequisite to establishing its authenticity. Rather, it is the provenance of the telling, its passage through the hands of multiple storytellers, along with the weaving and spinning its transference entails, that constitutes its essence and authenticity. Provenance becomes paramount to the function and meaning of the story, as captured in Benjamin's sensuous metaphor of the potter;

[Storytelling] does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience. (1968: 92)

In the same way that stories sink into the life of the storyteller, and the storyteller leaves their trace on the narrative, the passage of a documentary project encompasses the authenticity and utility of its story. Personal expression and experience are thus paramount to effective storytelling. Developments and re-configurations of epistemological and technological milieux post World War II, evidenced in the diversity of expression and experimentation by filmmakers and photographers alike, highlight the increasing significance of personal provenance to documentary storytelling.

The circumstances in which I learned what follows glow from my MacBook browser window; Amazon.com informs me customers who bought *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by Evans and Agee, also purchased Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1959) - rated 4.5 stars from 52 customer reviews, which now appears to be out of print, so the price of the object is sky rocketing. The 2008 50th anniversary Steidl edition was published in conjunction with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, preceding the exhibition *Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans'*, which toured the United States in 2009. The exhibition was also supplemented by an online interactive feature, which continues to offer a map and rough timeline of Frank's journey, notes about his book, as well as some interesting publishing details. His contact sheets provide evidence of the personal provenance guiding his editing process¹⁴:

These sheets are not carefully crafted objects; in his eagerness to see what he had captured, Frank did not bother to order his film strips

¹⁴ Contact sheets are frequently drawn upon in contemporary documentary photography publications and exhibitions for example *Magnum Contact Sheets* (2011) or the 'Contact/s: The Art of Photojournalism' exhibition by Contact Press Images that toured Australia in 2008. Contact sheets are often used to interrogate the authenticity of an image, for example Robert Capa's contact sheet featuring the famous 'Falling Soldier' caused renewed debate over the potential staging of the image in José Manuel Superregui's investigation *Sombras de la Fotografía* (2009).

numerically or even to orient them all in the same direction. Contact sheets made after Frank received his Guggenheim fellowship reveal that his financial security permitted him to work more intuitively - he was taking photographs for himself only, not for the eyes of prospective magazine publishers. As his friend, the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg said, "First thought, best thought."¹⁵

Customer purchasing trends at Amazon.com might be one of the more obscure material provenances connecting Walker Evans and Robert Frank, but in real-life the two photographers shared a supportive friendship. As Leslie Baier points out, Evans personally insisted Frank apply for the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, offering him a letter of support, and would later publish a tribute to Frank's achievement in the *U.S. Camera Annual* of 1958 (1981: 55). Frank was heavily influenced by the work of Evans on a personal, material, and intellectual level. Baier suggests that despite his hallmark large format images, Evans' experimentation with more versatile 35mm cameras, particularly in his subway series (1938-41),¹⁶ anticipated Frank's distinctive fortuitous aesthetic (1981: 56). More importantly, however, was the personal vision, in both senses of the phrase, that Evans had demonstrated in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and *American Photographs* (1938). *American Photographs* provided Frank with an intellectual and creative model for his own journey across America, a model that demonstrated the ability to produce a public record or document through a highly subjective perspective and unconventional aesthetic.

In addition to the spontaneity and unorthodox composition of Frank's images, his personal expression in *The Americans* is accentuated through innovative sequencing. There is no clear logic or narrative, be it chronological or geographical, besides four loosely identifiable sections introduced with images featuring the United States of America flag. Instead, meaning is construed through conceptual, thematic, formal, and emotional links between images. As Parr & Badger describe the narrative:

¹⁵ <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2009/frank/index.shtm> (accessed 7 June 2012)

¹⁶ In 1955, *Fortune* magazine published a series of Frank's images of businessmen riding a commuter train, titled *The Congressional*, the series was even accompanied by text written by Evans (Baier 1981: 55).

Ideas ebb and flow, are introduced, discarded, recapitulated, transfigured, transposed, played off and piled up against each other with the exuberant energy and precise articulation of a Charlie Parker saxophone solo. There are numerous themes, many moods - sad, happy, bitter, defiant, angry, sorrowful - but only one finale. (2004: 247)

The National Gallery of Art interactive notes tell me, '[Frank] tried to construct a sequence that would "stand up" to *Life* magazine's picture stories, with their "beginning, middle and end... but not be like them."' Frank's divergence from the picture stories of *Life* and other mass media in the "Golden Age" of photojournalism¹⁷ was in opposition to the depersonalising influence editorial boards and commercial imperatives impose on documentary storytelling.

A particularly memorable sequence at the end of the second section of *The Americans* sets out with an intimate car interior shot of two young men staring out to the road ahead of them ('U.S. 91, leaving Blackfoot, Idaho'). We then catch an automobile slightly blurred on its passage beyond idle expressions of elderly folk parked on a sidewalk bench in St. Petersburg, Florida, then a more abstract image of a vehicle draped in a protective cover under a pair of palm trees and urban Californian backdrop, mirrored in the following frame by a shrouded body ('Car accident - U.S. 66, between Winslow and Flagstaff, Arizona'), the urban surroundings replaced by hostile dry grassland whipped about by a gust of wind, providing additional discomfort to the four solicitous onlookers. The sequence is concluded by a barren high-contrast vertical composition of a seemingly endless road dotted by a single vehicle in the distance leading to an empty horizon ('U.S. 285, New Mexico'). The sequence offers a poignant metaphor of ageing, obsession, death - a life on the road.

Frank's *The Americans* inaugurates an aesthetic and storytelling mode with the purpose of portraying a personal narrative. Unlike the reproduction of individual 'masterpieces' these photographs would lack the author's desired meaning if the preceding and ensuing images on either side were not there. In Howard Becker's

¹⁷ A period characterised by significant technological developments in cameras and printing such as the small 35mm Leica, the rise of illustrated newspapers and magazines, large-scale urbanisation, consumerism, and mass entertainment, and prior to the widespread influence of television.

exploration of the role of context in guiding the interpretation of documentary photographs, he notes that the sequencing and thematic variation of Frank's images in *The Americans* provide their own context (1998). In Becker's words, Frank's sequences 'teach viewers what they need to know in order to arrive, by their own reasoning, at some conclusions about what they are looking at' (1998: 89). The photo-book form, and the authorial arrangement within it, provides contextual meaning for readers to determine the authenticity of the images and the narrative on their own behalf.

Image-sequencing, as Sergei Eisenstein's theories and demonstrations of montage famously exemplify (see Eisenstein 1975), is fundamental to motion film storytelling. The kind of disparate or 'intellectual' montage demonstrated in *The Americans* is in contrast to the 'rhythmic' continuity of conventional cinematic narrative. However, advancements in technology, just as the small 35mm still camera accommodated Frank's explorations, manifest similarly profound shifts in motion picture documentary. During the 1950s and 60s portable 16mm film cameras with synchronous sound recording offered an unprecedented opportunity to produce pictorial representations that could 'keep pace with speech' to a degree Walter Benjamin could only have imagined.

Three motion picture productions drawn fortuitously from the year 1967 demonstrate how changing technology influenced montage techniques in documentary film, and offer curious overlaps between documentary cinema, visual ethnography, and the emergence of documentary installation.

With the recent popularity of multiple screen installations, or 'expanded cinema', in contemporary documentary storytelling, the creative provenance of which ought consider the 'multi-dynamic image technique' developed by Christopher Chapman for *A Place To Stand* (1967). The 17 minute installation commissioned for the Ontario pavilion at Expo 67, held in Montreal, Canada, was the forerunner of multiple frames and superimposition in documentary film. Viewing a

reproduction on YouTube now,¹⁸ the dynamic frames - sometimes multiple, sometimes moving, appearing and disappearing to a fantastic orchestral soundtrack - present a playful depiction of daily life in Ontario. At Expo 67, as a 70mm Technicolor print projected onto a screen over 20 metres long and 10 metres high it was a monumental success. It was reportedly seen by 6000 viewers a day and 2 million in total over the six-month exposition period.¹⁹ *A Place to Stand* was nominated for two Academy Awards, and won an Oscar for Best Live Action Short. The 'multi-dynamic imaging technique', however, now appears somewhat tacky and would no doubt fail to astonish contemporary audiences.

Titicut Follies, the 1967 film directed by Frederick Wiseman, has replaced Ontario on my Internet browser. The entire 84 minutes has been published (illegally?) on YouTube by user SRFilmsUK, on May 3 2012. I click on the 'Like' icon, share the link on my Facebook wall, and wonder if any of my Friends will spend the time to watch it.

Through shades of grey, an inmate/patient of the Bridgewater State Hospital for criminally insane is being force-fed through a tube down his nose. He lies naked, tied to a bed, surrounded by a dozen guards. The doctor administering the feed has the funnel in one hand, liquid in the other, cigarette dangling out of his mouth, frown on his forehead, he openly mocks the resisting patient with the guards around them. This painfully disturbing scene is intercut with a more delicate and compassionate ritual of preparing the same patient's dead body, his carcass in the coffin, being slotted away in the morgue, we then cut to another inmate's birthday celebrations, singing, "have you ever been lonely... have you ever been blue...".²⁰ Like Robert Frank, Wiseman is adept at presenting his personal commentary through the juxtaposition and sequencing of images.

¹⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rt-5tAWJxvU> (accessed 20 August 2012)

¹⁹ http://expo67.ncf.ca/a_place_to_stand_p1.html (accessed 20 August 2012)

²⁰ Wiseman has recently commented that in retrospect although he thought this scene was terrific at the time, now he views it as a mistake. In discussion he stated 'It forces the issue in the sense that it's too heavy handed editorially. It would have been better, I think, to show the force feeding, and then a couple of sequences later, show the guy being made up for his funeral. Then you could come to the conclusion yourself that he was treated better in death than in life. The way I edited it, it's heavy handed.' - http://stfdocs.com/blog/comments/titicut_follies_torment_at_the_hands_of_the_state/ (accessed 2 June 2012)

Just as the unconventional aesthetic of *The Americans* might be attributed to a backlash against expositional and didactic use of photography in the aftermath of World War II,²¹ direct cinema and cinema vérité movements are also often interpreted as rejections of the then, as Bill Nichols puts it, 'moralizing quality of expository documentary' (1991:33) and prevalent Voice-of-God narration ascribing information to images. Lives as they are lived are presented to viewers, who then make conclusions based on their own - albeit mediated - observations.

While a handful of filmmakers, such as the Maysles Brothers, advocated the objective potential of cinema, it is largely a misconception that documentary claimed to be "capturing reality". To suggest *Titicut Follies* was an "objective record" would disregard the intentions of a young lawyer director, jaded by state institutions, the mediating presence of the camera, the performance offered by those in front of the lens, the narrative-friendly camerawork of John Marshall, the direction both he and Wiseman offered explicitly or implicitly in their actions, the editing and splicing together of footage, the cinematic conventions that might inform our interpretation of the images, and the relationship of any given viewer to any of these potential variables.²² However, it would be equally problematic to deny, based on reasonable assumptions, that the story Wiseman told of the cruel interior of the Bridgewater State Hospital was not *true*. Wiseman himself has described his work as 'reality fiction', readily embracing dramatic conventions of cinema, and rather than take sides in the superfluous dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity, he claims to produce an accurate and 'fair' depiction of his experience making the movie (see Renov 2004: xxi).

The credits have finished rolling and YouTube is recommending I watch a Q&A with Wiseman at a *Stranger Than Fiction* screening in New York early 2012. Introducing his film to the New York audience, Wiseman remarks that following its

²¹ This could include the monumental photographic exhibition *The Family of Man* curated by Edward Steichen at MoMA in 1955.

²² In many ways, portable recording technology offered unprecedented levels of 'objectivity', and particularly during the 50s and 60s, prior to television, the performances offered by subjects of documentaries probably reflected a far more accurate portrayal than present day image conscious and media savvy 'participants'.

release in 1967 it was banned for decades, except to certain university audiences, and was not available to the public until the death of Massachusetts Superior Court Judge Harry Kalus, who originally banned the film because of the politically sensitive mistreatment of the patients. It was finally made available to the public in 1989.²³ The political provenance of Wiseman's production reveals the film was not interpreted so liberally as "reality fiction" by powerful legal figures at the time.

Titicut Follies is also representative of a significant conjunction between documentary cinema and ethnographic filmmaking. Jay Ruby notes that Wiseman would have learnt a great deal about filmmaking through John Marshall, the experienced ethnographic cinematographer he employed to shoot *Titicut Follies* (2000: 118). Marshall was primary cameraperson and Timothy Asch²⁴ was on second camera while Wiseman recorded sound. Marshall and Asch were able to apply their previously developed methodology of 'event-sequence' filming to achieve a high level of detailed coverage of events that could later be smoothly edited in a chronological manner (Ruby 2000: 118, 285).²⁵ In 1968, a year after completing Wiseman's film, the pair founded Documentary Educational Research (DER), a non-profit organisation to produce and distribute ethnographic and documentary films through cinematic and educationally focused pathways.²⁶

Curiously, the notion of an invisible filmmaker was most radically rebutted in the field of ethnographic filmmaking. In 1967, the same year *Titicut Follies* was released, Jean Rouch released *Jaguar* - a film not so readily accessible on YouTube. I once viewed a VHS copy in my university library as an undergraduate, intrigued by the aura his name possessed, but now remember feeling shut off from my viewing experience - perhaps I was expecting more drama from "ethno-fiction", or

²³ see interview transcript with Frederick Wiseman for full details at: http://stfdocs.com/blog/comments/titicut_follies_torment_at_the_hands_of_the_state/ (accessed 2 June 2012)

²⁴ Timothy Asch was an anthropology graduate and had worked as an assistant to Margaret Mead, who encouraged him to pursue visual anthropology - <http://www.der.org/films/filmmakers/timothy-asch.html> (accessed 2 June 2012)

²⁵ Henley outlines that "event-sequence" filming demanded prior extended anthropological fieldwork in order to learn what was significant to the participants of the event which would then inform an accurate depiction in addition to any necessary contextual information (1998: 48)

²⁶ From 1966-68 Asch developed a media based curriculum for the public school system in Massachusetts - <http://www.der.org/films/filmmakers/timothy-asch.html> (accessed 2 June 2012)

perhaps my interest faded with the degenerate VHS viewing quality. Amazon.com also appears starved of Rouch films, I find one extensive compilation set with 727 minutes of his most well known titles, the audio is in its native French but the subtitles are only in Spanish. Unfortunately none of the universities around Sydney have much of a collection. One title that does appear in most of these libraries, however, is a short documentary about Rouch's first film made by his students and coincidentally distributed by DER - Marshall and Asch's initiative.

I'm viewing a complete version of *Jean Rouch Premier Film: 1947-1991* (1991) through the online ethnographic film database Alexander Street Anthropology,²⁷ where the video file is being relayed alongside a full transcript.

Rouch is telling the humorous story of his initial filmmaking efforts to a handful of attentive film students at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris. He recalls fortuitously acquiring a 16mm spring-wound Bell & Howell Filmo 70 with high quality Cook lenses the night before leaving Paris on a river expedition through Niger with two of his war-time comrades, writers Pierre Ponty and Jean Sauvy (Henley 2009: 38). Not having been trained in filmmaking, Rouch learnt basic principles such as the 180-degree rule through making mistakes. In this instance he discovered images of riverbanks shot from either side of a moving canoe were not possible to edit together. Although much of the footage was found to be useless in this way, luckily, Rouch recounts, the travelling company stopped at an island where locals were hunting a hippopotamus with harpoons. Rouch filmed a ritual preparation preceding the hunt, requesting the water Spirit for the hippopotamuses, and the ensuing quest.

Back in Paris, he *sees* the film is only good at 30 minutes duration and shows the edit to an audience of prominent ethnologists including Leroi-Gourhan, Lévi Strauss, Marcel Griaule, and Michel Leiris, who all appreciated what Rouch had done with the camera. Following the screening Leiris suggested showing it at a jazz club in Saint-Germain, called Le Lorientais. Between performances of New Orleans jazz, the audience was delighted with Rouch's film, so much so the pianist of the band

²⁷ <http://anth.alexanderstreet.com> (accessed 2 June 2012)

approached Jean with a proposition that he show it to his father who was in charge of French Newsreel. In need of money, Rouch sold the film for 60% of box office returns, with the conditions that French Newsreel would re-edit it, add some commentary and music, and perhaps some additional footage. The result, *In the Land of Black Magi* would later screen as part of the accompanying program to Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (Henley 2009: 42). Rouch re-enacts his initial response to the newsreel version:

The music was syrupy, a sort of "tropical" muzak, and the commentary was said by... the Tour de France sports-reporter: Here's the hippopotamus in second! etc., etc... Terrible, terrible! and we all said: It's just incredible! And yet the film worked! People loved it! So I went back to see it again and I saw... something that was not in the first film...and that was the ending. And for me this ending was a scandal. They'd found the possession dance to ask the water Spirit for hippopotamus. And the Spirit said: kill a white sheep over the harpoons. Now, since this possession dance was very dramatic... they put it in right at the end, so that the fishermen were actually thanking the water Spirit! But in Africa, if someone gives you food, you never say "Thank you". Giving food is normal there. So this was all wrong! But... it was highly dramatic! And so I discovered that to make a good film, to give it a touch of drama, you have to edit it back-to-front. And that's what they did: selecting the most dramatic shots for the end - shots more dramatic than those of the hunt itself - that is, the images of that very strange possession dance.

Rouch remarks he could never show this shameful concoction to his friends in Niger, nor his colleagues at the Musée de l'Homme. His response instead was to go back and make more films, learning from his mistakes, and importantly, the sensationalised French Newsreel taught him to appreciate the power of drama in cinematic storytelling.

Following a few more successful ethnographic sorties in Africa, and establishing himself as a pioneer of the 16mm camera,²⁸ Rouch completed his definitive hippopotamus hunt film, *Bataille sur le grand fleuve*, in 1952. In this film one scene

²⁸ *La Circoncision* (1949) and *Initiation à la danse des possédés* (1949) were screened by Jean Cocteau at the *Festival du Film Maudit* (Losada 2010)

stands out as significant to the intellectual, personal, and political provenance of his future praxis. The camera lies waiting for the two protagonists, Demouré Zika and Illo Gaouadel, as they wander across the river bank and discover to their surprise the tracks of the giant male hippopotamus eluding their capture. The convenience of this event, and melodramatic acting, are telling indicators the scene was performed for the camera, planting the seed for Rouch's future 'ethno-fictions' (Henley 2009: 62).

A further crucial development with *Bataille*, as Paul Henley points out, was the successful screening of his film back to the featured hunters (2009: 64-66). The screening not only provided an avenue for feedback and dialogue regarding the ethnography, but also opened up potential collaborations, or 'shared ethnography'. Accounts vary as to whether the film made Demouré a local celebrity or if he simply enjoyed seeing himself on screen, but he subsequently suggested to Rouch that they make another film, a feature 'like Zorro', starring himself and two friends as migrant workers to the Gold Coast (Henley 2009: 65, Losada 2000: np).²⁹ Damouré, a medic who worked as Rouch's assistant when he first came to Niger as an engineer in the Department of Public Works, and Lam Ibrahim, a chauffer, would become long-term collaborators, their initials forming the name of their production company, Delaru (Ruby 2000: 247).

First screened in 1967, *Jaguar* is a lighthearted road movie following a shepherd, played by Demouré, a hardened wanderer, Lam, and a fisherman, Illo Gaouadel, from their humble market home town in Niger to find work and pursue riches in the Gold Coast of West Africa. I've finally located a complete version of the film online, at the African Film Library - an initiative of Electronic Media Network (a subsidiary of South African-based multinational mass media company Naspers) to showcase African filmmaking. Three buttons sit underneath the title, Watch Trailer, Download, and Stream Movie, the last two options incur a \$5 fee. I click "Like" on the Facebook icon below, and notice only four other people have done the same. Rouch's voice opens the narration, "We are going to tell you a story," and we follow

²⁹ In the audience was Tahirou Koro, who suggested Rouch make a film about his activity Lion hunting, which would eventually lead to *The Lion Hunters* (1965) (Henley 2009: 65)

the three protagonists on their journey, through success and failure, but ultimate triumphant return to their home village, where they distribute their earnings and settle back into subsistence.

By many accounts, *Jaguar* defies conventions of documentary filmmaking. The film is fictional, in the sense that the three protagonists acted out their roles. For example, the trio is depicted walking their long journey from Niger to the Gold Coast, but in reality they were driven in Rouch's Land Rover (Henley 2009: 73). Furthermore, the labour the characters were enacting as casual migrant workers was only for the purpose of the film, and besides Demouré, who was on a salary as a civil servant in Niger, the other protagonists were paid by Rouch (Henley 2009: 73). Despite being released in 1967, *Jaguar* was shot between 1954-55, prior to synchronous sound, and in contrast to conventional narration or the audio fidelity of observational films like *Titicut Follies*, for *Jaguar*, Rouch, Demouré, and Lam, improvised the commentary and dialogue, responding to a silent projection, on two separate recording sessions in 1957 and '58, which Rouch then mixed with music and sound effects to create a fascinating multi-layered soundtrack (Henley 2009: 74). Catherine Russell goes so far to describe *Jaguar* as a "science fiction", due to the 'historical disjunction and subjective splitting' involved in the improvised voice-over recorded many years after the similarly improvised participatory filming (1999: 78).

Despite the "provocation" of culture with his camera (see Ruby 2000: 18), the authenticity in Rouch's ethno-fictions is located in their provenance. In other words, when viewing Rouch's oeuvre of over one hundred films, it is not simply the technical filmic devices, cinematic tropes, aesthetics, or even his collaborative methodology, that equate to the authenticity of the ethnography, but rather the entire provenance of his praxis. This includes, for example, his extensive background in anthropology, his experience living and working in Niger as an engineer, the humanistic and academic intentions of his films - as opposed to economic or hedonistic imperatives, his extensive research into the themes and issues of the fictional narratives, and his collaborative relationship with the participants of his films, in addition to the independent agency and unique

provenance they also bring to the production. While these inter-textual and contextual elements are not necessarily revealed through a single film, provenance highlights the ongoing interpretation and assemblage of the author and their praxis, highlighting the critical element of *trust* in storytelling.

The storyteller's aura

The progressive relationship between a filmmaker and their audience, in developing the kind of trust Rouch harnesses, is reflected in the emergence of cinema *auteurs*, the signature of the French *nouvelle vague* and inspired by Sartre's existentialism (Stam 2000). Rouch has been credited by Jean-Luc Godard as the initiator of the French *nouvelle vague* because of his innovative personal approach to filmmaking, exploiting portable equipment and pursuing unique collaborative methods (MacDougall 2005: 355). André Bazin, a co-founder of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, an integral publication to the movement, concisely outlined his theory of the cinema auteur in 1957;

The *politique des auteurs* consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard reference, and then assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next. (1985 [c. 1957]: 255)

Nouvelle vague filmmakers and critics perceived cinema as capable of individual expression equivalent to painting or writing. Foreseeing the risk of romanticising the "creative genius" of the director, Bazin suggested complementing criticism with other approaches, such as technological, historical, and sociological inquiry (Stam 2000: 2). Comparable to establishing authenticity in Rouch's ethnographies, auteur theory underlines the individual motivations of artistic creation and highlights the cumulative relationship between the audience and author beyond a particular text or artefact.³⁰

³⁰ Auteur theory has been criticised on structuralist grounds, Roland Barthes suggested that language codes and conventions created the author, and argued the reader was a more active site for producing meaning, in Laleen Jayamanne's words, 'intentions pale in the face of the inventiveness of reading' (2001: 54). Jayamanne's observation, was in response to an unexpected interpretation from a viewer of her experimental film *A Song of Ceylon* (1985). However, rupturing conventional tropes and genre codes to the extent demonstrated by her ambiguous avant-garde filmmaking, for example, arguably offers the viewer a far greater degree of freedom of interpretation to deny the author a place within the *auteur* paradigm. Similarly, it is the creative deployment and manipulation of such textual codes and conventions, perhaps at the edge of

Identifying an individual expression with the filmmaker not only correlates cinema with Benjamin's experiential storytelling encounter, but also raises the question of how the pedigree, or perhaps "aura", of an author informs the interpretation of their work, and how auxiliary texts influence that evaluation.

When I was young, too young to recall my age, I remember the constant struggle to stay awake long enough to catch the evening movie on television. On the rare occasions I managed to make it to eight-thirty, I always ended up submitting to slumber during a commercial break, I would wake up kicking to the soundtrack of rolling credits as my parents carried me grumpily to bed. But I have particularly fond memories of one evening, when I managed to conquer sleep, staying up late into the night by my father's side, mesmerised by Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954). Kurosawa is widely acknowledged as one of cinema's great auteurs, as Patrick Crogan notes:

Kurosawa was feted in the 1950s and 1960s as one the great auteurs of universal and enduring significance because of the humanist and humanitarian themes that pervade his work: a compassion for individual suffering, a quest for justice through personal rebellion against corrupt social structures, a concern for the existential crises of 'man' in the face of death, social pressure, and the apparent meaninglessness of life's struggle. (2000: np)

From film to film, however, Kurosawa's work was not always admired. Between his critical and commercial successes are strings of experiments and failures (Harper 2002: np). Luc Moullet, reporting in February 1957 for *Cahiers du Cinéma* on a retrospective of Kurosawa's films in France, writes of *Living* (1952) as 'the ultimate in absurdity':

audience expectations, that help to identify authorial creativity and voice. Even directors working within the Hollywood studio tradition, with concerned investors and swarming crews, through demonstrating a successive signature style or "voice" might rank as auteurs. For example, contemporary auteurs such as Micheal Winterbottom, the Coen Brothers, or Quentin Tarantino, whose works span many genres, subjects, and styles, demonstrate how auteurism is not limited to visual tropes as the structuralist critique attempts to undermine, but deeper idiosyncratic intentions and perspectives such as challenging genre conventions, relaying unique political perspectives, or even an idiosyncratic sense of humour. As Stam notes, 'Auteur studies now tend to see a director's work not as the expression of individual genius but rather as the site of encounter of a biography, an intertext, an institutional context, and a historical moment' (2000:6), in other words provenance providing authenticity to a story.

Here the director's misanthropy goes to such extremes that it quickly turns against him. As for the ending with the swing, confronted by such a piece of idiocy and affectation the audience is left speechless. The real Japanese cinema is elsewhere. (in Hiller 1985 [c1957]: 260)

André Bazin, in the following month's *Cahiers* edition, rebuts Moullet by contextualising Kurosawa's work as an innovative site of cultural translation of Japanese tradition into Western cinematic conventions, he writes:

When it comes to my personal taste, I still perhaps prefer Mizoguchi's style, like the pure Japanese music of his inspiration, but I surrender before the breadth of intellectual, moral and aesthetic perspectives opened up by a film like *Living*, which is suffused with values that are incomparably more important, in its script just as much as in its form. (in Hiller 1985 [c1957]: 262)

With a reputation for huge budgets by Japanese standards, and demanding schedules, the perceived excesses of Kurosawa's films resulted in him relying on funding from his admirers abroad (Harper 2002: np). In the late 1970s Francis Ford Coppola and George Lucas approached him with an offer to finance a film, resulting in *Kagemusha* (1980).³¹ This was followed by French *Nouvelle Vague* producer Serge Silberman, well known for his productions with Luis Buñuel, providing the funding for *Ran* (1985), an epic adaptation of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Little did I know, as I conquered sleep to witness the gallant deaths of four of Kurosawa's seven samurais one evening in the early nineteen nineties, the nature of images and their construction was being 'deconstructed' by philosophers, artists and critics alike. The 'reflexive mode' of documentary, as Nichols distinguished, attempted to integrate *how* the story was being told into aesthetic and politically challenging tropes and methods (2001: 125).

In the corner of my computer screen, emanating from a hand-held tape recorder, Akira Kurosawa's subtitled voice deliberates:

I always say to my crew: To create is to remember. Memory is the basis of everything.

³¹ Georg Lucas claims *Star Wars* (1977) was inspired by a Kurosawa film (Harper 2000: np).

Hang on a minute. That's not what I remember him saying. I'm referencing the subtitles of *Chris Marker - "A.K." (1985)* - 1/6 uploaded to YouTube by 'RaraBeretta' on Apr 25, 2011. I load my DVD version into the computer and click play. This time Kurosawa's subtitles over the same dialogue reads:

I often think that creation is the result of memory. If you ignore memories, you can't create.

The tape recorder is lowered to reveal a television and red-lit studio. Speaking in English this time, *A.K.*'s narrator begins:³²

We used to watch television every night. And the unfurling of this memory-less history formed a startling contrast to our daytime world: the black slopes of Mount Fuji; characters from another age; and the presence of Akira Kurosawa.

CUT TO: Kurosawa on set, intensely watching a performance outside of our frame.

Silberman invited fellow Kurosawa enthusiast, Chris Marker, to make a documentary about the production of *Ran*. Marker's documentary had its premier in the Un Certain Regard section at the 1985 Cannes Film Festival. The version I purchased from Amazon.com is a "special feature" to a region 2 DVD edition of *Ran*.

A.K. (1985) by Chris Marker presents a deconstruction of documentary narrative. It is a behind-the-scenes documentary portrait of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa on the set of *Ran*. Marker's films are often labeled "film-essays" because of their non-linear argumentative structure and diarist tone, as opposed to seamless "cause and effect" editing. André Bazin first wrote of Marker's work possessing an "essay" form because of a method he called "horizontal" montage; cuts are informed by ideas or "intelligence" rather than traditional shot to shot duration (Bazin 2003: 44). In line with the French tradition, the essay form proposes that investigations of society are also an inquiry into one's own relationship to that society (Alter 2006: 18). Moreover, Marker advocates first person perspective in documentary as a sign of humility, in his words, 'All I have to offer is myself' (in Alter 2006: 145).

³² The English version is narrated by Robert Kramer (Canby 1986: np). It is the only language available on my DVD or that I can find on the Internet.

For Marker to construe a documentary portrait of another person would involve a kind of introspection of their relationship. Hence *A.K.* opens with a hand holding a tape recorder, in the background is a television monitor and a light-box, these apparatus, in addition to his own 35mm footage from the set of Kurosawa's *Ran*, are the sources for Marker's documentary (Horak 1996: 61). The tape recorder projects Kurosawa's voice, 'To create is to remember. Memory is the basis of everything.' Marker correspondingly constructs his documentary by way of his own personal experiences and memories, the encounters motivating his own storytelling.

Catherine Lupton, in her survey of Marker's work, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (2005), divulges a conflicting interpretation of *A.K.*, she writes:

The tone of unwavering reference towards Kurosawa eventually becomes cloying, but a deeper problem is that his distance from, and apparent indifference to, the presence of Marker and his crew leaves *A.K.* having to scramble from the outside to thread together insights into its subject's work, and paradoxically to obtain its best material from those who are also furthest removed from the epicentre of the great director. (2005: 167)

Lupton is making a comparison of *A.K.* to Marker's other two portrait-films; *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* (1999) about Andrey Tarkovsky, and *La Solitude du chanteur de fond* (1974), on Yves Montand. As she points out, Marker was close friends with both of these men, and therefore *A.K.* lacks a similar 'spark of complicity' (2005: 167). Lupton's critique of *A.K.* in not achieving "access" to Kurosawa, I think, disregards the major themes of Marker's portrait, and for me, does not become cloying. Firstly, as Bazin suggested, both these *auteurs* (Kurosawa and Marker) choose the personal factor in artistic creation as their frames of reference; hence to suggest Marker ought to adopt an authoritative reportage perspective would undermine the honesty and authenticity of his portrayal. The artefacts Marker draws upon in his investigation - conversation recordings between Kurosawa and his close friends, Kurosawa's films, his documented biography, in addition to observational footage on set, arguably present a more authentic portrayal than an arranged interview on camera might. Secondly, the

distance Marker's crew maintain from Kurosawa, in the habit of calling him *sensei*, is indicative of the cultural translation underway, as *A.K.*'s narrator explains:

In all disciplines, from flower arrangement to Karate, the 'sensei' is he who, by achieving technical perfection, has got a sort of spiritual bonus out of it. The aura of respect that surrounds and protects Kurosawa is nothing like the reign of terror that some lesser directors impose on the set. And just like the great sword masters of the past, sensei has no time for abstraction. When he speaks of his work, he reflects on factual experiences.

A.K. is as much an ethnography of Japanese filmmaking, an extension of Marker's intimate association with Japanese culture, as it is about Akira Kurosawa.

A.K. can be seen to deconstruct conventions of the "behind-the-scenes" or "making-of" sub-genre of documentary. Instead of contributing to the illusion of *Ran*, or feeding the aura of celebrity, Marker has taken the behind-the-scenes task quite literally. Rather than presenting the standard interviews of notable cast members and crew, Marker puts forward twelve thematic chapters to his essay that focus his personal observations and insights into the work of Kurosawa (Alter 2006: 42). For example, in the chapter titled "Patience" Marker presents crew members falling asleep during the long periods of waiting, and days of set backs when drizzly weather sets in, highlighting the frequent contingencies to making a Kurosawa epic. The narrator of *A.K.* extends,

In this type of shooting, the first pitfall to avoid is appropriating the beauty that does not belong to us – to play up the lovely backlit shot. Of course, some of that borrowed beauty will come through anyway. We shall try to show what we see, the way we see it, from our eye level.

Marker's eye level on the set of *Ran* appears unashamedly to be similar to that of the other workers. Correspondingly, *A.K.* may prove to be an authentic representation of Kurosawa's influence on the crew and admiring audience. The political outcome of Marker's deconstructive reflexivity is therefore, not to question the illusion of *Ran*, but to expose the limitations of conventional documentary structure. Reflexivity challenges existing viewer expectations in order to displace our relationship to illusion and reinforce a social authenticity.

My family and Sri Lanka



Figure 2.4 My older brother Matthew and I meeting Chandrawathie's family on our first visit to "The Village", Kanewala, 1987. Photo by Geoff Burton.

With the task of raising two sons (my brother Matthew was born one and a half years before me in 1982), it took Sharon an entire decade to complete her PhD, from 1976-86.³³ Admittedly, when I was younger mum and dad's research and films in Sri Lanka were of little interest to me. Dad often travelled overseas for extensive periods to shoot movies, and when possible we visited him abroad. So it didn't seem particularly significant that the pair had made films on this exotic island. Not to mention *The Sri Lanka Series* was seriously lacking the guns, car chases, robots, or aliens necessary to be drawn from the VHS collection my brother and I avidly revisited.³⁴ But I guess I did find our family's lasting relationship with the island curious. An array of photographs and mementos from Sri Lanka featured

³³ She generously acknowledges the two of us in the preface of her thesis: '[...] my two small sons - who have done their best to ensure that the thesis would never be finished' (Bell 1986: iii).

³⁴ One of my earliest and most traumatic memories of being 'on set' was when a Jen-Diki space monster from *The Time Guardian* (1987) lifted me off the floor as a suitable snack between takes.

prominently amongst the artefacts littering our walls and table tops - including a large portion of dad's wooden mask collection hauntingly eyeing my upbringing.

The work of an anthropologist is a mystery to most adults let alone small children - not the least the anthropologists themselves. To me, what my mother did was study the *culture* of an appropriately far-away and exotic place. I had the impression she *knew* Sri Lanka. When we went there on holidays mum would constantly demonstrate her expertise; (unintentionally) shocking the locals with her fluent language while my brother and I would giggle at ensuing head wobbles. Perhaps the most revealing demonstration was the enthusiastic gatherings enacted with warm embraces and laughing recollections amongst the wide range of Sri Lankans we were forced to socialize with. And a wide-range they were; artists, eccentric filmmakers, political activists, and families that kind of resembled our own. These people I would later learn were her 'Significant Others'.

Any holiday to Colombo at some point required Matthew and I to be dragged away from our Nintendo Gameboys and hotel pool for an excursion to "The Village" in order to visit our Sri Lankan family, who constituted the focus of mum's initial fieldwork. The feeling was akin to visiting biological aunties, uncles, and cousins, somewhat awkward but ultimately pleasant. During these encounters my brother and I would smile, nod, and attempt to eat or drink whatever was presented to us. Wide eyed, we would gaze at mum joyfully volleying exchanges across the room, occasionally pointing in our direction between rising and dropping inflections.

I have a recurring image of mum watching the nightly news, standing with a horror struck expression towards the small glowing box in the corner of our compact living room in Balmain.³⁵ One should be circumspect with such early recollections as potentially, albeit vivid, constructions. As the particularly violent periods of the eighties and nineties were played out in Sri Lanka, later to be known as *bhisana kalaya* (time of terror), for mum, at the already uncomfortable distance from her friends as a foreign researcher, my brother and I tugging at her sleeve, news reports coming out of the island must have been incredibly distressing. Apart from

³⁵ An inner city suburb of Sydney, Australia

returning in 1985 to show us off to "The Village" and prove she was a *real* woman, mum made a deliberate decision not to travel to the island while there was a risk to our safety. At the time her friends in Colombo were doing their utmost to avoid assassination, taking refuge in networks of 'safe-houses' and seeking exile abroad (Bell 2004: 13).

In 1999 Sharon spent six months based in Colombo working on a report for the World Bank. She was part of a team undertaking capacity building projects with Sri Lanka's educational institutions.³⁶ During this time I recall my Year 10 Geography teacher bad-mouthing the World Bank for keeping developing countries dependent on aid, crippling them with financial loans. In my ignorance I interpreted my geography teacher's remarks as an attack on my mother and immediately came to the defense of her employer, 'They do some good work' I rebutted, not having any idea what I was talking about, 'Yes, they do', my teacher smirked and reversed down the classroom avoiding a fruitless and potentially emotional debate.

We made a holiday out of visiting Sharon in Colombo in '99. To my brother and my excitement the capital was under military curfew every evening. Perhaps there were elections, or even a recent bombing. We didn't complain. Great excuse not to go anywhere, make the most of the hotel cable TV channels, perhaps even room service, and be one step closer to the Arnie-action films we soaked up, with our very own heavily armed military patrolling the perimeter. This time, as image consumed teenagers, we were more ambivalent than ever about departing the Oberoi poolside for an excursion to "The Village". Despite our healthy dose of teenage apathy, on this visit to Kanewala, I distinctly recall being struck by the presence of televisions and mobile phones furnishing the simple homes we visited - at a time when mobiles were still a small luxury in Australia. The floors remained composed of clay, ceilings tattered, and the roads haphazardly carved through the ever encroaching jungle.

³⁶ It is worth noting that Sri Lanka's long standing record for providing free and compulsory education has led to comparatively high literacy rates in the region: 98% youth literacy between 2005-2010 (male and female 15 -24 years old) - http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/sri_lanka_statistics.html (accessed 10/09/2012)



Figure 2.5 My brother and I visiting mum in Colombo in 1999. Photo by Geoff Burton.

Even more noticeable than the technological trappings, which looked pretty meagre anyway, was the recent addition of a pair of boobs on the living room table. Owned by Chandwarathie's youngest son, Nilantha, the mould of a woman's breasts was used in the construction of bra cups. A few years older than me, Nilantha was working for a nearby garment factory producing Victoria's Secret underwear. Noticing these incongruities didn't seem to spark any kind of political or social injustice outrage within me - of the World Bank kind perhaps. They felt more like a glitch in the tapestry of the way things were. It was as though these "first world" objects had been leaked into the village, or perhaps tossed aside as excess only to be quietly gleaned and celebrated between these frail walls. When I returned to my schoolyard in Australia I imagined Nilantha's dark hands installed beneath the checkered Grammar dresses, supporting all those supple breasts blossoming out of my adoration for them. Our Sri Lankan village was evidently reaching my Australian schoolyard through cheap labour and global economics, a conjunction of personal and political provenance.

Hormones aside, it was not until I was seventeen and in my final years of secondary school that I feel I consciously came to grips with the significance of mum and dad's relationship with Sri Lanka. They employed me for a month or two as an after-school assistant editor, working with Adolfo Cruzado, to cut their documentary film *The Actor & The President* (2000). Written by mum, directed by dad, Sharon guides us through the story of Sri Lankan screen star, turned deity, turned politician, Vijaya Kumaratunga, from his humble beginnings in a low-caste marginal community, through a colorful acting career and charmed personal life, to his tragic assassination.

The Actor & The President

The opening is a dramatic recreation of Vijaya's murder, one of the more exciting scenes to work on - Adolfo even borrowed the soundtrack from Ridley Scott's recent *Gladiator* to aid our initial rough cutting. We hear Vijaya's wife, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, describe her instinctual reactions at the time of her husband's murder - to make sure her children were safe and get her husband's body to hospital. Throughout the film the President offers a poised and perhaps uncharacteristically open reflection of the life and final years of her late husband.

Following the title credits Sharon introduces her own relationship with Vijaya; while living in Sri Lanka for her research and filmmaking in the late 1970s, she recalls being captivated, like most women, by his presence. Vijaya was among a group of young filmmakers and actors in Colombo Sharon felt most at home with, her narration explains:

For me going to the capital of Colombo was an escape from the paddy fields and rubber trees to a more familiar world - of theatre, cinema, and places where a young woman could have a cold beer and socialize after dark... I can revisit the images I recorded of that time but the fragility of memory makes it hard to complete the emotional mosaic.

The fifty-two minute documentary attempts to understand part of Sharon's mosaic; archival excerpts from Vijaya's films are intercut with interviews with his

friends, family, and professional colleagues. Particularly revealing in this interplay of interviews and Sri Lankan cinema is the blurring between the film world and real world that on one level reflected a growing trend of socially concerned realist cinema in Sri Lanka, in which Vijaya occasionally starred in,³⁷ and on another level mirrored a parallel blurring within him personally. Numerous testimonies portray Vijaya as acting out the 'hero' role and attempting to confront real life injustices within the dangerous Sri Lankan political world to the point of ignoring threats to his life. Beyond the story of the individual, *The Actor & The President* attests to a terrifying culture of political violence in Sri Lanka against a rich backdrop of cultural heritage and storytelling.

Reviewing *The Actor & The President* again recently, I thought Sharon's voice comes across too aggressively, almost like a war correspondent. Stern and fast. This is in stark contrast to the sedate seventies enunciation of her earlier films. Indeed the film was produced as the 1999 elections were unfolding, so there was an urgency of 'current affairs' to the story. But I can also now discern in her voice the horrified mother glimpsing the violence threatening her friends across the Indian Ocean through nightly news slots in Sydney. The narrator laments, 'Time does not ease the anger and grief of his mindless killing'.

Vijaya's widowed wife Chandrika, visibly hardened by the murder of her husband, was elected Sri Lanka's first female president in 1994.³⁸ However, her tumultuous first term in office was characterised by frequent local elections and shifting political alliances (Peebles 2006: 165-167). At an election rally in Colombo, only a few weeks after mum and dad's interview, *The Actor & The President* concludes with footage from a terrifying suicide bombing attempt on the President. The assassination attempt occurred just prior to an election and had the converse effect of reaffirming her Presidency in the 1999 election. Recorded by local cameraman Asoka Jayasekera, the explosion going off and the gruesome aftermath

³⁷ This included *Along the Road (Para Dige)* (1980) directed by Darmasena Pathirajs, and for which Geoff took film stills.

³⁸ Chandrika is the daughter of two former Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka. Her father, Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, was assassinated when she was 14 years old. Her mother Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first female Prime Minister in 1960. Tragically, like Chandrika, Sirimavo was elected to power on the back of her husband's murder.

was unsettling for me in the editing suite, and now having been behind the camera so often, placing myself in Asoka's shoes makes the scenario even more unnerving. In the editing suite we assembled a slow motion replay for viewers to witness part of the President's face being torn away from the explosion.

At the time we were editing, the Sri Lanka portrayed in *The Actor & The President*, was one I found easier to identify with than mum and dad's earlier ethnographic films. Especially as this was now my mother telling the story, and I had played a minor role in the production, it provided a growing sense of personal proprietorship in our family's ties with the island.

Despite clarifying many of their obscure relationships in Sri Lanka, *The Actor & The President*, however, like the presence of mobile phones and Victoria's Secret in the village, also revealed how personally and politically intricate this mosaic of histories and memories had become. Ironically, for instance, the hired killer of Vijaya Kumaratunga turned out to be a poor nut and gram seller from the same village area where my mother lived for two years, from which she would periodically escape from to seek out the more familiar world of filmmakers and academics, a world seemingly unattainable for those born into such desperate circumstances.

Sri Lankan Documentary

My mother's doctoral research in the 1970s and 80s was anthropological. Her and my father's films in Sri Lanka were informed by her ethnographic fieldwork but were ultimately intended for a wider audience than Sharon's academic offerings. As previously mentioned her PhD supervisor advised her not to submit *The Sri Lanka Series* as part of her research. My own scholarly research is situated in visual storytelling. As a 'visual researcher' I perceive my 'immersion' into Sri Lankan *culture* as creatively and ethically necessitating an immersion into local visual practices. In other words, exploring notable documentary media made about and within Sri Lanka. Establishing a provenance of documentary in Sri Lanka is important for a number of reasons: Firstly, to contextualise Sharon and Geoff's films alongside other narratives from the same period, and to contextualise where my own contemporary production might build on existing traditions. In both instances I am hoping to inject our filmmaking ventures to the little known or discussed history and traditions of inter-cultural documentary storytelling of Sri Lanka. Secondly, as an avenue for cultural understanding and creative inspiration, surveying documentary storytelling in Sri Lanka offers potential themes, aesthetics, and techniques that I might adapt or reference in my own filmmaking. During my initial fieldwork on the island in 2010, I investigated the role and position of documentary media and art in Sri Lanka, and attempted to expose myself to as many of these creative projects as possible.

Theertha is an artist led initiative based on the outskirts of Colombo. The collective consists of around seventeen local artists engaged in a variety of professional and community programs, such as visual arts teacher training, artist support, exhibitions, international artist residencies, in addition to their own creative practices.³⁹ The artwork produced by individual Theertha artists is at the forefront of contemporary Sri Lankan art and has achieved notable international recognition. During my initial fieldwork I stayed in their artist run guesthouse, located across

³⁹ The artists I met at Theertha include: Jagath Weerasinghe, Anoli Perera, Pradeep Chandrasiri, Anura Krishantha, Bandu Manamperi, Koralegedara Pushpakumara, Pala Pothupitiya, Thisath Thoradeniya, Pradeep Thalawatte, Prasanna Ranabahu, Janananda Laksiri, Lakisha Fernando, Sanath Kalubadana, G. R. Constantine, Manika van der Pooten, Nishantha Hettiarachchi, and Lalith Manage.

the road from their office and Red Dot Gallery. We became close friends. I visited their houses, we interrogated each other's work, and every so often drank copious quantities of arrack or gin, singing and telling stories late into the night. We shared many discussions on Sri Lankan art, the role it is playing in contemporary politics and the governing themes it is confronting. Colombo held its first public art biennale in 2009, a positive sign of the growing influence of individual artists and collectives such as Theertha.

Documentary in Ceylon

20th century visual arts in Sri Lanka, known as Ceylon until 1972, can in many ways be conveniently slotted into the modernist to post-modernist trajectory of Western art. But as numerous art theorists and historians, such as Jagath Weerasinghe and Sasanka Perera have highlighted, Sri Lanka also possesses a very unique and alive culture of traditional arts and crafts that offer an alternative history to the dominant Western model. In fact, for many contemporary practitioners a post-colonial re-defining of fine art versus traditional "craft" remains a contentious space frequently interrogated through their praxis.

The '43 Group of artists, established in 1943 as their namesake suggests, represents the most distinctive and influential movement in Sri Lankan art up until the 1990s (Perera 2010). The group adopted a diversity of European Modernist trends such as Cubism, Expressionism, and Surrealism to explore Sri Lankan - indeed "Orientalist" - themes and religiosity (Perera 2010: 22). Perera describes the '43 Group as a nationalist project as much as an artistic movement: 'In the sense that their themes often expressed what were perceived to be local or Asian realities or mythic narratives' (2010: 22), which were fused with a European-derived aesthetic. As Perera points out, the '43 Group idealised Sri Lankan village life by emphasising a purity and natural simplicity to the scenes they depicted, this is despite its members comprising predominately of Colombo based elite having been educated abroad.

The only member of the '43 Group who was not a painter was Lionel Wendt, a photographer. I was first drawn to Wendt when I was studying nude photography

as an undergraduate student in art college. I remember being captivated by his refined studies of exotic Sri Lankan figures. Despite being the only photographer of the '43 Group Wendt's visual style was similarly informed by a range of modernist aesthetics. Much of his oeuvre, particularly the landscapes and scenes of daily life, are in line with the pictorialist photography movement that dominated American and European photography in the early 1900s, but Wendt also experimented widely with darkroom techniques such as composite printing, solarisation, and photograms, evidently influenced by Man Ray's surrealist imagery.

While many of Wendt's images possess social documentary qualities, such as the sequences *At The Well* or *On A Coconut Estate*, the impetus and guiding principal of his oeuvre, on the other hand, are their expression through photographic techniques and formal qualities, with a great deal of attention devoted to the quality of the print. Wendt's most significant exhibition of his work, held at the Art Gallery in Colombo in 1940, in which he displayed 267 prints made between 1932 and 1939, was titled *Camera-Work*, a homage to Alfred Stieglitz's pictorialist photography journal of the same name. In many instances there is an undercurrent of cultural preservation in his photography, particularly his images of ancient Buddhist temple architecture and murals, but for the most part I interpret his work as a beautification of a culture and heritage he is passionate about, in the same vein as the idyllic paintings of his '43 Group peers.⁴⁰

Apart from his photography Wendt is also known as the narrating voice in Basil Wright's influential film *Song of Ceylon* (1934). I discuss the film a little later on but for now it is important to mention this connection in order to paint a clearer picture of the shape of documentary arts on the island at the time. In addition to narrating the film, Wendt was recruited to assist Wright as a kind of local guide during production. Historian Manel Fonseka suggests that Wendt's influence in the

⁴⁰ This kind of celebratory intent, not dissimilar to Travel Photography, can be identified in a host of foreign and Sri Lankan photographers' work to this day. It is worth mentioning my friend Tim Page's book *Sri Lanka* (1984), the vibrant images of Dominic Sansoni, who is also the Managing Director of Barefoot Gallery - one of the few successful contemporary art spaces in Colombo, and the publications of Stephen Champion, namely *Dharmadeepa* (2009) and *Lanka 1986-1992* (1993). Champion's work also incorporates graphic reportage of the violence in Sri Lanka, particularly during the 80s and 90s, and recently compiled in *War Stories* (2008).

film should not be underestimated: 'Its musically-conceived structure, agenda, montage and composition of many sequences, have clear resonance in Wendt's photographic vision' (2000: 26-27). Fonseka relays an interview with Basil Wright, in which he was asked what exactly Lionel Wendt's contribution to *Song of Ceylon* was, Wright responds:

Enormous. Without him I don't think *Song of Ceylon* could have been what it is. For here was a man who knew Ceylon as few men did, and he was in touch with the avant-garde cinema of those days and he knew what the documentary people were doing. As a matter of fact, the only two people I met in Ceylon who knew anything about films then were Wendt and George Keyt.⁴¹ (2000: 27)

Wright also remarked that following *Song of Ceylon* Wendt planned to start a Ceylonese film unit. The pair went on to collaborate on two more films through Wright's Realist Film Unit in England with Wendt as Assistant Director. Wright's statement about nobody in Ceylon knowing anything about films, and Wendt's personal ambitions to launch a film unit on the island, illustrate the bereft state of documentary storytelling on the island prior to Independence.

Documentary in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art

Returning to historical trends in Sri Lankan art, Perera and Weerasinghe outline that apart from the work of a few outstanding individual artists, it was not until the 1990s that there were any major ideological or methodological shifts away from modernist preoccupations (2010: 23). The "90s Trend" as it has come to be known was characterised by the emergence of a dynamic group of young men and women who grew up confronting trauma and violence, many from rural villages and peripheral towns and from a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds - in contrast to the Colombo elite preceding them. This emerging group was keen to narrate their personal experiences and rapidly transforming urban identity through new modes of expression and art forms (Weerasinghe 2010: 17). Perera and Weerasinghe maintain that the 90s Trend is distinguished from previous movements by way of an acute political consciousness and location of the "self"

⁴¹ George Keyt was a lifelong friend of Wendt, fellow member of '43 Group and possibly Sri Lanka's most distinguished modern painter.

within an immediacy of time and space. In Weerasinghe's words: 'The art of the 1990s is an issues-driven art and an engagement with problems which are directly concerned with the "living reality" of society at large' (2010: 17). In the present milieu, due to the end of the war, there is evidently a renewed focus on reconciliation with social and political engagement of artists now working across the island's previously inaccessible geographic and cultural terrains.

Artful Resistance: Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka (2010) and *The Power of Sri Lankan Art 1943-2012* (2012) are two inaugural English language publications surveying contemporary art in Sri Lanka. Both testify to the significance of the 90s Trend and respond to the drought of art historical documentation of current practices. The artists and artworks surveyed illustrate how the Modernist mould is being disrupted through a multitude of visual mediums and techniques being employed to interrogate diverse conceptual themes. Given the political and social engagement of the movement, I was surprised to discover a scarcity of documentary photography and video amongst creative repertoires.

However, the lack of photography and moving images in contemporary Sri Lankan art has not meant the landscape is devoid of documentary treatment. The most fascinating and affecting example I have come across demonstrating a blurring between ethnography, documentary, and visual art is T. Shanaathanan's recent publication *The Incomplete Thombu* (2011). The project relays stories of physical and psychological displacement of Tamil speaking-citizens due to the civil war. The book object poses as a bureaucratic record, with the cover resembling a file - 'Thombu' in Tamil means a public register of lands. Encompassed are eighty individual stories presented through four elements: ground plans of the lost home roughly sketched by the displaced individual are presented on one page, professional architectural renderings based on the initial rough drawings are overlaid on translucent paper, memories of displacement stimulated by this active recollection process are noted on the reversal of the page, and lastly the artist offers his own dry pastel drawings in response to each personal encounter. The diversity of ground plans foster an imaginative play for the reader of unique family interactions and daily rituals, only to be shattered as the narrative of loss unfolds.

The project speaks to the architecture of memory, the physical significance of shared personal space to memory, and the trauma associated with being robbed of the security and familiarity of a home. *The Incomplete Thombu* is a revealing example of how the "real" is being creatively treated in contemporary Sri Lankan art.

I propose three fundamental reasons why there have been few documentary photography, film, or video works emanating from Sri Lankan visual arts. The first reason, and probably the most dubious, would be a general lack of appeal or attraction to documentary aesthetics by local artists. This can be accounted for on one level by a lack of exposure to creative documentary works, but also in the possibly alien nature of the imagery comprising a conventional canon of documentary as art. For instance I am trying to imagine the appeal of Diane Arbus portraits, or Martin Parr's ironic twist on British cuisine, or the video diaries of Jonas Mekas to a young Sri Lankan artist surrounded by a completely divergent environment. While I would by no means suggest Sri Lankan artists fail to understand or appreciate 'classic' documentary texts, I am however offering that the Euro-centricity of the conventional canon, particularly in photographic realism, might not strike the same degree of sympathy or efficacy with the themes and concerns expressed in their work.⁴² Similarly, the authoritative and privileged voice of Griersonian documentary is arguably at odds with the class and caste based struggle expressed by contemporary Sri Lankan artists. In contrast to a relatively limited exposure to still photography traditions and theory, my discussions with local artists and filmmakers often reveal an amazing depth of knowledge and familiarity with a wide range of cinematic forms, particularly classic European films, due to festivals and special screenings hosted by international cultural institutions such as Alliance Française, the British Council, and the Goethe-Institut in addition to special events held by foreign embassies.

The second reason I would offer is inaccessibility to technology, such as cameras, printing, and computer facilities, that until recently have remained out of reach for

⁴² see Pinney (2003) for a post-colonial re-evaluation of alternative canons and histories of photography.

most incomes and retail at high prices on the island. Moreover, the lack of equipment and facilities results in a shortage of technical expertise and training opportunities. Accessibility of technology, however, is rapidly changing as prices of electronic goods are lowering, personal recording devices such as mobile phones are more sophisticated, and the economic opportunity for most Sri Lankans is widening as the nation's economy develops.

Lastly, perhaps the most unique and concerning reason why there is a lack of independent documentary media in Sri Lanka is the threat of censorship and persecution by the Government directly or indirectly. Media freedom has been stifled by a dangerous and unpredictable political environment that extends to the production of documentary film and photography.⁴³ Anoma Rajakaruna for instance is a feminist filmmaker, photographer, and writer whose work has been repeatedly censored by consecutive governments since her first tele-movie *Sonduriya*, about a woman displaced from war searching for her lost husband, was blocked from broadcast in 1983. The following year another tele-movie *Ingiyak Nisa* ('The Signal') was also blocked by authorities. In 1989, in conjunction with International Women's Day, *Vilangu*, a film based on the true story of a single mother taking her son to court for violence, was again banned by Government authorities. Rajakaruna's documentary films are also regularly restricted from national broadcast and distribution; a recent example is *The Other Women* (2004), a documentary exploring women and armed conflict in Sri Lanka. Conversely,

⁴³ Numerous independent reports list the main challenges to Sri Lankan media and press freedom to be: the dominance of state owned media; State of Emergency regulations being invoked to silence criticism; legal intimidation and harassment of journalists and publications; extrajudicial assaults, killings and disappearances of journalists and editors; the language barrier between Tamils and Sinhalese biasing reports on either side of the conflict; and the culmination of these factors resulting in a culture of unquestioning official statements, avoidance of independent investigation, and self-censorship over controversial issues (see numerous reports on freedom of the press in Sri Lanka at freedomhouse.org, ifj.org, and freemediasrilanka.org). Since 2006, Freedom House's evaluation of Sri Lanka's press status downgraded from 'Partly Free' to 'Not Free' and has remained that way since. The most recent 2011 report again cites journalist harassment and intimidation, emergency regulations, lack of rights to information, a shrinking privately owned media sector, and recent Internet censorship, as some of the factors working against a free media environment (freedomhouse.org accessed 30/09/2012). On a more positive note, the report highlights the growing presence of Internet-based media and blogs. Groundviews and Vikalpa in particular have provided a range of news and citizen journalism on sensitive issues otherwise neglected by mainstream media (see groundviews.org & vikalpa.org). However, the report also points out only around 12 percent of the population accessed the Internet in 2010, deterred by the high costs involved.

Rajakaruna observes that documentary filmmaking, as opposed to her television dramas, actually offered her greater independence and freedom of expression because they presented an alternative audience of international film festivals and non-government organisations.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, as with all independent Sri Lankan filmmakers I've talked to, Rajakaruna laments the lack of support from the State, and is forced to rely on international grants and non-government organisations to produce films predominately only accessible to foreign audiences.⁴⁵

The threat of persecution, consciously or unconsciously is a potential reason why artists have turned to abstraction to portray controversial political sentiments, and it might also be the reason why Sri Lankan filmmakers appear to resort to fictional realism as a genre instead of confronting real life narratives through documentary modes.

Sri Lankan Realist Cinema

Over the last two decades a small but dedicated wave of socially and politically concerned independent filmmakers has achieved international success and accolades for their realist portrayals of Sri Lankan narratives. Prasanna Vithanage, Asoka Handagama, Sudath Mahaadivulwewa, and Vimukthi Jayasundara are the most important filmmakers of this movement. Jayasundara became the first Sri Lankan ever to win the prestigious *Caméra d'Or* award at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival for *The Forsaken Land*. His poetic and minimalist film portrays the daily life of a single household in a secluded war-torn landscape during a ceasefire, delving into the arduous psychological trials faced by a handful of characters. Despite its international success, the film was banned in Sri Lanka by the current UPFA Rajapaksa Government and it has been reported that Jayasundara received anonymous death threats that forced him into exile in Paris. It is also reported that in 2005 a meeting was held between two of the aforementioned filmmakers with high level military officials at which the filmmakers were questioned whether they would be willing to make films for military propaganda purposes, the pair were

⁴⁴ http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110612/Magazine/sundaytimestvtimes_5.html (accessed 30 September 2012)

⁴⁵ *ibid*

then threatened that if they didn't comply and war broke out again they would face the consequences.⁴⁶

One of the most outspoken critics of this latest wave of independent Sri Lankan cinema is Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera of the Sri Lankan Navy. Weerasekera has written a collection of articles for both English and Sinhala newspapers equating the work of these filmmakers as treason and labeling them 'terrorist sympathisers'. A selection of his articles is available on his personal website - sarathweerasekera.com where it is also possible to make PayPal or direct financial donations to his cause. One of the Rear Admiral's main qualms with the work of this current generation of filmmakers is the international stage on which they are depicting national soldiers as 'indisciplined' and soldier's wives as 'nymphomaniacs'.⁴⁷ Yet, despite the Rear Admiral's sensationalist criticisms, when I ask my friends in Sri Lanka about films like Jayasundara's *The Forsaken Land*, they similarly remark such films are only produced for the international festival circuit; that unconventional filmmaking styles and narratives render them inaccessible to a local audience, raising interesting questions surrounding cinematic conventions, audience and intentions.

Threats of censorship and persecution are evidently not limited to documentary form and the hypothesis that this threat turns documentary filmmakers to fictional realism would ignore the rich tradition of realist Sri Lankan cinema going back to Lester James Peries' critical success *Rekava* in 1956. This was a time when Italian neorealism was influencing filmmakers around the world, including Satyajit Ray in India with *Pather Panchali* (1955), which won "Best Human Document" at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. Pieres' *Rekava*, which was screened as a contender for the Palme d'Or at the 1957 Cannes Film Festival, is credited with establishing a

⁴⁶ see <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/nov2005/sril-n07.shtml> (accessed 07 August 2012)

⁴⁷ The Rear Admiral is also the first serviceman to write and direct a film in Sri Lanka. His premier film, *Gamini* (2011) was a box-office sensation while I was on the island. Contrary to the captivated expressions around me, I had trouble sitting through the 153 minutes of didactic storytelling in which the Tamil Tiger terrorists are portrayed as one-dimensional barbarians while an ideal Buddhist school teacher sways a retiring and charismatic Army Major, by way of a very 'safe' and uneventful romance, to train vulnerable villagers to protect themselves. The melodrama ends predictably with the brave villagers defeating the terrorists with their adept martial arts abilities.

truly indigenous Sinhala cinema. It was reportedly the first film to be shot entirely on location in Sri Lanka, featuring a narrative based on village life and mythical beliefs, and marking a distinct break from South Indian films dominating cinemas at the time. In the same vein as the visual narratives emanating from the '43 Group of artists, the revolution of Sri Lankan cinema sparked by *Rekava* and progressing throughout the 1960s with more locally successful classics like *Gamperaliya* (1963), could be described as adopting distinctly local themes to a European-derived aesthetic. Interestingly, *Rekava* was Peries' first film coming out of the Government Film Unit (GFU) where he learnt about documentary filmmaking from his self-professed "guru", Ralph Keene.

To dig deeper into the history of documentary cinema in Sri Lanka I met with one of my mother's Significant Others, Dharmasena Pathiraja, or "Pathi" as we know him. Pathiraja is credited with leading a 'second revolution' of Sri Lankan cinema in the 1970s. Unlike Peries' earlier films, this wave of filmmakers told contemporary stories through a heightened sense of social engagement and personal style. Amongst the pile of black and white photographs my father took in Sri Lanka are a series of film stills shot on the set of Pathiraja's *Para Dige* (later titled *Along the Road*) (1980). Indicative of the kinds of themes being tackled by this wave of filmmakers, *Para Dige* is about a young man trying to raise money for his girlfriend to have an abortion (very controversial at the time) and the couple's journey from the village to the city. Pathiraja remarks that of all his films *Para Dige* is his favorite, because like the lead character (played by Vijaya Kumaratunga) the director also migrated from the village to the city as a young man (see Wee 2009: 103).

The Government Film Unit

Pathi proved invaluable to my inquiries and the timing of my visit was very fortunate; the GFU had just completed cataloguing and digitising seventy of their archived films. As with *The Sri Lanka Series*, the material provenance of the GFU collection was undergoing a profound transformation. The project 'Preserving the Documentary Film Heritage of Sri Lanka' was made possible by funding from the US Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, providing a Telecine machine,

and catalogue publishing was funded by The Asia Foundation. Pathi immediately led me down to the film unit where we shook hands with a number of staff and organised open access to the collection in an air conditioned editing suite with Naomi as my minder - who didn't understand much English and let out a slow sigh each time I pointed to another title in the catalogue.

In addition to my time with Naomi and the GFU collection, articles by Richard Boyle, in particular 'Preserving the documentary heritage' (2010), excerpts from which appear in the GFU catalogue, provide rare insights into the history of Sri Lankan documentary. Sri Lankan filmmakers Tissa Abeysekera and Lester James Peries have also written revealing accounts from their personal experiences with the GFU (see Ganger 2003).

From these various sources I feel I made two significant discoveries about documentary film in Sri Lanka: Firstly, the persistent recruitment of foreign directors to head the film unit and their lasting influence on the shape of documentary on the island, and secondly, the blurring of fact and fiction as 'documentary' throughout the archive. In fact, most of the feature length 'documentaries' by GFU were entirely scripted and performed by actors. This tradition seems to continue today where fictional films that attempt to deal with real issues are readily labeled 'documentary'. Sri Lankan documentary film also appears to lack any movement of observational cinema or *cinema vérité*. Nevertheless, the international provenance and distribution of the GFU collection, of which many films circulated international festivals, make the archive a significant case study of intercultural storytelling, and represents the most extensive collection of twentieth century intercultural documentary cinema about Sri Lanka.

The first film appearing in the catalogue is Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), and although produced under Britain's GPO film unit prior the establishment of the GFU it marks the first of successive influences of foreign filmmakers on the island. Even though the film was commissioned by the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board - organizations established to promote

commodities imported from British colonies - the film itself is a lyrical and subversive experiment in documentary (Guynn 1998). The creative provenance of *Song of Ceylon* is fascinating in many ways, sharing similar dimensions to my own filmmaking.

I am not sure how Wright felt coming to Ceylon, but I imagine he would have been overwhelmed by a sense of being an outsider. Perhaps in the 1930s, Ceylon being a British colony, there would not have been the same sense of egalitarian respect across the 'North-South' divide that has since been ethically and politically realigned. As previously mentioned, the outsider dimension and cultural translation behind *Song of Ceylon* was in many ways mediated through the recruitment of Lionel Wendt as a local guide - an early exemplar of those my mother would refer to as a 'Significant Other' (see Bell 2004).

The other aspect of provenance I share with Wright is that at the time of making *Song of Ceylon* he was still a neophyte to cinema, and in that regard was not afraid to experiment. He juxtaposed diverse images and sounds by way of lyrical montage and unexpected audio, and departed from conventional narrative through an essayistic structure divided into four themes; religion and spirituality ("The Buddha), tradition and ritual ("The Virgin Island"), colonialism and capitalism ("The Voice of Commerce"). Wright also avoided the common authoritative pitfall in the narration, that is, to explicate imagery. Instead, the film's narration appropriates observations from *An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* (1680) written by the stranded English sailor Robert Knox centuries earlier. As Guynn notes, 'It is as if the juxtaposition of image and sound produced a critical discourse without blatant manipulation by an enunciator' (1998: 93).

Possibly a consequence of *Song of Ceylon's* experimental lyricism, although more likely a reflection of the governing colonialist ideologies of the day, is an underlying appeal to the exotic and primitive Other. Whilst on one level the narrative can be interpreted as a critique of colonialism and British exploitation, on another level, as Guynn argues, the film fails to provide the opportunity for Ceylonese to provide their own perspective:

In "speaking for" the Ceylonese, the film reduces them to silence. It appropriates their images and subjects them to the distortions of exoticism. They become, in effect, terms in a discourse of protest against the reality of social relations in the industrial era. (1998: 97-98)

Song of Ceylon is also readily labeled guilty of romanticising pre-colonial life, for instance, of neglecting to depict the poverty of and hardships of village life (Aufderheide 2007: 66). However, I credit *Song of Ceylon*'s creative montage sequences, lyrical imagery, and multi-layered soundtrack with rescuing it from an ethically flawed colonist perspective. Boyle contrasts Wright's approach with other 'travelogues' on Ceylon from the period, which are often imbued with condescending and racist narration, employing words like "primitive" and "child-like" to describe the local population (2010: np). In fact it is difficult to imagine, within reasonable expectations of the technical limitations of the 30s, albeit lacking a detailed account of his undertakings, how Wright could have incorporated a more ethically appropriate creative treatment.

The influence of foreign filmmakers on the future shape of Sri Lankan documentary is etched into the inception of the Government Film Unit. Tissa Abeysekera, offers a humorous account of the unit's beginnings (2003), his story commences with a group of "enlightened" businessmen from Colombo expressing an interest in producing films in Ceylon. Their enquiries pointed them towards Rome - where Visconti, Rossellini and other Neorealist filmmakers were making an impression. The Ceylon businessmen then travelled to Italy and contracted three filmmakers, Guilio Petroni, Francesco Calabria, and sound engineer Frederico Serra to start a production facility in Colombo (2003: 19). The filmmakers stipulated their required equipment - a Mitchell camera and Westrex audio recording system - which was duly arranged (2003: 19). However, in between the three months it took for the equipment and filmmakers to arrive, the enthusiastic Colombo businessmen had gone into voluntary liquidation. The filmmakers arrived only to be stranded on the island.

One morning along the Galle Face in Colombo, the increasingly desperate Italians confronted the Ceylon Director of Information on his morning stroll and persuaded

him to let them film the upcoming Independence celebrations. According to Abeysekera, when the First Prime Minister of Ceylon, D.S. Senanayeka witnessed the images of himself hoisting the national flag he broke down and wept (2003: 19-20). The newly formed Government then agreed to the Italians' proposal to lead a state-sponsored film unit like Crown Films London, and the Government Film Unit was born.

Boyle confers the first GFU documentary of significance to be *Hill Capital* (1950), directed by Petroni. The thirty-minute film explores the unique cultural traditions of Kandy, these include dancing, Buddhist pilgrimage and worshipping, temple architecture, details of Buddhist manuscripts, and scenes from the famous annual procession the Esala Perahera. The footage appears to be genuine and unrehearsed and the information provided by the English narration is enthusiastically informative without being patronising. However, Petroni's vision of Sri Lanka was short lived, when according to Abeysekera, upon discovering they were members of the Italian Communist Party the three filmmakers were ordered out of the country. Whereas according to Boyle, Petroni fled Ceylon after wooing the wife of an aristocrat, scandalising Colombo society prior to the couple remarrying in Italy. Interestingly, Boyle notes that Petroni returned to Sri Lanka in 1993 to make a documentary for Italian television and was appalled to find the GFU still using some of the equipment he was using half a century earlier, and was quoted saying 'These are antiques that belong in a museum' (2010: np).

Six months after Petroni's unceremonious departure, a leading documentary production company in London, the Film Producers' Guild was interested in co-producing films with the GFU and sent India-born Ralph Keene to negotiate. Consequently Keene was contracted to take over as Director of the GFU, bringing with him a team of technicians. He also persuaded a young Sri Lankan journalist attached to the *Times of London*, Lester James Peries, to return to Colombo and join him as an assistant at the GFU.

Documentary according to Keene was evidently an expositional driven form following the Griersonian narrative tradition. Of Keene's three films represented in

the GFU catalogue I was most captivated by the exploration of village politics in *Nelungama* (1953). A young paddy cultivator is stripped of his fields after denying the rich landowner an opportunity to buy his house and garden. The poor farmer tries various methods to get his paddy fields back, such as approaching the village headman, only to be further victimised by the landowner's thugs. Beaten and bruised, the poor farmer's last resort is to write a letter to the recently elected Democratic Party representative outlining his situation. In the meantime we see the government representative passing a national law to prevent the unfair sacking of cultivators from their fields. Having received the letter from the poor farmer, the politician makes the most of the opportunity, he rounds up the village headman and a press photographer to go meet the cultivator. As a testament to the power of photography and role of the media in a healthy democracy, confronted with the victimised farmer on the front page of the newspaper, now village celebrity, the wealthy landowner knew his game was up. He marches down to the poor farmer's house, where a crowd has gathered, and pulls him aside to relay his fears by giving him back the paddy fields and expressing a disinterest in his property, even offering some Betel to chew to prove his honesty. A Rural Development Society is launched to protect the farmers' rights in the happy-ever-after village of Nelungama. The film ends with a beautiful sequence of grinning farmers cultivating to a bouncy traditional score.

At the end of his contract, Keene left the GFU in the hands of the three expatriate Sri Lankan filmmakers he had personally induced back to the island; Lester James Peries, Irwin Dassanayake, and Pragnasoma Hettiarachchi, in addition to the director of the first film Keene wrote in Ceylon, George Wickremasinghe, who took up the position to head the unit.

Curiously, in the late 1950s, devoid of international influence, the GFU appears to have taken an ethnographic turn, at least in the films represented in the catalogue: *Kandy Perahera* (1958) directed by George Wickremasinghe presents the ritual proceedings of the annual religious precession; *Makers, Motifs and Materials* (1958) and *Rhythms of the People* (1960) by Pragnasoma Hettiarachchi, offer detailed accounts of various folk traditions and crafts of southern Sri Lanka; and

The Living Wild (1959) by Irwin Dassanayake presents a rare visual record of an indigenous Sri Lankan Veddah community living through traditional means within the Ruhunu National Park. Despite various claims of 'authenticity' attached to these films, as with Keene's GFU productions it appears most of them have been entirely scripted and performed for the camera. They may well have been thoroughly researched, and the participants are most likely the actual characters portrayed, however they possess a distinct 'staging' to the visuals that are rendered more expository by way of didactic narration.

In response to a creative stagnation in the GFU in the late 1960s, which Boyles accounts for in flawed commissioning decisions, German director Paul Zils was recruited. Zils arrived as a Consultant for a West German aid grant to restructure and modernize the GFU, re-equipping the sound and editing facilities with modern Steenbeck machines (2003: 17). By that stage Zils was a well-established documentary director with an incredible past. Reportedly a favorite of Hitler's Propaganda Minister Goebbels, he managed to flee Nazi Germany in order to work in Hollywood but was later arrested in Bali by the British during World War II and made a prisoner of war. On release in 1946 he was appointed head of Information Films of India and is credited with shaping the independent documentary film movement in India. Peries writes admirably of Zils' filmmaking:

Unlike the modern off-shoots of the movement, namely cinema verite (the improvised off-the-cuff, candid slices of life) which I dare say has its own vitality, the classical school of documentary depends far more on thorough organization of its material and the precision of its execution. The beauty and power in Zils' best documentaries reveal these two qualities in abundant measure. (2003: 09)

Rather than challenge this dominant form of 'classical documentary' with greater realism, Zils pushed fictional elements further. For example his beautiful 'docu-fiction' film titled *Meditation* (1968) pursues a middle-age doctor, who after sequences of pensive reflection, decides to sacrifice his medical practice and material belongings in order to become a Buddhist monk. Abeysekera recounts:

Paul brought in narrative, dramaturgy, and certain architecture in the shots that were in marked contrast not only with the staid British

formalism but also with the harsh realism of the early Italians. (2003: 20)

Like Ralph Keene's lasting influence on a select group of Sri Lankan filmmakers, Paul Zils' legacy on the island is also marked by his influence on another generation of local talent. If Lester James Peries was Ralph Keene's protégé then Tissa Abeysekera was Paul Zils', as Abeysekera recounts:

Paul was my tutor, and from him I learnt how to plan a film meticulously from concept to screen [...] My films were veering too much on the narrative side and Paul cautioned me against that. But for me this was only a laboratory where I was familiarizing myself with the tools of filmmaking to make the narrative films of my future. (2003: 18)

Abeysekera, like Peries went on from the GFU to a successful career writing and directing feature films.

Once again in regards to the influence of foreign filmmakers, Abeysekera emphasises Zils' insistence that along with technological training, his apprentices in Sri Lanka were required to be familiar with the aesthetics of cinema, apparently a unique opportunity on the island:

We had wonderful programmes of German Expressionism, Italian Neo-realism, the Russian and Japanese classics etc. etc. I wonder whether those men and women knew then, that that was going to be the only instance when such an exercise was conducted in this country. The beneficiaries are all occupying key positions in the beleaguered Sri Lankan film industry today, and they have contributed their skills and their talents to whatever we have achieved in the last thirty years. (2003: 19)

Coincidentally, I only by chance happened across the book *Paul Zils and the Indian Documentary* (2003), from which I've referenced Peries' and Abeysekera's articles, as I was scrounging through a pile of ex-library books on sale at the Goethe-Institut in Colombo.

Boyles concludes his historical account of the GFU remarking that during the 1970s Sri Lankan documentary film had misplaced its former glory, which is reflected in the uninspiring selection of titles offered in the catalogue from the

period. The influence of television in the 80s and 90s appears to have provided the nail to the Sri Lankan Government Film Unit's coffin.

Contemporary Sri Lankan Documentary

Evidently, *cinéma vérité* and Direct Cinema movements in Europe and America respectively in the 1960s and 70s had little impact on Sri Lankan documentary where scripting and dramatic recreation has continued to dominate the genre. An obvious reason for this is the lack of television and ongoing production in 35mm film for cinematic distribution. Apart from the technical environment I think it is more interesting to consider the influence these visionary international filmmakers had on the local film industry, imparting their unique skills and particular methodologies to how a nation should craft a narrativised reality through cinema. Regardless of the reasons for a lack of observational filmmaking in Sri Lanka, contemporary understanding of documentary remains a didactic and scripted form.

It seems appropriate, then, to conclude my examination of Sri Lankan documentary by way of an anomaly in the GFU catalogue. Vimukthi Jayasundera's *The Land of Silence* (2000) was the director's first documentary prior to receiving a scholarship from the French Government and the Sri Lanka National Film Corporation to study at Le Fresnoy-Studio National des Arts in France. The film presents a series of observations on the treatment of disabled soldiers at a rehabilitation centre. I was surprised to find it in the catalogue because I interpret the film as very critical of the war and subversive of the Government's efforts to label incapacitated soldiers as "war heroes".

Stylistically, the grainy black and white film stock used in *The Land of Silence* appears to reference historical documentaries like *Song of Ceylon*, but Vimukthi told me he stumbled across piles of forgotten 16mm film at the GFU and was presented with similar limitations of vision and sound to fifty or sixty years ago. Like *Song of Ceylon* it uses intertextual and poetic devices to subvert dominant perceptions of the subject. The images themselves generally follow a straightforward observational approach to illustrating a wide variety of treatments

undertaken on nameless soldiers. However, a voice-of-god narrator and haunting soundtrack presents a subversive commentary from the expected official propaganda tone. For example over images of a surgeon operating on an anaesthetized soldier the narrator offers, 'They are the living dead, lives shattered to oblivion, silent monuments, breathing yet dead', and later in the film the same voice suggests the soldiers are only being rehabilitated in order to be better market driven consumers.

Occasionally a soldier or staff member speaks directly to camera in Sinhala but neither the voice-over nor subtitles bother to interpret what they say. Instead the narrator offers one or two sentences to sum up their story. As a young male soldier pleads to the lens from his bed the narrator describes him as 'a brave adventurous type [...] whose dreams were blown up by a landmine.' The narrator's voice is not directly mocking of individual cases but offers a detached and simplified account of the subject that I interpret to express the absurdity of both the conflict and the social situations that led young men to confront such a dire state.

The surreal exposition of *The Land of Silence* is reminiscent of Luis Buñuel's parody of an anthropological expedition in *Las Hurdes: Tierra Sin Pan* (*Land Without Bread*) (1933). In both of these films the conventional voice of god narrator has been subverted in order to reveal a deeper social commentary on perception and representation. *Song of Ceylon* achieves a similar reflexive subversion through Robert Knox's seventeenth century observations and dissonant sound effects. In all of these films however the voice of the real participants is denied to varying extents as they become subjected to heavily stylised creative treatments. Placed in a wider political context, *The Land of Silence* presents a critical stance on the stifling social consequences of the war in Sri Lanka while simultaneously offering a reflexive critique of the debilitated state of documentary storytelling on the island.

Section III Production

Point Of View: Ethics & Authenticity

No more apparent is the significance of *trust* in audiences determining the authenticity of a story than in documentary photography. In her re-examination of photography, Susan Sontag reiterates the medium's dual nature:

Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real - incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be - since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real - since a person had been there to take them. (2003: 23)

A "Thank you" card slips out from between the hard cover of *Regarding the Pain of Others*. It's a photo of a puppy gazing vulnerably into the lens, made even more adorable by a frangipani tucked behind its ear. A gift perhaps. Inside the card is marked with a dozen or so messages and signatures addressed to my mother from a Women's Leadership Development Program at the University of Newcastle, June 2007. A twenty-rand bank note also slips out from the other end of the book. But I remember going to South Africa in 2005. Origins or passage? Now I'm not sure where the book came from, bewildered by traces of where it has been.

While it appears to have taken over a century for the provenance of Roger Fenton's photographs from the Crimean War, specifically the two published variations of *The Valley in the Shadow of Death* (1855), to undermine their original authenticity and be the subject of Sontag's dismay (see Sontag 2003 and Morris 2011), in the age of electronic media viewing contexts are constantly in flux, still and moving images are routinely reproduced in divergent forms other than originally intended and their provenance readily displaced. Nevertheless, the intentions and narrative of the photographer or author continue to be probed and speculated on. The indexical nature of photography placed in the hands of an individual's perspective, particularly when focused on a fellow human being, heightens its ethical implications. In other words, the relationship of the photographer to their subject

is integral to the authenticity of the image, not only in regards to highly involved acts of "staging" or "posing" but the occasional dilemma of not interacting at all.

At the outset of my third year of undergraduate study in photography I was inspired to become a photojournalist, a war photographer. In addition to my photography skills I thought it might be a useful selling point to learn how to write. Leaving the confines of my art college, I enrolled in News Writing at a distant campus.

Towards the end of our initial lecture, instructions for the first assignment were handed out. It was to be an essay on ethics in journalism. When the assignment stimulus turned out to be Kevin Carter's iconic image of a vulture standing over a collapsed and extremely malnourished child I was immediately enthused that I would be able to write an insightful photographically informed essay. On the lecturer's further deliberations however, my enthusiasm shifted to disgruntlement. The task, from memory, involved discussing the ethics of Kevin Carter's actions surrounding this image. What particularly upset me about the assignment was the way his image and 'actions' were presented to us, furthermore, the instruction that we would not need to reference any other sources than the information provided on the sheet, which read:

[Image banner]Pulitzer1994 Kevin Carter

[Caption] The PHOTO in the mail is the "Pulitzer prize" winning photo taken in 1994 during the Sudan famine. The picture depicts a famine stricken child crawling towards an United Nations food camp, located a kilometer away.

>The vulture is waiting for the child to die so that it can eat it. This picture shocked the whole world. No one knows what happened to the child, including the photographer Kevin Carter who left the place as soon as the photograph was taken.

>Three months later he committed suicide due to depression.

Coincidentally, I had recently returned from South Africa, where I had been recruited to photograph a Christian Brothers' "Social Justice Camp". The expedition involved a small group of select students from a range of Catholic high schools across the state of Queensland, travelling to South Africa in order to be immersed

in the social and political history and contemporary challenges facing the nation. In my background research for the camp I read about the 'Bang Bang Club', a group of four daring photojournalists, including Carter, who frequently risked their lives to record the violence erupting out of South Africa's apartheid.⁴⁸ I formed a great deal of respect and admiration for the work of these photographers, recording the violence and atrocities in South Africa at the time. They incurred unimaginable physical and mental hardship in order to pursue the perhaps naive intention of witnessing history, admittedly often returning for the adrenaline hit, but also confronting incredibly complex negotiations of racism, power, and personal intervention.

Amid the comfort of a relaxed Queensland lecture theatre I was angered by the simplicity and one-sided rhetoric of the text accompanying Carter's image, which we were instructed as being sufficient to deliver an essay on ethical journalism. 'Do we ONLY use the information provided on the assignment sheet?' I asked in disbelief, 'Yes', the lecturer shrugged and continued with his instructions.

Following the lecture, a quick Google Image search revealed the provenance of the assignment graphic. The prepackaged photograph and text combination appears numerous times from a range of sources. The 'meme', as this kind of text and image combination has come to be known, was most likely constructed as a 'viral' email intended to undermine the *raison d'être* of photojournalism.

Despite the apparent 'obviousness' that Kevin Carter photographed a child in need and failed to physically help her, ultimately winning an illustrious journalism award for the image, the intentions and non-intervention of Carter, like Roger Fenton's 19th century cannon balls, have been the subject of ongoing debate and speculation. There are plenty of avenues for uncovering the truth surrounding what happened to the girl in the image, and for ascertaining the reality of Kevin Carter's actions. Instead, as Morris observes, readers endow photographs with

⁴⁸ Two of the Bang Bang Club lost their lives in the high risk environment, Ken Oosterbroek was killed in a cross-fire and Kevin Carter committed suicide (Marinovich & Silva 2000), and Joao Silva recently lost both his legs when he stepped on a mine reporting from Afghanistan.

intentions (2011: 20), and in the case of the assignment graphic, Carter's imagined exploitative agenda in order to win a journalism award.

These days I take pains to discuss in my own lectures on Ethics in Photojournalism the significance of information provided by the image itself, particularly in news photography where the single image is tasked with telling the story. Looking at Carter's image it is evident in the visually compressed space, between the foreground and background details, that a long focal length lens has been used which would have required Carter to be at a significant physical distance from the child. From the image alone this subject distance and lens focal length might suggest a lack of interaction by the photographer. It is an effective example of 'flattening perspective' to heighten drama. If Carter was using a wide angle lens from a position closer to the child, maintaining both subjects entirely in the frame, then a 'steepened perspective' would result in the vulture appearing smaller and at a less threatening distance. However, a closer subject distance would imply an intimate exchange between Carter and the child, perhaps even a consensual acknowledgement. As a class exercise I enjoy asking my students to turn to the person next to them and have a discussion with their faces as close as possible.⁴⁹ Feeling your neighbour's breath at such an uncomfortable closeness reveals the significance of the space between us in determining the nature of our relationships. The camera, in its most scientifically objective capacity, conveys this physical distance between the subject and lens. In Carter's single image, the distant viewpoint alone has translated into an ethical dilemma of non-intervention. Robert Capa's famous mantra "if your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough" rings true in regard to the *perceived* ethics of the photographic point of view.

The ill-conceived assignment task I was presented with demonstrates how easily images can be lifted out of context and invested with new intentions, but in a more positive development, the "blogosphere" is credited with being a major site of uncovering photographic manipulation. I was re-assured recently when I repeated my Google Image search for "Kevin Carter vulture" and the first website carrying

⁴⁹ An exercise I adopted from my mentor David Lloyd at Queensland College of Art.

the graphic was Hoax-Slayer.com - 'Debunking email hoaxes and exposing Internet scams since 2003!'. The mission statement of Hoax-Slayer proceeds: 'The goal of the Hoax-Slayer Website is to help make the Internet a safer, more pleasant and productive environment'. The website is credited to a single operator, Brett Christenson, working out of Bundaberg - a small town famous for rum, ginger beer and sugar cane, in rural Queensland, Australia. Christenson warns us, 'Email hoaxes spread misinformation, waste bandwidth, and lessen the effectiveness of email as a communication medium' (hoax-slayer.com). His article 'Kevin Carter Pulitzer Prize Photograph' (2008) features a more extended version of the graphic to include a fictitious suicide note praying to God to protect the child. Christenson provides his own detailed analysis of the image and references to other articles and resources.⁵⁰ Similarly, 'truthorfiction.com', gives a summary of the "eRumor" followed by its own version of "The Truth".⁵¹ Both of these sites provide corrections to the year the image was taken, 1993, more accurate accounts of Carter's suicide and quotes from reliable sources, and both of these examples resist inventing their own emotionally charged psychological suppositions and imagined circumstances.

Internet Weblogs have not only offered a degree of policing disingenuous images, but for many photographers they now also offer a space to relay personal accounts beyond the images themselves - the narrative lacking from Carter's frame. For example Time magazine's *Light Box* or the New York Times *Lens* blog provide accounts from photographers of their intentions and auxiliary circumstances behind published images.

The provenance of Kevin Carter's image reveals a significant shortcoming in mass media storytelling, a similar deficiency to that which Benjamin identified almost six decades prior to Carter firing his shutter, namely, the dissemination of information as news, pre-packaged and explained. Provenance in this instance offers a critique of contemporary global journalism. Provenance in contemporary photojournalism, or press photography, has arguably become obscured by the rise

⁵⁰ <http://www.hoax-slayer.com/kevin-carter-pulitzer.shtml> (accessed 12 June 2012)

⁵¹ <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/k/kevincarter.htm> (accessed 12 June 2012)

of global image agencies such as Reuters, Getty, or Associated Press, and the redundancy of staff photographers, who once upon a time offered an identifiable voice across publications. In documentary photography, as previously discussed, sequencing, publication control, and the development of the author's voice across texts, provides a greater depth to the information and meaning of the images. Should the ethics and authenticity of Carter's photograph not consider the blatant culture of experiential disconnect from information that Benjamin warned of? For instance the role of the New York Times purchasing an image from someone outside their regular contact and *care*. Or the naive agenda of bearing witness without bearing the psychological burdens and narrative of a singular perspective. Even the Pulitzer website reproducing Carter's image conveys the story with a minimal caption: 'For a picture of a starving Sudanese girl who collapsed on her way to a feeding center while a vulture waited nearby'.⁵² The news cycle that supported, or failed to support Carter, is responsible for images lacking a more authentic story as experienced by the photographer. The story of Kevin Carter's image is gripping and insightful, but the lack of a suitable space for openly prompting his personal experience resulted in make-believe narratives, narratives which now overshadow the small girl and the famine she, along with thousands of others, fell victim to in Sudan in 1993.⁵³ Photographic point of view demands a narrative, and if it is not appropriately contextualised with one throughout the photograph's provenance, then a narrative will be constructed regardless, as Benjamin warned, other storytellers will pass it off as their own (1968 [c1936]: 92).

How personal documentary stories are passed on in this age of electronic reproduction, raises an important and contentious distinction in regards to the nature of *experience* in maintaining an *authentic* point of view. Jill Bennett (2012) offers a thorough examination of the ongoing passage and transformation of

⁵² <http://www.pulitzer.org/awards/1994> (accessed 11 June 2012)

⁵³ The same article in which Carter's photograph first appeared in the New York Times, 'Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West' by Donatella Lorch March 26, 1993, reported that in some areas of Sudan there were no living children under 5 years of age, and in one area it was reported that more than 15 people were dying per day due to starvation. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/26/world/sudan-is-described-as-trying-to-placate-the-west.html> (accessed 11 June 2012)

Carter's photograph through multiple storytellers and into contemporary artworks by way of her conceptual framework of 'practical aesthetics'. Bennett outlines what it means to engage with 'practical aesthetics':

It is to conceive of an aesthetics informed by and derived from practical, real-world encounters, an aesthetics that is in turn capable of being used or put into effect in a real situation. (2012: 02)

She goes on to suggest practical aesthetics is an *orientation* of aesthetics towards actual events or real problems, in a similar way Benjamin's storyteller 'takes what he tells from his experience - his own or that reported by others' (1968: 87). However, the foggy and contentious distinction between 'practical aesthetics' and personal documentary lies in what I perceive as divergent interpretations of *experience*. Bennett observes that in contemporary culture, the 'objects' and 'fields' of previously distinct realms of 'art', 'media', 'popular culture' are now 'fluid and heterogeneous entities' (2012: 08). In other words, contemporary visual culture is *lived* as opposed to merely being observed. For example, 9/11 was 'experienced' by us, the viewers, as an event. We perpetuate the narrative as our own with questions like "where were you when it happened?" or "did you see it?". Hence the reason why news events, as Bennett suggests, 'are emphatically on the agenda of contemporary art' (2012: 33).

What I argue is lost in this surrogate experience is the *authenticity* of the encounter. This murky zone of virtual experience is subject to a weaving and spinning through any number of sources and multifarious provenances branded into the reporting. It is exactly this kind of *experiential* disconnect that led to suppositions of Carter's personal actions and intentions becoming the story that was passed on, and the original narrative of widespread famine and starvation in Sudan in 1993 waylaid.

One of the key premises for considering media as lived experience is in its ability to 'affect', and the observation that images have an 'emotional life' (2012: 24). Bennett's thesis maintains that 'affect', as opposed to ethical or political propositions, is 'the proper - if messy and impure - subject of practical aesthetics' (2012: 190). Which in Carter's case, paradoxically, the success of the image to inspire compassion was its undoing (2012: 183). Bennett contextualises Carter's

photograph as an exemplar of 'famine imagery' and the heightened emotional pull consequential to this category of reporting. During the late 80s and 90s, social issues such as famine were increasingly intertwined with popular culture, epitomised by the *Live Aid* concerts in 1985. Bennett explains:

Such campaigns create a framework for action that builds on the image's capacity to incite emotion but by holding out the promise of remedial action serve to assuage the negative affects of distress, guilt and anger that passive viewing promotes. (2012: 162)

It is through this framework of expecting action and relief that Carter's photograph thwarted expectations of humanitarian intervention and led to the denunciation of Carter himself (2012: 165). Within the image is embedded a contradiction of meaning and reality; the photograph pleads to readers to help the child but they soon discover the photographer himself apparently failed to do so. It is in this disconnect between image and action that Bennett locates a remedial function of 'practical aesthetics'. Her thesis explores three contemporary experimental works that each reconstruct the scene of the photograph in order to critically examine and attempt to re-direct its 'emotional entanglements', including: Xu Zhen's *The Starving of Sudan* (2008) performance, Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000), and Alfredo Jaar's *Sound of Silence* (2006).

Xu Zhen completely re-enacts the scene of the photograph as a performance in an expansive Beijing gallery space, albeit with a healthy local child playing the Sudanese girl and a robot vulture as the predator. Bennett explains that Xu's performance is aimed at 'refreshing' the image - like an internet browser, in order to re-evaluate how images are consumed and interpreted.

Danielewski's novel extends well beyond the photographic event in its fabrication of an elaborate provenance surrounding the life of the image and photographer. *House of Leaves* is an epic exercise of parody in which personal letters, interviews, poems, academic discourse, conferences, even photographs, are entirely crafted by the author in order to critique the intellectual and moral narrative underway. As Bennett points out:

The spoof theories and papers are not themselves the object of critique but just part of a momentous discursive flow, an endless mill of speech propelled by the desire to pass judgement, to name, assuage, foreclose. (2012: 170)

House of Leaves exemplifies Morris's hypothesis that we imbue photographs with intentions and goes much further to delve deep into the imagined desires and motivations of an expansive and elaborately made-up provenance topography.

Alfredo Jaar's *Sound of Silence* installation similarly offers an elaborate reconstruction of the provenance of Carter's image. Bennett aptly describes it as a corrective viewing apparatus for re-conditioning the viewer (2012: 168). Inside the ominous concrete and metal structure a video sequence relays a factual text based narrative of Kevin Carter's life, from his birth to his suicide and the journey of the famous image beyond his death. As with *House of Leaves*, Jaar draws from multiple dimensions of provenance from Carter's topography, for example, as Bennett notes, the installation facility of *Sound of Silence* was inspired by the material provenance of the photograph under the current ownership of Corbis - a corporation owned by Bill Gates. The *Sound of Silence* concrete structure references the facility Gates created in order to store and preserve millions of original photographs 200 feet below the earth in an abandoned limestone mine in Pennsylvania (Bennett 2012: 177).

However, as one review of Jaar's artwork in the *New York Times* (the same publication that originally ran Carter's image) notes, the narrative Jaar recounts omits significant aspects of the story - such as Carter witnessing the death of one of his best friends and fellow Bang Bang Club member Ken Oosterbroek only days after the announcement of the Pulitzer Prize. As the reviewer Roberta Smith observes:

So the photographer's history becomes the artist's to frame in his own way. In the end Mr. Jaar does exploit a sensational story, and in shaping it, he manipulates us. Except for its savvy presentation, the piece is like shooting fish in a barrel [...] Yet it works. (2009: np)

Bennett explicates the narrative of *Sound of Silence*, through its shifting pace, repetition and play on audience expectations, as tracing a topography of affect and

consequently critiquing the nature of how affect has animated Carter's narrative. Through affirming, concealing and revealing 'facts' informing our experience of the image, Jaar offers a critical space for questioning the provenance of visual storytelling.

In all three of these experimental modes of re-telling Carter's story the subject under scrutiny becomes *storytelling* itself. The point of differentiation of personal documentary from other art forms concerned with the *real*, is in maintaining a thread through the storyteller's lived experience, in other words incorporating the author's distinctly personal point of view. As Benjamin suggests:

Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience. (1968 [c1936], 92)

In an age when mass-media consumption constitutes lived experience, the aesthetics of re-telling a story in personal documentary needs to be deliberated on through an idiosyncratic engagement with provenance. Otherwise speculation and emotional suppositions lose touch with the original maxim, moral, or proverb of the story. Therefore, the authenticity of personal documentary, as Benjamin outlines as an essential trait of all storytelling, is its intention to counsel listeners with an experientially informed narrative. My own re-telling of *The Sri Lanka Series* requires spinning and weaving into my lived experience. Critical engagement with provenance, unique to the story and storyteller, provides a necessary framework for developing and re-telling stories from an ethical and authentic point of view.

My mother's postscripts and the Academy

When shining a spotlight on memories, even 'projects', to explore my family's relationship with Sri Lanka, I ought to be cautious not to give the impression these matters constantly consumed us. I cannot speak for the rest of my family, but a curious dimension to these kinds of international ties and personal histories, is the reality that life goes on in front of you and you inevitably become ensnared by your immediate surroundings. Where these foreign lands and distant relationships sit becomes a challenging place to comprehend, nurture, and articulate. In addition to *The Actor & The President*, discussed in the previous section, my mother's scholarly reflections have since attempted to critically interpret these often uncomfortable but incredibly enriching intercultural ties. Her writing and lectures have been profoundly influential to the intellectual and personal provenance of my own research and fieldwork.

Coincidentally, not long after I enrolled at Griffith University's Queensland College of Art (QCA) as an undergraduate, Sharon joined the same institution as a Pro-Vice Chancellor, leaving her position as Dean of Arts at University of Wollongong. I mention this in passing because it was in her new appointment that I was once again able to play a small role in communicating her Sri Lanka mosaic, so to speak. In particular, I helped compile the visual media accompanying her 2004 professorial lecture *The Secret Lives of Us*. This lecture can be contextualised as one of a handful of 'postscripts' she has since published reflecting on her personal, academic, and creative experience. These postscripts could then be further contextualised as part of a growing discourse emanating from the humanities and social sciences, often referred to as New Ethnography, which on one hand critiques many of the assumptions and 'traditional' methodologies of the Academy and on the other hand can be understood as celebrating the unique forms of knowledge, experiences, and connections that many of these, often bizarre, disciplinary rites of passage foster.

'The Secret Lives of Us'

Thursday afternoon, 22nd of July, 2004, despite my multimedia video presentation failing halfway through her talk, much to my embarrassment, mum's professorial lecture *The Secret Lives of Us* was personally moving and provocative. The DVD I provided was faulty, but a comment from the audience that all the visual material was a bit too distracting anyway provided slight relief.

Sharon professes not to be an 'expert' in any specific discipline that would traditionally demand a high level of academic authority associated with a 'Professorial' title. Rather, she outlines her career:

I embraced geography as an undergraduate, anthropology and motherhood as a post-graduate, ethnographic filmmaking and more mothering as a post-doc, and documentary filmmaking and academic administration in mid-life (2004: 2)

As you can see my brother and I played a significant role in her professional trajectory. While mum never practised nor was employed as an anthropologist since completing her doctoral research, she credits her early ethnographic fieldwork as informing all of her professional roles since. More specifically her ethnographic experience has fostered an ongoing dialogue linking the academy with community, and the personal with the political. Influenced by the historical shift in the social sciences during the 1980s, or 'ethnographic turn', Sharon offers a reflexive composition to explore the question 'Does the field ever leave us?' (2004: 2).

Embracing an auto-ethnographic and inter-subjective frame, Sharon explores the challenges she faced undertaking *rite de passage* fieldwork at a time when anthropology itself was facing critical scrutiny; post-colonialism was restricting access to once 'fertile fields' and questioning many of the discipline's core theoretical assumptions.⁵⁴ To this day her fieldwork and ongoing relationships remain a contentious site for how her stories, and the stories from others she encountered, are told. Mum outlines how her *modus operandi* would have been little different from other ethnographers before her:

⁵⁴ The groundbreaking thesis by Edward Said, *Orientalism*, was published in 1978.

I spent several months learning the Sinhala language, I 'chose' a village in which to live and work in the (understudied) southwest lowlands of Sri Lanka, I 'found' a family who was happy to accommodate me, and later I 'negotiated' a house where I could live relatively independently. As long as the local police and the *Grama Sevaka* (Village Headman in the bureaucratic rather than democratic sense) agree, there was no formal or informal negotiation with the community I was to study. I was there to observe, to learn and to 'write a book about the women' and then to 'make some films'. (2004: 8-9)

Back in Australia however, as a young feminist, Sharon had the added difficulty of challenging a canon led by senior male anthropologists. Mum recounts a now humorous story of her pleas to incorporate the life histories of her female 'informants' as a significant part of her presentation - providing a space for their own voices to be relayed in order to deviate from the inevitable abstraction conventional 'data analyses' would otherwise entail. Recalling how infuriated her colleagues at the Department of Anthropology were with her proposal:

The response was disastrous. Not only did my colleagues not appreciate my paper, many were angry, some furious. Did I not understand, they interjected, the nature of scholarly research, nor my role as a doctoral student to place one small building block of knowledge on the wall that is the established canon? Obviously I did not. (1998: 330-331)

In the face of such criticism, Sharon felt she was unable to honestly recount her fieldwork experience with colleagues or incorporate personal dimensions into the narrative of her dissertation (2004: 5). Nevertheless, the life histories of four individual women ultimately became the focus of her final dissertation and provided the structure of her film *Four Women* (1980).

To a certain extent Sharon now over-critically presents her doctoral research and early filmmaking as orthodox "pith-helmet" anthropological conduct. While I readily interpret a personal voice in both her written words and on screen, mum maintains that she is only ever occasionally evidenced in the frame, pressured to adopt an academically validated distance at the expense of a more personal and perhaps honest inclusiveness:

Ironically, or perhaps predictably given my lack of 'creative' education, my early films bore the clear markings of an anthropological thesis - an accurate, even if sanitised, reflection of the appropriate (that is acceptable) fiction of the fieldwork experience. I am occasionally evidenced in frame, speaking the language. The films document, or at least make reference to, an economic reality, a social hierarchy, even a political milieu, interspersed with or illustrated by various rituals and 'rites de passage'. They make no reference to my 'lived experience' in the field: the loneliness so intense that it generated nausea; the tropical illnesses of dengue and filariasis; the numbing and time-consuming daily rituals of survival in a house without electricity or running water; or the adoption of an asexual persona (immature, unmarried woman) in the interests of 'anthropological integrity'. (Bell 2009: 256)

While the pace of the films is slow by contemporary standards and the films fail to reveal Sharon's bout of elephantitis and other such 'impurities' of the field, I believe they and her final thesis, *Women and Wage Labour: The Impact of Capitalism in Southwest Sri Lanka* (1986), integrate progressive forms of reflexive engagement through a frank personal voice and feminist perspective. In addition to the task of her research topic, Sharon grapples with her agency and presence in the village as a privileged outsider, an intellectually unsettling situation for her yet easily rationalised by the villagers as the result of her being born Sinhalese in a previous life. For example, in the introduction to her thesis mum contrasts fundamental differences between her personal life and those of the villagers she was studying:

Although my research grant was not large, I never suffered the economic uncertainty that plagued most of those with whom I lived. Although I followed national politics at election time, I knew my future career was not dependent on the success of a particular party at the polls. Although I was told that my world was now populated by a variety of supernatural beings, many of them malign, I never experienced the real fear of possession nor the anxiety associated with displeasing the dead. (1986: 5-6)

Sharon's critical stance of her formative ethnographic work is perhaps not so much a critique of her research project, rather, it is an underlying frustration with what

was being left out or sacrificed to disciplinary conventions and mythologies. Mum goes on to explain:

Then, as now, beneath the ethnographic façade lie the impurities of the fieldwork experience: 'finding' a village was hellishly difficult (I had absolutely no idea as to how to go about this crucial task when I landed in Sri Lanka); gaining any sort of independence of movement frowned upon (especially by middle-class villagers who were busily protecting the virginity of their daughters); any hint of privacy impossible (young women should never be alone); surviving without electricity or running water, not so much arduous, as unbelievably time consuming: the 'wet' (southwest monsoon - only once as it was too wet, too thunder-storm dark, too hot to do anything productive); political curfews induced fear when there was no television or reliable radio news; and there were no telephones to alleviate intense loneliness and anxiety (except through a complex process at the local post office, requiring all the skills at one's disposal to negotiate a remarkable post-colonial bureaucratic legacy). (2004:10)

Instead of incorporating these personal dimensions into her written or visual documentation of the time, these 'impurities' were relegated to diaries, letters home, or simply filed away as elusive memories (Bell 2004: 10). Mum argues that these hidden 'impurities' of field experience, are not only culturally significant events in themselves but are more importantly, in her words, 'stories of incorporation, of the ethnographer as "one of them" (in this case mentally, psychologically and politically) rather than just the "other".' (2004: 11)

In addition to peculiar impurities behind the ethnographic facade, Sharon elaborates that even when there is a greater inclusion of the "self" within research, such auto-ethnographies continue to omit the influence of those she calls "significant others": 'those with whom one interacts through necessity, through new or continuing professional relationships, or in my case, creative relationships' (2004: 12). Sharon discusses how it was necessary for her, both emotionally and intellectually, to have a group of like minded friends and colleagues in Colombo to periodically socialise with and gain otherwise inaccessible cultural insights, but

who largely remained undocumented, outside the ethnographic frame. She explains:

I soon learnt that if I was to survive this experience I needed to connect regularly with colleagues who shared interests and values - and who spoke English, enabling conversation to move beyond the superficial banter of village interactions. It was also important to be able to mix socially with people who weren't averse to a woman enjoying a cold beer! (2004: 12)

It was these Significant Others whom my brother and I would encounter over jovial drinks every time we visited Sri Lanka (and to this day remain partial to a cold beer), who have continued to shape our mother's involvement with the island long after she left the village. These unofficial colleagues were instrumental to her cultural understanding of Sri Lanka, in particular the volatile national politics of the era. Nevertheless, they remained outside the scholarly frame:

I have in the past wondered why I felt guilty about my Colombo excursions and close relationships, why I believed these were taking me away from the ethnographic experience, from the pursuit of 'informants', when in fact they were deeply enriching it. (2004: 12-13)

Contingency and chance encounters played a significant role in Sharon's research and understanding of Sri Lankan culture, dimensions of experience that perhaps cannot be predetermined yet ought not to be disregarded. Acknowledging the nature and importance of these personal relationships, and the tension of distance between them, not only illustrates fundamental gaps in the traditional ethnographic storytelling mode but also problematises the engrained language of "research", "methodology", or even "experiment" to account for close friendships, and denies the necessity to essentially "be yourself" in the field (see Muecke 2012: 23).

Mum's final critique of the ethnographer-in-the-field mythology questions the perceived "power" of the researcher to design the nature of their fieldwork. Concluding her answer to the question, 'Does the field ever leave us?', mum invokes the complex nature of her relationships with "informants". She quotes John van Maanen in discussing the need to develop useful relationships in the field:

Fieldworkers do not want to become close to just anyone, but rather want to count amongst their associates the more open, knowledgeable, comfortable, good-natured, well-placed, and articulate members of the organization. The fact is, however, that informants probably select the researcher as much as the researcher selects them. (1991: 36 [in Bell 2004: 16])

Complex and controversial negotiations of power dynamics surrounding foreign researchers from the North investigating the South readily overlook or disregard the agency of those being researched. In this post-colonial environment the relatively recent ability of the host-country to welcome a foreigner or not might also filter down to the sovereignty of individuals, endowed with a similar independence. These negotiations between researcher and the researched, as van Maanen suggests, are deliberated on at a unique personal level, involving character, curiosity, needs and desires.

One of the significant hypotheses emerging from Sharon's observations of the incorporation of women into the developing Sri Lankan wage labour workforce in the 1970s, was the ongoing pre-capitalist form of dependency on and obligation to their employers: '[...] women will work for low wages under poor conditions and once again will even accept the responsibility of covering their employers' potential losses' (Bell 1981: 18). This feudalistic patron-client relationship is maintained by the constant threat of unemployment on one hand but also the positive advantages of assistance on the other. For instance, workers will turn to their employer for the provision of loans, purchasing medicine, and other kinds of assistance in times of need (Bell 1981: 19). Mum identified the importance of relationships of dependency as a survival strategy for poor village women and their families:

Dependency and obligation are typical of a wide variety of relationships in the village, from the demanding, sometimes exploitative ties between rich and poor to the close, usually affectionate ties between parents and their children... All villagers are apt to call on the ideology of kinship and the associated moral obligations of kin when it is to their advantage to do so. Just as the villagers are able to conceptualise it in terms of equality and the obligation to share resources. (1986: 148)

When Sharon returned to Colombo in 1996 to negotiate with President Chandrika Kumaratunga to shoot *The Actor & The President*, she and Geoff were greeted by a young woman in her mid-twenties who, to their surprise referred to them as 'mother' and 'father'. They had been 'adopted' by Priyanthi, their once five year old neighbour from the village. Sharon draws on her early hypothesis to account for this development:

Whilst in the village her mother, Chandrawathie [one of the stars of *Four Women*], had made us string hoppars (rice noodles) on a regular basis, but she generally refused payment. When Chandrawathie wrote to us in Australia to tell us that her husband, the local exorcist, had died, we had begun supporting her three children through their school years. I was slow however to realise that I was playing out exactly the sort of relationship of dependency that I had identified 15 years earlier. (2004: 17)

The ethical imperative to be "yourself" and not hide behind the ethnographic facade perhaps leaves the ethnographer open to developing the same complex relations they are trying to isolate, blurring the boundaries between "participant observation" and plain "participation". Sharon quotes Malcolm Crick, who argues, 'relations between ethnographer and informant are more accurately seen, perhaps, as mutual exploitation' (Crick 1992: 176). Once again, idiosyncratic complexity in the nature of documentary relationships resists systematic strategising. Sharon asserts that "informants" have a much greater awareness of and agency in the ethnographic relationships than they are generally given credit (2004: 17). These relationships are always unique, some more exploitative than others, but it is the privileged act of "engagement" that my mother stresses as significant. Concluding her professorial lecture, Sharon acknowledges that her account of 'others knowing others' is for the most part one-sided, emphasising that questions of academic hierarchy and the politics of power need to be confronted through creative storytelling as a form cultural critique. Reflecting on her ethnographic experience she offers, 'The emotional journey is not straightforward, but it is the intellectual journey that makes the trip worthwhile.' (2004: 17)

At the outset of my own fieldwork in Sri Lanka, I was particularly interested in translating and experimenting with how I might be able to address the issues Sharon raises in her post-scripts within my visual work. Particularly how I might incorporate 'impurities of the field', 'significant others', participant agency, and the troublesome *distance* of a foreign researcher faced with moments of intense intimacy from 'being oneself in the field'.



Figure 3.1 Sharon, Sri Lanka, 1978. Photo by Geoff Burton.

The art of boredom

Driving through a flat African landscape with director Philo Bregstein and Rouch behind the wheel, a scene from *Jean Rouch and His Camera in the Heart of Africa* (1986) - sixteen and a half minutes of the complete seventy-four have been uploaded to YouTube as a preview by DER. Bregstein casually leans against his side of the car and fires Rouch an odd question, the subtitles read:

B: So, why did you choose this country, which is so poor and so strange to live in? Have you been working here for 30 years?

R: I discovered here people who have taught me many things

B: What?

R: My patience, for example. Time doesn't exist. I haven't had a watch since the war. Time, means death, and to have a watch means that you are going to die. And for me, during the war time we all synchronised our time, and that meant that at some point we would go off to be killed or to kill others.

So, time must be eliminated. Time doesn't exist. Yes, it's very strange.

B: It is in this country that you started to be fascinated by film-making

R: I was fascinated by film-making because I couldn't see any other way of expressing what is happening, and, even so, films don't show everything. You see for example, that, what's that? It's a very flat country, it's really this... the way that this country of "The Lion Hunt" has been called Gandju Kangamoru Gamoru, the bush which is further away than far, the country of nowhere. So, in the country of nowhere, you can dream... you can invent things, but in the country of nowhere, there is something, which can perhaps be seen... in your camera, there, behind it, it's the river, and the river is a miracle.

Martin Heidegger thought along similar lines when he confronted the nature of our Being through the nothingness of boredom:

Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and human beings and oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference. This boredom reveals beings as a whole. (1993 [c1929]: 99)

To alleviate time, to do away with "deadlines", is to seek boredom. Benjamin pointed out that the role of boredom, the nesting place for storytelling, had been misplaced in modern society, he writes:

If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places - the activities that are intimately associated with boredom - are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. (1968: 91)

In anthropology, the requirement to spend enough time immersed in the culture under investigation in order to access *boredom*, could be said to be one of the main principles of ethnographic fieldwork. Jean Rouch's anthropology mentors, Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, both advised him that a researcher needs to spend at least twenty years experiencing a culture before one can achieve a 'deep knowledge' of a society's 'system of thought' (Henley 2009: 10). But how long is twenty years in a place where time does not exist?

In addition to conveying maxims based on experience, Benjamin's storyteller was evidently tasked with the act of translation, between different cultures and segregated social classes. While Benjamin's essay on *The Storyteller* can be interpreted as specifically referring to 19th and 20th century genres, in particular the short stories and fables of Russian storyteller Nikolai Leskov, through this exemplar, as Taussig notes, Benjamin is also highlighting Leskov's skilled cultural mediation between Russian peasantry and the bourgeoisie (2006: 61-62). Benjamin offers two 'tribes of storytellers' embodied in the archetypes of the traveler and that of the home bound farmer; the 'trading seamen' and the 'tiller of the soil' (1968: 85). In both instances the exchange of stories cross cultural terrain; the traveler bringing stories from afar and the peasant becoming an expert in local tales and traditions. Benjamin outlines:

If peasants and seaman were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place. (1968: 85)

The lore of faraway places combined with the lore of the past, mediated through an adept storyteller corresponds with the task of ethnography and inter-cultural documentary.

Fieldworks: Dialogues between Art and Anthropology - Part 6, Michael Taussig and Susan Hiller from session 4, 23 September 2003, are conversing through an embedded video player on the Tate website.⁵⁵ Taussig, in a less colourful shirt than he usually presents, at least since his book about colour, explains:

Fieldwork is the heart of ethnography, and ethnography is the heart of anthropology. Ethnography is basically, in my opinion, storytelling. But it's a special form of storytelling. Ethnography is telling other people's stories - badly. We have "informants", we don't have "storytellers". In other words, the artwork that's involved is doubly concealed. First for not recognising the art that's involved in this storytelling activity, and second, for using a bad faith art to conceal our art malpractice.

Boredom, evidently, is one of the many concealed attributes (or 'impurities' as my mother would suggest) comprising the art 'malpractice' of ethnographic storytelling.

Taussig's book *My Cocaine Museum* (2004) devotes a chapter to *boredom*. The book is based on his extensive fieldwork in the remote Pacific coast of Colombia where African slaves were originally taken to mine gold, and where boredom is commonplace. He writes:

In a well-intentioned effort to combat racist stereotyping, anthropologists are often moved to evoke equally stereotyped tropes of the cultural "dynamism" and cultural "richness" of the coast, yet I find it hard to know what is meant here. Certainly such statements reflect oddly on the rigor of everyday experience imposed by the climate and the physical brutality of the work necessary to stay alive. For what is elided by such tropes is the existential soul strength that monotony demands. Here ethnography fares poorly because this formative experience, namely, the sticky vacuum of heat and boredom, seems pretty well unconveyable and, worse still, all manner of narrative,

⁵⁵ <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/fieldworks-dialogues-between-art-and-anthropology-part-6> (accessed 2 June 2012)

paradox, and so-called data are then desperately shaped by the observer so as to jolt the emptiness with meaning. (2004: 59-60)

Perhaps there is something significant in jolting the emptiness with dynamism and cultural richness, even if they are fabricated. Jean Rouch, for example, jolts the emptiness of his timeless Niger with collaborative "ethno-fiction" productions. However, the risk for Taussig then, is judging how his creative response to boredom, by way of writing, imposes on the reality lived by others, an ongoing concern of his digging into mimesis. He continues:

Have I projected my boredom on to the village? This is the anthropologist's dilemma. Even nightmare. I ask Lilia if she feels bored. "I want to leave *running*! I want to fly!" she says with unnerving passion. "It's suffocating," she says. "Sometimes after I've finished my household chores, I go and sit downstairs and look up and down the empty street. Up and down. Nothing." (2004: 60)

An unnerving passion to 'run' and 'fly' emanating out of 'nothing' is transformed into Taussig's narrative and becomes integral to us, the reader's understanding of life for a young woman in a remote village on the coast of Colombia.

Seeking boredom myself one rainy day in Sydney's Circular Quay, 2006, I stumbled across Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983). Part of an exhibition of video-art from the Centre Pompidou collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art. My 103-minute gallery viewing experience continues to deeply inspire me to craft personal stories. It is a film that has been reconsidered as a significant example of experimental ethnography (see Russell 1999) and a film that acknowledges boredom at its core.

Accompanying images of sleeping passengers on an overnight ferry from Hokkaido to Tokyo the narrator relays:

He wrote: I've been round the world several times and now only banality still interests me. On this trip I've tracked it with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter.

Through both form and concept *Sans Soleil* establishes a poly-vocality that epitomizes postmodern documentary. A female narrator relays letters written to her from the elusive travelling filmmaker, occasionally adding her own perspective, which is further complicated by frequently dissociated imagery and a multi-

layered soundtrack. Themes of time and space, or more specifically memory and travel, are interrogated through the protagonist's impossible leaping between such locations as a futuristic Tokyo and a primitive Cape Verde islands, with the added imposition of television inspired nightmares or the traveler's misplaced reality within Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. As Catherine Russell (1999) observes, the identity of the filmmaker and his subjects become fragmented and pluralistic, consequently destabilizing notions of authority and ethnicity, and ultimately highlighting the narrative potential of subjective, or perhaps collaborative, histories. It's odd, if I were chasing banality, a futuristic metropolis like Tokyo or the exotic Cape Verde islands would not be where I would expect to find it. *Sans Soleil* reveals the vulnerability of our perceptions toward ethnicity, time, and space, for which boredom is crucial to understanding.

Australian documentary filmmaker Dennis O'Rourke's camera also takes us on a destabilizing journey through boredom and the exotic in *Cannibal Tours* (1988). As with Marker's oeuvre, O'Rourke's personal filmmaking has been profoundly influential to my creative provenance. We join a group of wealthy European and North American tourists on a luxurious vessel slicing through the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, a pre-packaged journey into the unknown reminiscent of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. On-board, O'Rourke's camera hunts down the lethargic reflections of tourists between docking at villages to perform photographs and bargain for woodcarvings. A shirtless German tourist is conversing with O'Rourke's camera through sunglasses as the river speeds by in the background, the subtitles read:

This river reminds me of the Zambesi, in Africa... palm trees on the bank... plenty of crocodiles. Life is slow and peaceful... people live simply... but they might be satisfied with that. For me, as a tourist, it's very impressive... it's very nice to travel in New Guinea. And we don't regret the long journey to get here... to see a way-of-life so opposite to that of Europe.

I'm reviewing the DVD with the director's commentary switched 'on', so every now and again O'Rourke's voice offers a footnote to the images. The two-decade gap between producing the film and recording the commentary for this release provides an interesting disjunction between the story and the storyteller.

O'Rourke's commentary confirms this was his first film as a "one-man-band": 16mm camera on one shoulder, sound recording microphone on the other, written, directed, and co-produced by him, although edited by Tim Litchfield. O'Rourke's singular perspective, however, is somewhat disjointed because he constructs what I perceive as four distinct points of view through different filmmaking strategies. The first point of view is of a conventional non-interactive gaze, presenting the exotic locations and primitive people, used in some instances to establish the scene, like a Wide Shot might, but more conceptually significant in its mirroring of the tourists' gaze. A beautiful child stares complacently into the lens. 'I love this shot', O'Rourke remarks over the close up of a New Guinean boy facing his camera. Over a scene showing a Spirit-House the director comments that his framing is exactly the same as that found on postcards sold in shops.

The second perspective or strategy is that of O'Rourke amongst the tourists, on-board the vessel, strolling the villages, interacting and occasionally evidenced in frame by way of a hand or leading question. This is perhaps the most revealing and provocative position in the sense of presenting the tourists and their crass behavior as the "exotic other" - a perspective we are more familiar with directed towards the "natives" as they perform traditional rituals and activities. We witness tourists admiring wood carvings before proceeding to bargain for a 'second price' or 'third price' before finally concluding the two or three dollars being asked is too much as they turn away from the frustrated local vendor. O'Rourke presents these exchanges as the cultural ritual, an ethnography of tourism.

O'Rourke's third strategy forms the seemingly impromptu mid-shot interviews with the travelers, offered a stage for their reflections of the journey. From which O'Rourke presents their self-assured explanations of primitivism, evolution, and social development amongst other observations. These interviews with the tourists provide a revealing contrast to a fourth strategy, the closely framed interviews with individual local elders from the villages. The elders O'Rourke presents are critical of the behaviour of the tourists and of the inequality of their transactions. They confess to fabricating their performed rituals and a general lack

of understanding why the tourists are so fascinated by them, but also the frustration of having to bargain for the few dollars needed in order to buy clothing, general goods, and to educate their children.

O'Rourke reveals in the DVD director's commentary that he was only able to garner these candid interviews with the elders, who usually retreat when tourists arrive, because he made an additional trip to the villages, spending a week or two in each to converse with the local population in the pidgin tongue in which he was fluent. The commentary also reveals that although the film is edited together as one trip it is actually constructed from three separate journeys with three groups of tourists plus the additional journey to individual villages.

The weaving together of these four strategies results in a fascinating tapestry of conflicting perspectives and agendas. As O'Rourke intended, *Cannibal Tours* is an engaging exposé of the stereotypical tourist perspective in contrast to the often more intricate understanding of the tourists held by the subjects of attraction. O'Rourke remarks in the commentary that he hopes viewers interpret a kind of 'auto-critique' of his own complicity and position as filmmaker within the social disparity at play, and that he never felt superior to the tourists depicted. I think O'Rourke is very brave to rely on the disdain of viewers to be turned back on themselves once they reflect on their own complicity to the inequality being exploited, and to trust the audience to conclude we are all implicated in some way. Personally, I believe his expectations of viewers to do this is perhaps too ambitious, and his patent agenda can leave an unpleasant taste of manipulation.

Like many notable documentary filmmakers before him, O'Rourke resorts to encouraging a more 'fictional' interpretive frame. As he states in his notes *On the Making of 'Cannibal Tours'*:

However, in the context of my film, all of these real tourists are, in part, invented characters and they should not be vilified because of what they reveal *about us*. This can be understood by accepting that all my films are not so much 'documentary' but 'fiction', because they don't purport to be the objective truth.

In the act of first imagining a film and then photographing and editing it, all my subjects lose their authenticity as individuals and become manipulated characters in the drama that is created. The authenticity of the film - its 'truth' - is entirely subjective. (1999: 19)

In this provocative style of filmmaking, also demonstrated in *Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) and *Cunnamulla* (2000), O'Rourke relies on his shared provenance to varying degrees coming from the cultures he is critiquing to be granted a right or permission to be so critical - in other words his *right* to tell the story. However, often the characters he sets an example of, such as the wealthy tourist in *Cannibal Tours* or even himself in *Good Woman of Bangkok*, are so far removed from what the audience relate to, or perhaps through his unsympathetic portrayal of them, result in these films being readily perceived as exploitative or voyeuristic (see Jayamanne 1997).

Despite the contentious outcomes such personal instigations can lead to, O'Rourke's oeuvre reveals a postmodern boredom with the exotic 'other' and a corresponding estrangement of Western identities. Like Rouch or Taussig, O'Rourke jolts the nothingness through creative collaboration and experimentations with *culture*. Ultimately the personal provenance of his storytelling offers the space for the audience to determine the authenticity of his narratives for themselves. O'Rourke evidently extends the art of boredom to essentially being himself in the field, compelled to counsel his audience like all great storytellers.

Fieldwork



Figure 3.2 Celebrity cricket match in Colombo, 2010. Photo by Author.

From: Sharon Bell

Date: 24 May 2010 7:19:31 PM AEST

To: Aaron Burton

Dear Aaron,

All sounds good, including the drama of the monsoon!

A few practical tips:

- should be able to get Parmesan and any other 'pasta' accoutrements (including olives and anchovies) at any KEELS supermarket, but certainly the one at CRESCAT or the supermarket at Liberty Plaza. It was one of my regular staples at CRESCAT when I was just sick of curry.
- To add to your routine you might like to do a Sinhalese course. There's bound to be one on offer, and two months is a time that you can become quite proficient. You could contact Dr Karu Karunatilaka in the Sinhalese Dept at Kelaniya University. He's the guy who taught me Sinhala and wrote that textbook. Also the person I mentioned who arranges 'short stays' in

Buddhist monasteries. Sorry I don't have a phone number for him but the office may be able to help you get through on the phone.

- I have also been to a gym near there (near an oval) but at that time it wasn't air-conditioned! I think you will find that most gyms will give short term membership.
- Ask Ranjith to take you to the Social Scientists Association as they have a library and bookshop, and some interesting people and seminars (they will also know about legitimate Sinhala courses).
- May is the wettest month in the south-west so the rain will continue for a while, but should settle into a regular pattern, eg afternoons/evenings.

Make sure you give yourself sufficient 'creative space' in your routine, and don't let not keeping to your schedule be a source of anxiety AS OFTEN THERE IT IS SIMPLY OUT OF YOUR HANDS. Remember that EVERYTHING you do there is potentially a source of understanding and might possibly inform your creative work, so in one sense it is all legitimate work. In the field I was far too often riddled with guilt about 'not getting the work done' but I would have done better work if I had given myself more time for reflecting and being available for the mad things people wanted me to do.

The more profound question of what are you doing there has resonance. Educated Sri Lankans, with their Socialist/Marxist heritage have always had a love-hate relationship with foreigners. I was constantly quizzed (in quite a serious way) about why I thought I had the right to do research there. In Kanewala it was OK as they simply thought I was born Sinhala in a previous life. In Colombo it was about post-colonial appropriation and power. Perhaps your answer is: Many believed that my mother who is now getting old (vayasai -- Sinhala pronunciation) was born Sinhala in a previous life. I am here to investigate what that meant. It is an interesting translation of your 'provenance' research paradigm, and sets you outside what might be expected of a 'tropicalite'. The second observation is your journal and the question of audience. I'm not suggesting that you take anything down but that you consider whom the current and future audience(s) might be. Seems to me you write assuming the audience to be 'at home', but many of your new colleagues may well read your journal, if not now, then in the future. So just as you are sensitive to 'personal' narratives and how they might impact on the innocent, be mindful of 'professional' narratives/critiques and think about whether you would be comfortable for those you meet to read what you are writing, about them or their work. Dad and Karl are here in Melbourne with me for 10 days.

Much love

Shaz

Strategies

Unlike Sharon I didn't live in the village for two years as an immersed anthropologist. My base was in Colombo, in an 'annex' to a large house in Gregory's Road in the leafy suburb of Cinnamon Gardens (Colombo 7). By pure coincidence Sharon and Geoff at one point also rented an annex around the corner from my address. While I have no doubt that living in "The Village" like Sharon did would result in many fascinating insights and discoveries, it was an unnecessary and unreasonable prospect for my research for the following reasons: *The Sri Lanka Series* had provided the participants and themes which I would be pursuing and therefore I wasn't required to spend extensive periods ascertaining contacts (or for them to ascertain me); furthermore, Colombo is well located between the three communities and the most accessible place for transport - it was feasible to take a bus, three-wheeler, or taxi to any of the three villages; I was taking regular Sinhala classes at The British Council in Colombo; my research was set to be affiliated with the University of Colombo and I had arranged to conduct a postgraduate certificate course in Visual Ethnography & Social Documentary within the Department of Sociology which would require me to be on campus at least once a week;⁵⁶ lastly, unlike Sharon I was carrying expensive computers, hard drives, cameras, lenses, and projectors that required secure and dry storage. In addition to these logistic and technical reasons for staying in Colombo, my girlfriend at the time Tosca was able to live with me for three months to assist with filming and offer personal support, plus my father Geoff was also potentially living in Colombo for the year to shoot a feature film about Siddhartha the Buddha (which unfortunately collapsed in pre-production), hence finding a comfortable and suitable base in Colombo was the most appropriate solution.

My approach to recording and the shape of the final work was left open to experimentation throughout my stay in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, I required some strategies that I hoped would at least provide the foundations of a visual response to *The Sri Lanka Series* and provoke further discoveries to integrate and pursue.

⁵⁶ Unfortunately, upon finalising a budget and the advertising for my course, widespread academic strikes prevented administrative proceedings for the remainder of the year and we were unable to launch the program, nevertheless I conducted numerous workshops and screenings at the University of Colombo, Theertha, and at the University of Jaffna.

These initial strategies included: screening *The Sri Lanka Series* to my friends and colleagues in Colombo; meeting with original participants and recording their initial responses to reviewing the films; conducting interviews with the original participants and their offspring based on the same themes and issues; recording observational sequences of the participants' contemporary lives; lastly, undertaking community screenings of the films in each of the three villages. I thought it was important to record individual responses and interviews prior to undertaking any public screenings in the three villages to safe guard against potential community influence on participant responses.

Screening *The Sri Lanka Series*

Having become familiar with the shape of Sri Lankan documentary storytelling, I was interested to hear what my friends and colleagues in Colombo thought about *The Sri Lanka Series*. The overwhelming response from audiences was of gratitude, both to my parents for making the films and to me for sharing them. The screenings confirmed my suspicions that the observational approach is a very unique and rare style of filmmaking in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the films were remarked to be of particular historical significance because of the period they were made - during the drastic economic reforms of the 1970s and just prior to the civil war. With the recent end of the conflict in 2009, and the ambitious economic prospects of the current government by way of the Mahinda Chintana (Mahinda Vision) development plan, the late 1970s and the present day scenario mark similarly transformative periods in Sri Lanka's history.

Young women in the audiences were noticeably moved by the focus on women in the village and the candid and often humorous nature through which participants relay their family roles and responsibilities, which I gather largely remain taboo in contemporary social life. Prior to screening I was warned that feedback and questions would be politely reserved, and following one screening I received a phone call from a man from the audience firmly suggesting I continue to pursue feminist themes because in many ways the role and position of women had not progressed, remarks he must have felt uncomfortable voicing in the audience, and a position I would learn is shared by many of my Sri Lankan colleagues.

Particularly with audience members born in the 60s and 70s, for whom childhood is remembered amongst trees and dirt paths, there was a strong sense of nostalgia towards "those days" and the simplicity of village life. We discussed at length how the films represent a way of life that many people in the audience had traded for the opportunities of urban existence in Colombo. Even though the participants in the films vocalise the hardship and struggle of meeting daily needs, the relatively slow pace amid jungle surroundings sparks an acute nostalgia for the traditions of village existence. As Sasanka Perera explains, for the rapidly growing urban population in Sri Lanka, 'the village' remains a romanticized symbol of national pride; he writes:

It is a site of purity as opposed to the city, which is perceived as a site of decadence, corruption, commercialization and westernization. This simplicity and purity is supposed to be based on the villagers' strict adherence to Buddhist values and ethics. The repository of the country's undiluted traditions and customs is believed to be the village. In this scheme of things, rather than a dynamic living entity, the village is understood more as an unchanging cultural icon stuck in the mythic past. (2005: 117)

Correspondingly, the images in *Four Women* are lush and romantic; uniformed rubber trees drip latex at dawn, bare feet stroll down narrow dirt tracks, giggling harvesters lunch out of banana leaves, and a mother and daughter bathe in the setting sun from a fresh water well. The imagery in *Fishermen of Duwa* is even more utopic; endless stretches of golden sand, pristine waves gently slap the rhythmic boats, and hard bodies of singing fishermen glisten salt and sweat. Despite the imagery, in both instances the participants discuss how arduous and seemingly unsustainable their livelihoods are. Sharon has since expressed the difficulty of translating the reality of her experience in the village on to film:

In fact, one of the most significant challenges posed by the documentary film footage of this village in which close to half the population were struggling to subsist from day to day, was that the beauty of the natural environment translated on celluloid to a lush, tropical paradise, masking the economic poverty. (2004: 10)

Technical definitions aside, these 'villages' are now more akin to suburbs, sprawling from nearby urban centers. The majority of villagers commute daily to urban and industrial centres like Colombo, or to garment factories littered around the island, not to mention the significant portion working abroad as labourers or domestic workers, mostly in the Middle East.⁵⁷

I encountered a diverse range of opinions and perceptions of the 'village' and its significance to contemporary Sri Lankan culture. On an intellectual and academic level the mythologizing of the village is readily associated with post-independence nationalism and identity construction, as proposed by Perera (2005). However, outside of Colombo, on a conversational level many people I confronted expressed a fondness and affinity for their visibly continuing traditional way of life, and profess that despite some drastic transformations, many aspects, like the slow pace, knowing your neighbours, and temple rituals continue to remain unique to villages. Due to these conflicting accounts of 'the village' or even the potential 'death of the village' and its significance to Sri Lankan identity, I consciously incorporated the theme into my interviews and remained observant of how the contemporary physical environment contrasted with *The Sri Lanka Series*.

Re-screening *The Sri Lanka Series*

How my screening and interaction strategies panned out in the three villages didn't go exactly to plan but their unfolding was revealing of each community's unique social circumstances and a comparison between them presents interesting points of distinction.

I feel extremely fortunate to witness and influence the historical passage and materiality of *The Sri Lanka Series*. Because the films were originally shot on 16mm, while my parents did arrange public projections in each village at the time, it meant that many members of these communities and some of the participants had either not seen the films since they were produced or had not seen them at all.

⁵⁷ In 2005 around 800,000 Sri Lankans were working abroad, 90 per cent of them in the Middle East, sending home more than \$1 billion a year - more than one-fifth of total export earnings and more than one quarter of national savings (Peebles 2006: 147).

When Sharon and Geoff started production on *The Sri Lanka Series* it was clear the villagers had not been exposed to documentary films at all. When they attempted to discuss their filmmaking intentions people were perplexed as to how their simple peasant lives would translate into the cinema they were familiar with — primarily South Indian black and white dramas, screened at the local school, complete with casts whose ‘film star’ lives they followed in popular magazines. My parent’s addressed this dilemma in Kanewala by holding a number of documentary film nights at the Buddhist temple prayer hall. With the assistance of the Australian High Commission, providing a 16mm projector and documentaries from their library, the village of Kanewala was exposed to an eclectic range of what was available, from films about Sydney to Australian wildlife. Sharon recalls the most popular title was *Miao Year* (1968) by the late Professor Bill Geddes from the University of Sydney. The film depicts the traditional lifestyle of the Miao (or Hmong) people living in the northern hills region of Thailand. Mum recalls how the Kanewala audience was surprised to see that others lived a peasant existence akin to their own. They were also very impressed by the Thai craft skills, particularly the women’s complex weaving and needlework. When their own film, *Four Women* was completed in 1978 my mother and father held a 16mm screening at the temple, as I would do again in the same prayer hall thirty-three years later through a portable projector and DVD player.

Prior to leaving Australia I had the 16mm screening reels of *The Sri Lanka Series* telecined and was able to provide DVD copies of the films to the original participants and their families. While I didn’t appreciate it at the time, especially with those original participants and families my mother and father had lost contact with, having these DVDs were a passport back into their homes. The process would have been far more arduous and complicated if not for this object. In an effort to call attention to the material transgressions of *The Sri Lanka Series*, I recorded the initial re-screenings of the films in the participant’s usual DVD viewing environment such as living room, computer or neighbour’s house. The few instances there wasn’t an accessible screen or DVD player, or the space was too dark or unsuitable for my own video recording, we resorted to screening through

my laptop.

In Kanewala, the setting of *Four Women*, Chandrawathie and Priyanthi were given a VHS copy in the 1990s and were familiar with the film. Nevertheless they were incredibly grateful for the DVD and each time we pushed play the film would provoke laughter and renewed gossip. The first time I recorded the pair reviewing the film was on my laptop and Priyanthi was nursing her neighbour's toddler on her lap. Upon reviewing my footage I was concerned that the child would be misleadingly perceived as Priyanthi's so I asked if we could do it again, this time through the living room television and only with members of her direct family. The second take was much better, and Priyanthi's youngest daughter provided unprompted and revealing questions such as 'why are you walking mum?' as opposed to the driving and motorcycle riding she has been raised with.



Figure 3.3 Priyanthi and her family reviewing *Four Women* on DVD, 2011. Photo by Author.

Over two hundred people gathered for our public screening of *Four Women* at the Kanewala temple. When I arrived in the morning Priyanthi, her mother, and a neighbour were frantically packing 150 snack bags with bananas, cake, biscuits, and candy for the audience. In retrospect I should have filmed this and other preparations but I was too wrapped up in lending a hand and setting up the audiovisual equipment for the screening. It was a fun day and the audience was very thankful for the occasion. I had anticipated the opportunity following the film for voluntary personal responses to camera, but almost as soon as *Four Women* ended there was a power failure. We packed our things under the luminance of dancing mobile phones like a forest of fireflies as the audience retreated to their homes.

In Pelpitigoda, the location of *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance*, the protagonist Juse had died only a few years earlier. Priyanthi successfully tracked down one of his children, Vimalasiri. It was difficult to arrange a suitable time with Vimalasiri to meet and show him the film, and for a couple of months I didn't understand why he was always rescheduling. Finally, on the day we held a screening at his house most of the village had been informed to come along. Rather than an intimate screening, he must have wanted the entire family and neighbours to be there when the 'sudu-mahattaya' (literally 'white gentleman') arrived. Nevertheless, I complied with the crowded gathering and recorded Vimalasiri's reactions amongst all the others crowded around the family's 46-inch LG flat-screen television. At the end of the film tears of gratitude and trembling handshakes ensued, and Vimalasiri was honoured by the prospect of another movie.

I can't help but question whether I made a mistake in Duwa. At the early stages of discussing my intentions with the resident priest, Father Sisira - the church being the center of all village activity - I gave him a copy of *Fishermen of Duwa* on DVD. A couple of months later when I was trying to organise a community screening event, I was rebuffed by the response, 'Why would we do that when we all have copies on DVD?'. The disc I had given the priest had been duplicated and circulated throughout the entire village. Why indeed would they want a community screening and perform their emotions for my camera? What's more, I recently discovered

excerpts of *Fishermen of Duwa* uploaded onto YouTube and posted on the wall of the 'Duwa Passion Play' Facebook page. The notion of a 'community screening' has evidently assumed new dimensions.

Conversely, while I was interviewing Sister Magdaline, an incredibly compassionate nun from Duwa, she remembered a roll of film lying around somewhere. After disappearing for a few minutes in the back rooms of her convent in Colombo, she reappeared with a 16mm canister, an original print of *Fishermen of Duwa* that Sharon and Geoff had left with the church three decades ago. Despite my protesting she insisted I take it with me.

Irrespective of the re-invigorated material provenance of *Fishermen of Duwa*, Father Sisira was constantly circumspect about the idea of a public screening and ultimately prevented one from taking place. It took me a while to understand why but eventually I learnt of a long running rift in the community, between the East and West side of the village. Apparently there is a raft of intense ongoing disagreements surrounding a range of community issues, including: the ownership and storage of the miraculous Jesus puppet; the historical dating of the church and whether it should be celebrating its 125th or 150th anniversary; annual fish market stall position allocations, which are owned and leased through auction by the church; and divisions regarding who plays what role in the annual Passion Play. Father Sisira told me that in order to resolve the dispute over the play, in 2010 the church board decided to give all the acting to a younger generation for the first time, the agreement being that once a performer is married they can no longer star in the production. Understandably, one section of the community wishes to embrace roles handed down through generations whereas others are interested in a more democratic production model. Father Sisira didn't approve a screening of the film because he thought it would inflame arguments. He explained how the community had previously become violent about the play, even causing priests to abandon the parish. He pulled out a copy of a letter from a serving priest in the 1800s outlining how volatile the community was even then, particularly regarding the play. He then produced a list of all the priests that had served the Duwa parish and their length of service, pointing out that most priests only stayed one or two

years, many only lasting a few months. I got the impression he was undertaking this investigation as a response to stresses he was currently negotiating and re-considering his own future in Duwa. The priest's concerns became a reality later that year when a violent confrontation compelled him to close the church doors and cancel nightly masses. He moved residence to a neighbouring parish, leaving the faithful Duwa women kneeled in prayer around the church grounds. Its doors remained locked for more than three months.

When I relayed the Duwa community disputes to my mother and father, they responded with surprise that they had forgotten all about the tension. They recalled at the time they were filming they were very aware of the quarreling and had consciously decided not to incorporate it into the story they were telling. Moreover, mum and dad suggested that because they decided not to incorporate the altercations into their film they had somehow lost significance over time, in other words *The Sri Lanka Series* had shaped their memories. Ethically, I was also unsure if I should pursue the ongoing conflicts in my filming. Nobody in Duwa wanted to talk about it, and especially not to camera. I felt such a pursuit could easily sacrifice trust and slip into exploitative storytelling. I came to the conclusion that any significant disagreement or debate will have the opportunity to surface through recorded conversations and observational filming without my probing, or they will simply exist elsewhere (or at least here) as another story.

I have been very fortunate in the friendships my parents forged with all the participants of their films. Of the living participants of *The Sri Lanka Series* all unhesitatingly agreed to participate in my project. It was the next generation who had never seen the film or were too small to remember, who were more cautious of my intentions. I was certain that after watching the old films they would be eager to participate in a contemporary sequel, but there was evidently a slight discomfort in my request to record them watching the films for the first time.

While Simon Vaas had since passed away, the other two fishermen featured in *Fishermen of Duwa*, Nimal Kurera and Christy Fernando were more than happy to be involved - constantly sharing fond memories of their times with Sharon and

Geoff. I met the son of Christy Fernando, Chrishanth, after he finished work for beer and hoppers at The Summer Garden restaurant in Colombo. I was keen to spend more time with him socially in order to get to know one another and discuss what we could do with the filming. He must have had the same idea, tactfully bringing a stocky business minded friend along to interrogate my intentions; who was I making the film for? Where will it be screened? And most importantly, how much money will I make from it?

I was in a prime position to be frank; my film is being produced as university research, I am an independent filmmaker with relatively little money and little interest in employing template narratives typical of television broadcasting, and while I did hope the completed picture would tour the world and collect a fortune of awards and launch a successful career, the reality I predicted would be much humbler. This was hardly the occasion to unleash a Participant Consent Form, but it is worth noting as a requirement of my academic program the human ethics application comprehensively accounts for potential exploitation and at any point the participant is able to withdraw their consent. Lion Lager and pork curry, however, provide a more fluid way of negotiation, and by the end of a cheerful evening our collaboration promised to be equitable and enjoyable.

The challenge of arranging individual screenings and interviews in Duwa was revealing of how the lives of the original participants had transformed, not just through their offspring. One final anecdote from my time in Duwa highlights how village life has changed since my parents' films and suggests that, as Benjamin predicted, boredom is disappearing from the villages too. Since his early ventures in the net fishing trade which he inherited from his father, as illustrated in *Fishermen of Duwa*, Nimal went on to shape a successful career in political life. When I arranged to check some of the material I planned to use from the interview we had recorded together, he was stern and forthright with the time we would meet, he was a busy man and had business to attend to. Public transport is unpredictable in Colombo and while I was on my way on the bus from Colombo I called to mention I might be ten minutes late. For the remainder of the bus ride he must have called back three times to impatiently check where I was. He picked

me up from the bus depot ten minutes later than our pre-arranged arrival time. He seemed visibly agitated by my lateness and proceeded to ask how long we needed. I apologized and insisted we wouldn't need long. Ten minutes later I had his approval for the scenes I wanted to use and was out of his hair. Christy Fernando's wife lives next door to Nimal and I had arranged to meet Christy there after my meeting with Nimal. Following my hasty engagement I wandered over and was invited to sit in their yard under the shade of coconut palms to wait for Christy to arrive. A few moments later Nimal appeared from his front door. He had shed his business attire and was now only brandishing a sarong. He strolled over to where I was sitting, pulled up a chair, unfolded the weekend newspaper, and proceeded to relax. 'Weren't you heading north for business?' I asked, 'No, not today' he replied. He then insisted I ring Christy to find out why he was running so late. They were still 30 or 40 minutes away. Nimal sighed and tut-tutted, immersed himself in the news while I became captivated by a series of dung beetles collecting poo and rolling their prized orbs around the periphery of our otherwise uneventful space. When Christy and his son arrived they apologised profusely for being late, 'caught up with other business' they professed. I said I didn't mind at all and relayed how I was captivated by the beetles collecting shit. I expected them to laugh it off and dismiss the dung activity as something they were accustomed to. Christy however turned to me quite excitedly and said yes they used to sit and watch them for hours when they were fishing on the beach camps in the 1970s. The time for boredom, which once belonged to the dung beetle, seems to have rolled away.

Interviews and Observations

In addition to re-screening the *Sri Lanka Series*, other strategies I pursued with the participants included recording individual interviews and observational sequences of daily life. I was studying Sinhala at The British Council, and by the time we were recording interviews I was able to understand basic conversation but was certainly not competent enough to conduct the interviews myself, as Sharon did. Priyanthi had embraced her role as Sinhala interpreter and mediator, perhaps following in my mother's footsteps. However, a revealing development with the ensuing generations of Sri Lankans is their ability to speak and understand English,

and on occasions participants were fluent and comfortable I was able to conduct the interviews myself.

Priyanthi and I reviewed *The Sri Lanka Series* together in order to ascertain an appropriate tone and pacing for the interviews, in addition to isolating key themes that ought to be prompted if the pre-formulated questions failed to stimulate a comprehensive response. Most of the questions we asked corresponded directly to those asked by my mother in the original films or concerned the same topics raised through her narration. In addition to these individually tailored questions were a series of generic questions for all participants, concerning: memories from their time with Sharon and Geoff and their impressions of the film they starred in; how living conditions, employment, and family life had altered since then; observations on how their particular village had changed over the last three decades; in addition to any personal ramifications of the civil war and impacts of the 2004 tsunami.



Figure 3.4 Priyanthi conducting an interview with Mala for *My Mother's Village*, 2011. Photo by Author.

Once again Priyanthi's role as interviewer and interpreter cannot be understated. After conducting a few interviews it was clear how comfortable and honest the responses were to her questioning. At first I associated this partly to her being a woman, that is, being able to relate to the other women being interviewed and also being non-threatening to males, which to a degree I had also attributed to the candid responses Sharon prompted in *The Sri Lanka Series*. Reflecting on our encounters with participants, and the general discussions between Priyanthi and the interviewee, I realise the more significant affinity she shared with them was their relationships with Sharon and Geoff. Initial meetings often began by way of cheerfully recounting their families' participation in the films. I can only speculate, but I imagine if I employed a professional interpreter this shared provenance would have been lost and responses from participants consequently more guarded. As Priyanthi and I toured between the three communities together there was a palpable feeling of being engaged in a collective exercise, of revisiting shared experiences and collaboratively producing a contemporary response.

As previously mentioned, one of the more difficult challenges that arose from not living in the communities was organising specific times or days that I could spend with participants. Unlike Sharon's lead of the anthropologist living in the field installed as a 'semi-permanent guest', I often found myself on the phone arranging activities and suitable hours to record, occasionally protesting 'I don't mind if it will be boring, I would like to come along'. Mrs Hettiarachchi for instance, one of the original *Four Women* featured as the well-to-do wife of the local Member of Parliament, due to her husband's busy post-political life with charities and social engagements was challenging to arrange time together. Because it was known that I would be there for the entire year, participants would often suggest a later date - a habit my friends would joke as not uncommon on the island regarding any activity. But it was the lack of 'activity' I was chasing, the nesting places intimately associated with *boredom*, 'the apogee of mental relaxation' (1968: 91), as Benjamin argued essential to the art of storytelling. I was compelled to question if my lack of presence in the "field" denied this space, or if the "field" itself had witnessed the extinction of activities associated with boredom, that is, the "busyness" of the city now plagued the village too.

Impurities and Significant Others

In response to Sharon's frustration with her films making no reference to her 'lived experience' in the field, I felt it was important to incorporate my personal experiences into the narrative of *My Mother's Village*. Admittedly, my sojourn in Sri Lanka was half the duration of Sharon's and in seemingly far greater comfort. While at times I could sympathise with her intense loneliness and anxiety, unlike her I managed to avoid dengue and filariasis, my house had electricity and running water, Internet, television, and mobile phones, and I wasn't faced with having to adopt an asexual persona in the interests of 'anthropological integrity' (see Bell 2009: 256). While my fieldwork might sound like a "cop-out", and was the cause of much anxiety that I wasn't doing the "real thing", I only had to look around at the lives of the participants to realise that they no longer lived in those conditions either. All the houses I visited had electricity and running water, computers and televisions, they slept in beds under fans and mosquito nets, drove to work and no longer bathed in a well. Apart from my address in a relatively expensive suburb of Colombo (and occasional indulgence in Parmesan cheese), our daily lives were not very different. Perhaps the most striking development between my experience in the "field" and Sharon's is that most of the Sri Lankan participants of *My Mother's Village* are also my 'Friends' on Facebook.

That said, I feel I experienced my share of 'impurities of the field'. For instance the pervasive heat that would coat my body in a viscid film of perspiration threatening to flood if too much movement were enacted, and my poor cameras that would simply conk out in the sun - understandably why the English term "upset" is used in colloquial Sinhala to describe a faulty mechanical device or broken down vehicle. Or crawling in traffic for hours if I made the mistake of leaving home at the beginning of school time, end of school time, or during after-work peak hour - basically anytime spent on the road except between midnight and 4am. Enjoying evenings of debauchery with friends, singing in sarongs or dancing through the night to electronic music on the beach. Noticing my taste buds craving hotter and hotter curries as each serve passed through my fingertips. And the day I woke to my face swollen like a pumpkin, remaining inflated for seven days, to which doctors shrugged their shoulders, an allergy perhaps. Or the frequent discomfort

of being a 'tropicalite', finding myself in the company of expatriate kin developing boutique hotels around the island as though they are the only ones selling paradise, while my professional Sri Lankan colleagues are forced to queue on the curbside and have their fingerprints taken when applying for a visa to visit Australia. It was these kinds of 'impurities' that Sharon had suggested are not only culturally significant in themselves, but are stories of incorporation, of at least attempting to cross the bridge from 'other' to being 'one of them' (2004: 11).

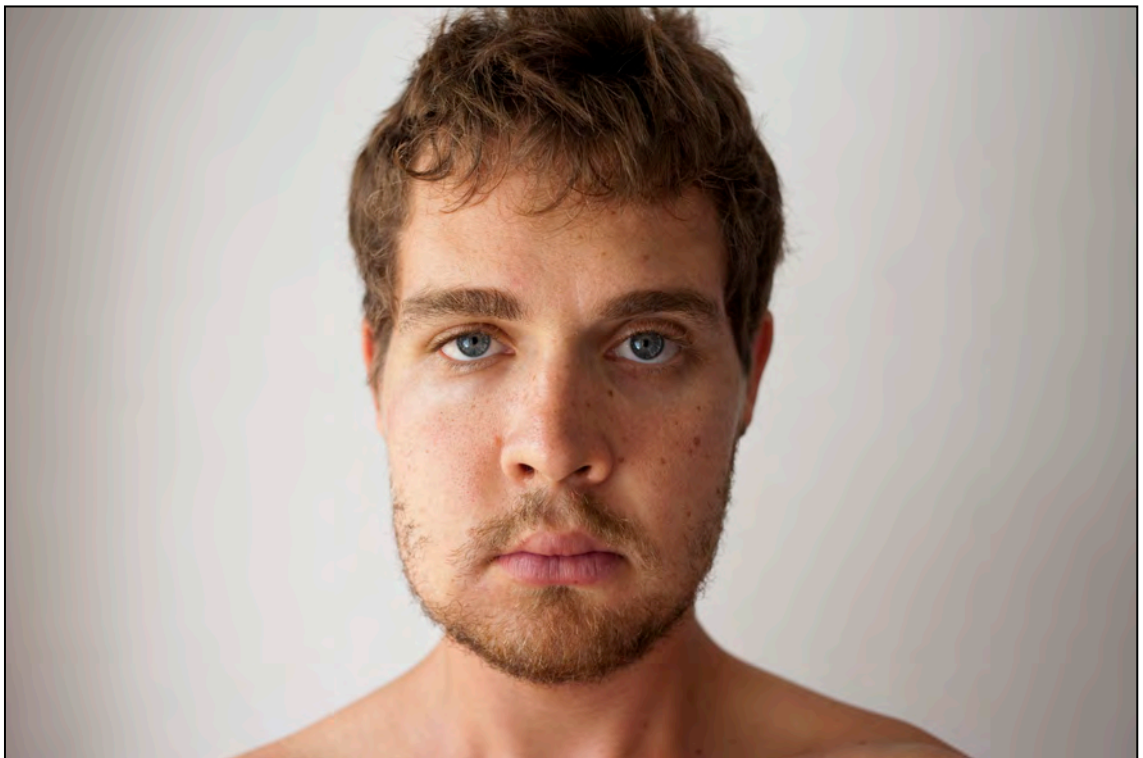


Figure 3.5 An 'impurity of the field' - waking up to my face swollen, cause remains unknown, 2011. Photo by Author.

Like Sharon, I also came to appreciate the role of 'Significant Others'. Those incredible companions that teach, comfort, and have fun. Rendering the notion of "fieldwork" a construct. Many of my mother's friends such as Ranjith Perera and the Abeysekera family offered invaluable companionship, support, and the tastiest home cooked rice and curry. I also forged my own significant others through intense friendships with the Theertha artists, Nalinda and Natasha at the Social

Scientists Association, and a motley crew of once a week tennis partners. Not to mention my spirited girlfriend at the time Tosca who put up with me for three months in Colombo, and then having to deal with her absence for the remainder of my stay. An excerpt from my journal reads:

Tosca just burst into my 'office' in her climate-adjusted apparel of Bonds undies and nothing else but a pair of earphones, the chord running down her body to the iPod-mini stashed by her bum. I tell her about my desire of capturing her presence here. I try to explain how I believe one of the most interesting elements to ethnographic research and social documentary is the personal story too often locked away in private journals. I tell her that I wish I could capture my feelings for her on video, her beauty, humour, and personality. I tell her that I'm not even sure if I would use any of the footage or incorporate it into the final film, and that my main concern is being ethical towards the other 'participants' and their stories. She says I better start filming because I'll need to have enough material to build her character even if she doesn't make the final cut. We agree my new video camera is too often locked away and only brought out at orchestrated events, and that we ought to have it lying around to capture impromptu moments. Perhaps it will be her absence in a couple of months I end up recording.

How to address lived experiences in order to provide texture and honesty to my depiction of "the field" was a matter of constant experimentation. The challenge was also in anticipating how any visuals would sit alongside footage of key participants and their respective stories. In response to this dilemma I was deeply inspired by the structure, imagery, and literary diversity in Michael Ondaatje's memoir *Running In The Family* (1984).

Running In The Family is divided into seven sections, each exploring different periods or individual characters of his family. I was attracted to the alternating styles and literary techniques of each chapter. Some chapters engage reflectively with events that brought Ondaatje to that topic or theme, such as the first chapter, 'Asia', when recounting his farewell party in England, he summarises the intentions of his journey, 'In my mid-thirties I realised I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood' (1984: 22). Most of the chapters are

presented as a kind of first person oral history, coming across either very well researched or elaborately made-up. Then there are the less uniform chapters consisting of poetry, lyrical prose, conversations, and direct quotes from his family. Ultimately it is the combination of these eclectic forms that I'm interested in. I feel I am involved in a comparable personal journey to Ondaatje, with a completely different background and family history of course, but the alternating modes of expression he draws upon seem to accurately portray the diversity of experiences and relationships confronted on such personal endeavours. The structure of *Running in the Family* inspired me to attempt a combination of similarly diverse forms in video and photographic sequences.

One of the more readily translatable features of *Running in the Family* into the cinematic are his incredibly evocative and lyrical sequences of imagery, such as in the chapters titled 'Monsoon Notebook':

[...] Have seen the outline of a large fish caught and thrown in the curl of a wave, been where nobody wears socks, where you wash your feet before you go to bed, where I watch my sister who alternatively reminds me of my father, mother and brother. Driven through rainstorms that flood the streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate, where sweat falls in the path of this ballpoint, where the jak fruit rolls across your feet in the back of the jeep, where there are eighteen ways of describing the smell of durian, where bullocks hold up traffic and steam after the rains.

(1984: 69)

These details compel me to photograph my surrounding environment in a similarly nuanced and macro approach. Ondaatje's sequences of imagery appear as photographs in my mind, cutting rapidly from one to another like a slideshow, with similarly diverse sound bytes fading between them. The use of still photographs could capture the diversity of significant individuals, encounters, and experiences without demanding the string of narrative interpretation that moving images expect. A series of such montage sequences could be intercut throughout *My Mother's Village*, emphasising the unique textures of the personal journey.

Personal Camera

Conflicting with the disparate imagery offered by Ondaatje, a personal photographic "voice" or aesthetics arguably demands a consistent treatment throughout the narrative. As a visual artist I don't profess to having developed a stylistic signature or "lick" to my creative work but there are certainly tropes and techniques I brought to recording *My Mother's Village* along with recurring themes that steadily strengthened throughout the year. These include, for instance, literally including my hand within the frame and calling attention to a corporeality in personal documentary filming reminiscent of Vertov's 'Kino-Glaz' (Camera Eye). Not to be confused with Point Of View (POV) camera angles inherent to still photographs and shoulder mounted motion cameras, handholding a video camera generally around waist height - encouraged by the development of flip-out viewing screens and handles - calls attention to the mechanical device at work. This distinctive digital video aesthetic provides a unique corporeal perspective as an extension rather than substitution of the photographer's eyes.



Figure 3.6 Utilising the camera handle and flip-out screen to record artist Jagath Pitigala, 2011.

Photo by Preeman Rathnayaka.

Emphasis on the personal in both material and creative provenance extends to all the media I collated during my fieldwork. This includes still photographs from my digital SLR and audio from a portable Edirol WAV/MP3 recorder. Editing, post-production manipulation and mastering on my computer are also expressive of my personal experience, and maintain a personal provenance throughout my storytelling. As auteur theory has demonstrated, consistent aesthetic treatment helps establish 'trust' in the storyteller, and is crucial to the interpretation and authenticity of what is being shared, beyond and between the storytelling event.

Two of the more pronounced recurring motifs in my video recording respond to personal memories and psychological connections to Sri Lanka. After six months of living on the island, I often found myself grasping for melancholic childhood recollections; when climbing into a 'three-wheeler' was the beginning of a magical ride and colonial hotels were majestic receptacles from another world. I urged myself to become excited again, and somehow frame my perspective through that lens. Hence, I was constantly recording travel - in three-wheelers, on buses, in taxis, and rattling along train lines. I anticipated the narrative of *My Mother's Village* to jump between the three villages, and saw the opportunity to imbue transitions with a sense of the physical journey and landscape, hoping to elicit the excitement and fascination I remember as a child.

Another recurring theme worth mentioning emanated from missing my Cocker Spaniel in Australia, and my penchant for dogs. Despite my fondness for the animal, dogs have a visible presence in Sri Lanka, and I think their overall good health on the island is reflective of a host of cultural qualities such as a governing Buddhist and Hindu kindness towards other living creatures, in addition to a more peculiar awareness and health care of animals, perhaps an extension of an overly thorough medical system for humans. I feel the health of street dogs in particular reflects the health and philosophy of the population. I thought combining the personal camera perspective with my chance encounters with dogs would develop my personality on screen and isolate physical interaction with real locations in time.

Section IV Post-production

Inner-boredom and the sanctuary

If boredom is necessary to the art of storytelling, as Benjamin suggests, yet has all but disappeared from our short-of-time existence, is it by coincidence then that contemporary spaces and contexts for contemporary documentary storytelling do their utmost to achieve nothingness? Reflecting on how to display and distribute *My Mother's Village*, my hypothesis is that gallery exhibitions and cinematic screenings offer a comparable time and space to the verandahs and pastures Benjamin evokes as his 'nesting places' of boredom essential for the storyteller.

The blank white walls on which documentary photographs are hung, or the antithesis void of a black cube for video installations have come to represent a distinctive neutrality for contemporary art to rupture. Even the hollow cinema halls, that once mimicked the extravagant ornamentation of rococo opera theatres, now furnish their interiors with vacuous sound buffering materials pierced by one or two virescent glowing 'exit' signs. I want to wrap up the analogy of personal documentary as a hybrid amalgamation of Benjamin's 'storyteller' and 'work of art' by considering the locations and events in which we encounter personal documentary, specifically, art exhibitions and film festivals. Distinct from the sacred churches and museums Benjamin would have navigated in the early 20th century, devoid of gilt frames and religious fervor, convergent forms of ethnography, documentary, and photography are found in these blank spaces. *Documenta 11* in 2002, curated by Okwui Enwezor, is perhaps the most pronounced turning point of converging forms of documentary storytelling being incorporated into the contemporary art context. Curatorial themes of globalization and post-colonialism, in other words a deeply political provenance, lent themselves to an anecdotal estimate of 600 hours of largely documentary based video work being displayed (Heartney 2002). In his introductory essay to the Whitechapel Gallery *Documents of Contemporary Art Documentary* volume, 'Contentious Relations: Art and Documentary' (2013), Julian Stallabrass explains:

As artists from nations outside of the US and Western Europe came to prominence, they often brought with them distinct political positions and perspectives that were quite alien from those of the old art world centres. They were also often obliged to perform their nationality through reference to politics (so Chinese artists regularly refer to censorship, Indian artists to sectarian violence, and Russian artists to the communist past). (2013: 12)

In addition to the focus on globalisation in contemporary art, Stallabrass reiterates that increased access to high-quality recording technology, and the unstable politics of representation since 9/11, have encouraged a resurgence of critical documentary modes of storytelling (2013: 12). Since Enwezor's pivotal curatorship in 2002, it is rare for any contemporary large-scale survey art exhibition not to include documentary modes of storytelling. All of the projects I have so far discussed have at some point been displayed in art galleries or associated cinemateques.

Boredom abounds not only in the viewing infrastructure but also within the screening event, in the transmission and residues of light and the warm imprints left behind by previous audiences and participants. Hiroshi Sugimoto's study of entire movies exposed in single photographic frames, *Theaters* (2006), encapsulates cinematic transmission. His black and white photographs of lavish and distinctive movie theatres across North America call attention to the congregation of empty seats staring blankly at the effusion of an entire movie, inscribed into the silver halides of Sugimoto's negatives as one frozen moment. A statement from his website outlines his method:

Dressed up as a tourist, I walked into a cheap cinema in the East Village with a large-format camera. As soon as the movie started, I fixed the shutter at a wide-open aperture, and two hours later when the movie finished, I clicked the shutter closed. That evening, I developed the film, and the vision exploded behind my eyes.⁵⁸

'Dressed up as a tourist' to disguise his intentions of "business" behind an effective veneer of harmless touristic boredom, consequently, Sugimoto's images reflect the

⁵⁸ <http://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/theater.html> (accessed 02 July 2012)

cinematic storytelling event. By the viewer not being there and physically experiencing the narrative his images capture an indeterminate echo throughout the hollow chambers. To sit in a theatre and watch a film for an hour or two might be as close as many of us come to the kind of passive state Benjamin perceived as integral to storytelling.



Figure 4.1 Sugimoto, H. 1980, *Movie Theatre - Akron Civic, Ohio*, Silver Gelatin Print, held at C4 Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Sugimoto's images extend beyond the empty space to demonstrate how the cinematic image literally pierces the viewer, physically overwhelming the emulsion of his negatives to produce 'bleeding' and 'over-exposed' screens, or in Sugimoto's terms a vision that explodes behind your eyes. Numerous film theorists have expanded on the material provenance of cinematic transmission. Laura Marks for instance, develops a notion of 'the skin of the film' (2000). In her book of the same name, she explores the way 'intercultural cinema' signifies through its materiality, or corporeality, through a contact between perceiver and object represented (2000: xi). Marks refers to the tactility of the film in a physical sense, the significance of its circulation and collective propriety, and in a figurative sense

draws on Benjamin's ideas of mimesis and what she terms 'haptic visuality'; 'as though one were touching a film with one's eyes' (2000: xii).

A similar phenomenological interpretation of cinema, although not limited to intercultural transactions, has also been outlined by Vivian Sobchack:

Thus, the film experience is a system of communication based on bodily perception as a vehicle of conscious expression. It entails the visible, audible, kinetic aspects of sensible experience to make sense visibly, audibly, and haptically. The film experience not only *represents* and reflects upon the prior direct perceptual experience of the filmmaker *by means* of the modes and structures of direct and reflective perceptual experience, but also *presents* the direct and reflective experience of a perceptual and expressive existence *as* the film. (1992: 41)

Whilst I consider this kind of phenomenological interpretation to understate the profilmic event, in particular the interaction between the filmmaker and participant, both Sobchack and Marks' theses provide valuable insights into the proprietorial role of the audience to cinematic and intercultural storytelling, as Marks explains:

[A]s well as bearing meanings to the audience, these works receive impressions from the people who have seen them. Intercultural cinema builds up these impressions like a palimpsest and passes them on to other audiences. The very circulation of a film among different viewers is like a series of skin contacts that leave mutual traces. (2000: xii)

To consider film as a palimpsest offers profound implications for the significance of provenance. The moving image thus becomes subjected to a valuation more akin to a work of fine art; in which galleries it has been hung, in what collections it has inhabited, how it is framed or installed, and of course its market evaluation. An investigation into the provenance of a work of personal documentary reveals the idiosyncratic processes and life circumstances that shape the work and its meaning.

Returning to Benjamin, the cinematic object possesses an aura akin to the work of art. Marks contends that cinema is not only empowered by human audiences and production processes, but the aura of recording retains the presence of objects.

Remarking on Benjamin's resistance of letting go to the power of objects, Marks observes, 'Aura is the sense an object gives that it can speak to us of the past, without ever letting us completely decipher it' (2000: 81). The same indecipherable aura shines through Sugimoto's movie theatres. In contemporary storytelling it is not only the potter that leaves their prints on the clay but audiences also leave their mark in a mode of production and provenance that resists finality.

Authentic white cube

At the turn of the 21st century The Düsseldorf School of photographers were the forerunners of creating conceptually and physically innovative photographic responses to the 'white cube' gallery space. As Parr and Badger note, throughout the twentieth century photography exhibitions and fine prints were usually considered an afterthought to publication, but Bernd and Hilla Becher's typological images of industrial buildings, conceived with the gallery space in mind, signaled a shift in the nature of photography as contemporary art (2006: 262). Their students, consisting of some of the most influential and renowned photographers today, such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, and Candida Höfer, have continued the Düsseldorf philosophy by producing larger and larger prints to compete with other art forms and by conceptually turning photography on itself. Engaging directly with the significance of provenance to the authenticity of their works, as Parr and Badger point out, these photo-artists recognise the importance of publishing individual photobooks, even as catalogues, to function as a series and accumulate meaning as a group (2006: 262).

From Thomas Ruff's deadpan composite portraits or his blurred extractions from pornographic films, to Andreas Gursky's epically scaled scenes of barren landscapes, dance concerts, or supermarket shelves, or the visual interrogation of archives and museum spaces by Candida Höfer and Thomas Struth, nowhere in contemporary modes of storytelling could boredom be more abundant. In 2011, one of Andreas Gursky's most mundane landscapes, the 80 x 140 inch C-print *Rhine II* (1999) sold for US\$4.3 million at a Christie's auction in New York, setting a new record for a single photograph. What's more, the image had been digitally

manipulated to remove intrusive elements such as buildings on the horizon, or straightening geometric lines, and manicuring the body of water. Gursky digitally modifies his images to make them more banal and nondescript in their epic nothingness.

A hyperlink in an article about the record sale of *Rhine II* in *The Guardian*, 'Sum paid for sludge image of desolate, featureless landscape sets new world record for a photograph',⁵⁹ has led me to a Vimeo upload titled *Ben Lewis - Gursky World* by 'TofuTasties'.⁶⁰ The vibrant art critic Ben Lewis is conversing with Gursky at his printer's studio. Speaking in German the subtitles read:

BL: What do the Düsseldorf photographers have in common?

AG: Above all, they have a very neutral approach to their subjects.
Their pictures are always totally objective.

BL: And why is it art to be objective?

AG: Precisely because it is not art. That is the whole point.
First you have to learn how to see. Reality is so multi-layered and complex... that when you're looking with your eyes, it doesn't mean you're seeing...
Yeah...
[Laugh]

⁵⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/nov/11/andreas-gursky-rhine-ii-photograph> (accessed 01 July 2012)

⁶⁰ <http://vimeo.com/17692722> (accessed 01 July 2012), actual documentary title is *The Art Show*, season 1, episode 1, 'Gursky World' (2002)



Figure 4.2 Gursky, A. 1999, *The Rhine II*, Chromogenic Colour Print, held in the Tate Collection, London.

Gursky and his Düsseldorf school colleagues achieve "objectivity" because the subjects of their images are rendered anonymous, stripped of individuality. As Lewis explains in his short documentary, Düsseldorf images undermine all the qualities that have traditionally been glorified in photography. They utilise flat lighting, vast subject distances, and trivialize Cartier-Bresson's "decisive moment" through repetition, compositing multiple images, emotionless expressions, and enormous prints. Even Thomas Ruff's *Portraits* series (1986-), featuring passport like images taken with a 9 x 12 cm negative and printed to over two metres in length achieve anonymity of the sitters through their blank expressions and repetition within the series. The ongoing *Portrait* project evolved into composite images that effectively eradicate the photographed individual's presence. Removed of all subjectivities apart from the author's utterance, the Düsseldorf images become conceptual objects, or artefacts, ready to be consumed by viewers and the art market alike.

In the aesthetics of boredom presented by the Düsseldorf School of photography Walter Benjamin's theory of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction comes full circle. Thomas Struth's *Museum Photographs* ironically examines the phenomenon of looking at art in barren gallery spaces but also calls attention to

the transformation of churches and once venerated sites having been stripped of aura through their "museumification". Moreover, Struth's isolation of specific artworks and locations arguably reaches beyond a phenomenology of art consumption to reinvest "aura" into the artworks being scrutinized. *Museum Photographs* relays a story of the fetishization of art in museums and galleries destroying their aura, but placed within Struth's frame, the overwhelming influence of tourism, of art pilgrimages, consumerism, crowds and distracting behaviour - punters seeking boredom no doubt - can be contemplatively removed from the original artworks and their authenticity reconsidered. As Parr and Badger explain:

Most people experience 'painting' through photographic reproductions. Now those who have taken the trouble to seek out the originals have themselves become, along with these highly priced and talismanic artifacts, the subject of further photographic reproduction. Furthermore, this photographic representation is made by a leading light in the group of artists who are regarded as having replaced painting with their photographic works. This 'reproduction' will itself be hung in a museum, to be gazed at reverentially by future streams of visitors. (2006: 272)

Like the masterworks on display Struth's images also become fetishized. While most of the museum visitors in his photographs would be able to afford a copy of Struth's book, if it is a first edition and signed by the artist, such a rare material provenance would demonstrate a similar degree of authenticity as an 'original' print (2006: 264).

A Google search for Thomas Struth's 'Museum Photographs' leads me to another Vimeo link, *Thomas Struth//Museum Photographs*, by 'haveanicebook'. The video camera is locked-off above the hardcopy book and in three minutes twenty-six seconds a pair of tattooed arms reach into the frame and systematically turn through every page of the hardcover publication. The soundtrack is a grungy folk-rock track that fails to complement the images but is readily turned off. Through my computer screen I watch an embedded video window of the turning pages of a book featuring photographic images of people viewing original artworks in museums. In other words, I am presented with the work of art in the age of electronic reproduction.

Authentic black cube

The nature of the moving image, inextricably bound to temporality, resists the kind of objectification explored by the Düsseldorf School. Within the contemporary black cube gallery space, video-art relentlessly struggles to undermine the hierarchical segmentation of conventional motion storytelling, often 'looping' impractical and unorthodox durations.⁶¹ In 1993 artist Douglas Gordon slowed Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Psycho* (1960) to approximately two frames per second to create *24 Hour Psycho*. This year Sydney was treated to Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010), a 24-hour montage of scenes relating to time from a diverse catalogue from the history of cinema. *The Clock* debuted at London's White Cube gallery in 2010 and the following year was awarded the Golden Lion at the 2011 Venice Biennale. Displayed in the new wing of the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), each time I went to view *The Clock* I stayed for up to an hour or so, until I became too bored or perhaps anxious about the time ticking outside.

Video-art loops are frequently metamorphosed into objects of a different nature in order to satisfy the art market and enrich the pedigree of the producer. I recently sought out the private gallery Roslyn Oxley9 in the back streets of Paddington in Sydney to view the single screen translation of Isaac Julien's installation *Ten Thousand Waves*, which premiered at the 2010 Biennale of Sydney. I recall being mesmerised by the nine large screens strategically placed throughout a sweeping low ceiling space on Cockatoo Island for the biennale. I recall stunning images of a Shanghai skyline at dawn, a beautiful Chinese woman idly gazing out from a minimalist styled high-rise apartment, the leaping back in time to a Chinese street scene on board a moving tram, and the recurring images of water, in England, China, past and present.

⁶¹ Although traditionally limited to academic screening rooms, ethnographic film has also occasionally demonstrated a disregard of conventional film durations - for example Ian Dunlop's 7-hour long *Towards Baruya Manhood* (1972) that was later segmented into nine films, or David MacDougall's more recent 185-minute film *Gandhi's Children* (2008).

It was raining when I reached Roslyn Oxley9 gallery. The single screen version of Julien's project runs for 55 minutes, when I arrived it was 10 minutes into a loop so I decided to wander around and come back to view the 'piece' from start to finish. This provided time to reflect on the huge 'film still' photographic prints also featured in the exhibition.

There were three very large panel images at roughly 2 metres high and 4 to 5 metres long. Rich ultra gloss coating and vibrant silky colours were tantalising to navigate. These larger artworks carried a price tag of £55,000 each. Two of the three smaller prints were £33,000 each and the smallest image, at £22,000, was 120 by 160 centimetres. The smallest print had two red dots next to it. It is an edition of ten, the others editions of six. I notice the DVD of the single channel film, *Better Life, (Ten Thousand Waves II)*, is also for sale at £50,000 for an edition of ten. These price tags seem significant for multiple edition photographic prints, but in comparison to other fine art forms, or cinema budgets, they are significantly inferior. I imagine the large prints furnishing foyers in high-rise buildings. The video, I'm not so sure about. I'm also confused about where the images sit in relation to the original artwork. Is it a fund raising exercise to support the artist? Or do they in some way attest to the authenticity of the story being told? In the same manner photographic contact sheets or conventional 'film stills' might.

The photocopied catalogue leaflet provides the usual requirements in considering the provenance of an artist: two pages of solo and group exhibitions (since 2000), a selective list of major works, distinguished collections constituent to, a short biography in prose form, and a statement about the exhibited work.

The artwork statement speaks directly to the authenticity of the story, outlining the inspiration of *Ten Thousand Waves* in the Morecambe Bay tragedy, Northern England in 2004, in which 23 Chinese cockle-pickers died:

In successive years, Julien spent time in China slowly coming to understand the country and developing relationships that have enabled him to undertake the rich and multifaceted work. Through conversations with academics, curators, and artists, Julien uncovered a

symbolic body of material to create a work that explores modern and traditional Chinese values and superstitions. These are encapsulated in a fable from Fujian Province (where the Morecambe Bay cockle-pickers originated) which relates the story of sixteenth-century fishermen lost and in danger at sea. At the heart of the legend is the goddess figure who leads the fishermen to safety. The audio and visuals of the rescue operation at Morecambe Bay ground the film in a haunting documentary reality. *Better Life (Ten Thousand Waves)* combines fact, fiction and film essay genres to create a meditation on global human migrations.

Julien's conversations with 'academics, curators, and artists', during his significant time spent in China, seems to be defending the intercultural legitimacy of translating a Fujian Province fable into Julien's own storytelling frame and British heritage, in other words what right he has to tell the story. It is easy to interpret *Better Life (Ten Thousand Waves II)* as a contemporary manifestation of Benjamin's 'storyteller'; boredom abounds in the silent white cube, the maxim or political intention of Julien's story is ambiguous but referenced as his intentions, and the retelling of someone else's story, in this case authenticated audio and visual material from the tragic rescue operation, and the traditional fable, is consumed by the storyteller and re-arranged through his personally engrossing and insightful interpretation.

However, the blurring of fact and fiction in *Ten Thousand Waves* is no more apparent than in the conflicting criteria towards a pedigree of authenticity against economic appraisal. Furthermore, how these criteria shape the material artefacts and the consequential provenance of the story becomes unsettling. For me the *authentic* version of Julien's story was the *original edition* told on a more distant rainy day on Cockatoo Island in 2010, via an expanded cinema of nine floating projections, amongst herds of drifting viewers, and without a price tag attached.

Perhaps in the current technological milieu, the imperative for articulating and expressing the pedigree of an artist within the telling of their story is not essential. A Google search for Isaac Julien presents a host of sources and references informing his provenance. His own website provides detailed 'media kits', project

descriptions, and background details.⁶² Another site, MK Moving Image, outlines seminars and exhibitions being offered by Isaac Julien's department of media art at HfG Karlsruhe in Germany,⁶³ where he is a Professor. On YouTube, amongst shaky spectator grabs of his video installations around the world, there are a handful of informative interviews with the artist, and of particular note, a one-hour forty-five minute and fifty-seven second presentation at the World Leaders Forum at Columbia University in 2011.⁶⁴ Julien confidently asserts: 'Today, we embrace a far more complicated and fragile world platform in which art is able to make interventions on to the political stage'.⁶⁵

iTunes Store features a selection of presentations by Julien including an iTunes U lecture at the Smithsonian Hirshorn Museum, *Exhibits: Cinema Effect* (2011), and a Podcast from MoMA Talks: Conversations, *Isaac Julien* from 2010. In the MoMA talk Julien provides an in-depth discussion of his praxis and wide-ranging experiences filmmaking. In regard to my initial distrust of the glossy objects for sale, Julien discusses the dangers of art patronage, and how his art practice attempts to grapple with the duality of creating aesthetic objects of politically charged issues and documentary forms, calling attention to the problematic friction of this association. He deliberates through my speakers:

The desire to bring together incongruous material and make it beautiful, and at the same time not to - because you're interested in aesthetics - shy away from subject matter or a political idea that may seem incongruous. Because, of course, in the American debate, beauty and politics, or beauty and ideas, are quite separated. (2010: np)

As I listen to his intentions I realise the artist has led me, albeit inadvertently, to his voice in the podcast, in a well considered and deliberate engagement with the art market, exhibition possibilities, and auxiliary information nodes. Perhaps the pedigree and authenticity of Julien's storytelling need not be addressed by the gallery displaying or selling his work, or even be addressed in the work itself. Like Kevin Carter's intentions, the provenance of Julien's praxis will inevitably be

⁶² <http://www.isaacjulien.com/> (accessed 2 July 2012)

⁶³ <http://movingimage.hfg-karlsruhe.de/> (accessed 2 July 2012)

⁶⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hhks5oyH-mY> (accessed 2 July 2012)

⁶⁵ The fact of his participation in the World Leaders Forum alongside current Presidents of nation states attest to his remarks of contemporary artists being capable of political intervention

littered amongst the multitude of references and sources lining our technological landscape. But as a practitioner rather than art critic, I am interested in how the identification of this ecology might inform a creative provenance of authentic storytelling. In a press article coinciding with an exhibition of *Ten Thousand Waves* in Singapore earlier this year, Julien is quoted saying: 'We're always multi-tasking visually. When we open our emails, go on Facebook, we're working with different screens. There's a different sense of cognition.'⁶⁶ The multiple projector installations and fragmented storytelling Julien explores are indicative of a conscious engagement with the material and intellectual provenance of contemporary visual storytelling. His diverse engagement with material, political, and creative forms reiterates the necessity to 'be yourself' in the field and to actively maintain an honest voice throughout your provenance topography.

⁶⁶ http://asiaviews.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=34050%3Awave-effect&Itemid=57 (accessed 2 July 2012)

Installation Experiments

Towards the end of 2011 Theertha offered me a place in their October International Artist Residency program. Since establishing such intimate relationships with the Theertha artists during my first fieldwork in 2010 I had been hoping to arrange an exhibition together, so I was thrilled to participate in the one month residency and display work alongside friends before heading home at the end of the year. I also felt by this stage I was losing touch with all the material I had been collating so the residency was a great opportunity to review my rushes and attempt to construct a video installation.

I focused on producing a short-form visually dynamic installation that was not narrative dependent, that would 'jolt' the emptiness, and that viewers could wander in and out of. From *The Sri Lanka Series*, *Fishermen of Duwa* offered the most vibrant observational sequences suited to my agenda, specifically the ten-minute sequence of the famous Duwa Passion Play.

Contrasting my contemporary rushes of the performance with my father's recording revealed a number of curious discoveries. The first revelation was how similar my footage was to the Passion Play sequence in *Fishermen of Duwa*. While I had viewed my father's filming numerous times, and noted the themes and scenarios he focused on - such as preparing costumes, make-up, and the manner in which he recorded the performance - when it came to recording the play myself, I did not intentionally match shots with his film. Perhaps I had become so familiar with the sequence in *Fishermen of Duwa* that I subconsciously recorded it in a similar way. Was it purely coincidence? Or had I inherited his gaze? Or perhaps it was a Holy intervention. One of the most intriguing similarities in our coverage was the primary camera position for recording the majority of the performance - on a platform slightly to the left of stage about 20 or 30 metres towards the crowd. When I arrived on Good Friday I was given a choice of where to set up this camera position and I remember actually being more attracted to a closer perspective on the other side of the stage. I didn't think about matching frames at all. Christy Fernando however, the fisherman who also helped Geoff when they were filming

in 1978, said 'No, no, no... I have set up these tables for you here'. I scampered up the rickety school desks to my designated platform, arranged a comfortable position with a chair, tripod, umbrella for shade, and wet towel to cool the camera, and proceeded to record the five hour performance under thirty-five degree tropical sun. It was only more recently when I was reviewing one of Sharon's essays stressing the agency and influence of participants or 'informants' in the field that the significance of Christy's positioning of my camera, and perhaps even Geoff's camera on the roof of his four-wheel drive, made me realise how subject to contingency and unpredictable influence these meaningful associations can be born out (see Bell 2004: 16).



Figure 4.3 Conversing with Christi from the camera position he pre-arranged at the Duwa Passion Play, 2011. Photo by Tosca Lloyd.

33 *Duwa*, the installation I produced for the residency exhibition juxtaposed excerpts from *Fishermen of Duwa* with the footage I had recently recorded. Ideally, I would have physically separated the two films with dual projections, but the

logistics of limited space and lacking multiple projectors and dual DVD players restricted the installation to a single split screen. I felt placing the images directly alongside one another encouraged a superfluous compositional bind, particularly along the join, but the technique ultimately offered the cleanest design solution for the installation. I painted my white room entirely black - leaving a precise white rectangle for the projected image to illuminate.

In addition to the curious comparison between my father's visual framing and my own, the juxtaposition of the two sequences contrasted material provenance. The two recordings presented a comparison between the aged 16mm print and digital video, and extended to the technologies used in the *Passion Play* itself - in particular the current use of radio microphones as opposed to wired microphones being waved around on poles, and resorting to a prerecorded soundtrack in contrast to the live rendition of the previous generation.

For the astute observer the juxtaposition also reveals contrasting talent on stage - or perhaps even "passion" - between the two generations. In the 1970s roles in the play were for the most part inherited and the same actor might occupy a single role for decades, offering plenty of opportunity to refine their performance. 2011 was only the second year in which the acting roles had been handed down to this younger, less experienced cast.

Colombo Art Biennale 2012

Prior to leaving Sri Lanka in 2011 I met with two international art curators, Suresh Jayaram and Roman Berka, who were surveying local artists for the following year's Colombo Art Biennale (CAB). I shared the installation video I made for the New Media Residency and proposed to extend on the concept into a larger scale dual screen installation for CAB that spanned all three of *The Sri Lanka Series* films. With the biennale scheduled only a few months away in February 2012, it was an encouraging impetus to thoroughly sort through my rushes and correspond footage with the original films. At this stage of the wider *My Mother's Village* project I was still unsure about the form and shape of the final work, either as a video installation or single screen cinematic narrative. I saw the biennale

exhibition as a fertile testing ground for playing with the potential of the installation option.

33 consists of two screens both 1700mm in height, with one 3000mm in length and the other 2120mm to match the different aspect ratio of the two video formats. The screens were made in Sri Lanka as fully primed white canvases to provide a sharp image and in order that they could be recycled by local artists following the exhibition. Having established the rental and purchasing prices for audiovisual equipment in Sri Lanka as prohibitively high, I decided to purchase two high-definition projectors from Amazon.com, shipped from the U.S., and two Sony Blu-ray/DVD players in Australia. It was crucial that the DVD players were the same make and model in order to synchronise playback manually through one remote control - a function normally executed through an expensive and in this instance unattainable DVD synchronizer. My equipment costs were covered by the \$1000 artist fee, and like the canvas screens I planned to donate the projectors and players to local artists following the exhibition.

From each of the original three films I extracted 20 minute segments that I thought were able to independently relay a coherent story and for which I could identify literal or conceptual associations with my contemporary footage. With *Four Women* this was simply a matter of extracting one of the four segments from the film, Chandrawathie's. *Fishermen of Duwa* again featured the Passion Play in addition to early scenes outlining fishing traditions and migration patterns, which I placed alongside recent commentary from the fishermen explaining how the ethnic conflict put an end to that migration and consequently transformed their livelihoods. With *Dancers Were Only Allowed To Dance* I was able to place the late Juse alongside his son, dancing and presenting interview dialogues to the camera. The young dancer Palitha is presented as a twelve year old discussing social caste, being watched for the first time by his forty-five year old self, dancing together and contrasting lives.



Figure 4.4 33, dual screen video installation at the 2012 Colombo Art Biennale. Photo by Author.

The installation features a mix of stereo sound, with each speaker corresponding individually to each of the screens, left with left, right with right, and occasionally mixed or panned between in order to guide or confuse the viewer at different points of the narrative. The large dimension of the separate screens demands a physical panning by the viewer, and an active decision of which one to watch, rendering the viewing experience a physical and mental process of travelling between time.

In regards to outcomes and audience responses, every occasion I visited the installation the headphones were occupied and viewers regularly sat through the entire sixty-minute presentation. The feedback I received was encouraging. Viewers who had not seen the original *The Sri Lanka Series* re-iterated how rare the footage was, both historically from that era and also in the candid and honest nature of the depiction. Many people commented positively on the heightened viewing experience demanded by the dual screens and overlapping narratives.

The major disappointment I had with CAB was the lack of attendance by local "everyday" Sri Lankans. Most of the events and publicity surrounding CAB were targeted at expatriates living in Sri Lanka or a local wealthy upper-class. Private galleries were involved in the organisation of the exhibition and hence needed to

capitalise on the opportunity to sell artworks auxiliary to what was on show. Furthermore, many of the venues were places most Sri Lankans would not normally frequent so an extraordinary amount of publicity and marketing would have been needed to build a necessary level of attraction to catalyse visitors. The issue of accessibility was particularly disappointing for me because it was the opposite experience of the village screenings I staged the previous year. I felt that the Sri Lankan general public would thoroughly enjoy and be stimulated by the works on display but were held back because they were not directly invited to join in.

Beyond the biennale exhibition the cumbersome and intricate installation required by 33 drastically limits its mobility and future distribution potential. Installations in other possible venues such as university campuses or non-government organisations would similarly require significant measures to attract the general public to places they would not normally go. A single screen output, on the other hand, can readily be displayed in a vast array of environments and is adaptable to multiple technologies. I felt this was necessary if I was to reach a wider Sri Lankan audience.

Lastly, the dual screen form of 33 limited the scope of my own narrative. Too much of the story I wanted to tell was forced out of the installation because of having to correspond contemporary material with the original films, even obscurely. Furthermore, having three uncut excerpts restricted the historical information being pulled out of *The Sri Lanka Series*. A less linear method of quoting and referencing the original stories was needed to explore the complete narratives and the lives of all the participants involved.

I was incredibly pleased with 33 and the installation viewing experience it fostered, however, I felt I needed to attempt a single screen narrative in order to incorporate personal experiences, in addition to the stories of other participants that had been left out, in a form that would be physically and technically accessible to a wider Sri Lankan audience. Nevertheless, reflecting on the potential of a multifarious provenance in contemporary storytelling, 33 will continue to exist as an alternative

installation viewing experience to *My Mother's Village*, perhaps even as a "DVD Extra".



Figure 4.5 Celebrating the 2012 Colombo Art Biennale with fellow participants at the Residence of The Ambassador of Norway. From left to right, Koralegedara Pushpakumara, Bandu Manamperi, Aaron Burton, Janananda Laksiri, Pradeep Chandrasiri, and the late Sanath Kalubadana, 2012.

Photo by Lalith Manage.

The Edit

This chapter briefly reflects on a selection of the more significant conceptual, aesthetic, and technical deliberations made in the post-production of the single screen narrative *My Mother's Village*. These include crafting a single screen narrative, the role of sound and narration, quoting *The Sri Lanka Series*, and bilingual subtitling.

In response to the historical significance of *The Sri Lanka Series*, by way of both content and form, it was important to maintain the core elements of the original narratives in addition to highlighting aspects that have become revealing of changes over the last three decades. As re-screening and responses with participants revealed, the other historical outcome I wanted to highlight was the acute personal affect *The Sri Lanka Series* evoked for participants, their families, and the Sri Lankan public.

Narrative

The challenge with a single screen narrative was developing a meaningful structure that tied the original three films together as well as incorporating contemporary stories, all within an acceptable duration and comprehensible development. The inter-generational theme provided a strong conceptual link between the three films, lending *My Mother's Village* to a Buddhist inspired three part structure of 'previous lives', 'this life', and 'next lives'. I initially signposted these chapters with inter-titles but ultimately found them unnecessary and felt they prompted misleading expectations. The first section of the film introduces *The Sri Lanka Series* through community and participant screenings and introduces each of the contemporary participants with their initial responses to the films. Dominant themes in this initial section include economic well-being, the civil war, and social caste. The middle third of the film pursues the present day status of the original participants in relation to the same ethnographic themes raised three decades ago and their sentiments are contrasted with the lives of the next generation of the same families. Significant developments over the three decades manifest in consumerism, employment abroad, education, marriage, and the

absence of caste based determinates. The final section concludes with participant reflections on life and death, various hopes and ambitions for the future, opportunities abroad and the global dispersion of families, also reflected in the rapidly transforming nature of "The Village".

Sound & Narration

The provenance of sound is as significant as the provenance of the image in personal documentary. The unique creative provenance of *My Mother's Village*, specifically the continuation of *The Sri Lanka Series* project, had a significant influence on sound design and use of music. Sound recording by Leo Sullivan on *The Sri Lanka Series* is remarkably clear and evocative. Lapping waves on the beach, snapping tree branches in the village, or cooking hopppers at dawn are some of the memorable recordings foregrounded in the soundtrack, only dimmed during interviews, and provide a rich texture to the viewing experience.

As discussed in the chapter, Personal Camera, emphasis on the experiential encounter in both material and creative provenance extends to all the media I collated during my fieldwork. Audio recording technology for *My Mother's Village* included a radio lapel microphone for individual interviews, an external shotgun microphone for interviews with more than one person, the Sony PMW-EXR1 on camera microphone for all other sound, in addition to an Edirol digital audio recorder used for live musical performances and ambient sound effects. Similar to the corporeal aesthetic of handholding the video camera around waist height, recording the majority of audio through the on-camera microphone has a similar effect of situating the viewer as the filmmaker. The sound reaches the viewer as it does the camera. Conversely, an undesirable consequence of situating the microphone near the camera operator is the likelihood it will pick-up their noises too. For the most part I was able to cut out the clicking of buttons, swirl of lens adjustments and so on. However, one of the accidental recordings I came to embrace was the faint noise of breathing. My breathing. Hand-holding the camera and utilising the flip-out monitor often placed the microphone closer to my mouth. Again, this would normally be an undesirable mistake but in order to reinforce the

expression of corporeality and individual perspective I retained a faint level of camera operator breathing in the final audio track.

In the tradition of conventional ethnographic cinema (see Weinberger 1992: 40) *The Sri Lanka Series* does not have a compositional score, yet music plays a significant role in all three films. Singing, drumming, and dancing is paramount to the customs and rituals featured. From the dynamic exorcisms in *Four Women*, rhythmic chants of labourers hauling nets in *Fishermen of Duwa*, to the rapid beating of drums in *Dancers Were Only Allowed to Dance*, music permeates the soundtrack across all three narratives.

In contrast to traditional ethnographic tropes, for *My Mother's Village* I was open to composing music that might add resonance to the imagery and emotionally guide viewers through the narrative. However, as found in *The Sri Lanka Series*, my observational recordings of participants featured an abundance of live musical performances, music notably unique to Sri Lankan customs and culture, that my attempts to compose even an ambient score were found superficial to the narrative and inappropriate to the cross-cultural depiction. Nevertheless, I was able to draw on live musical recordings throughout *My Mother's Village* as digetic and non-digetic narrative devices.

My own voice-over narration was employed to provide the contextual foundations for an inter-generational investigation. It became clear in the construction of 33 that the story I was telling was an outcome of heredity and need not be the subject of it. In other words, *My Mother's Village* did not need to be *about* me being the son of the anthropologist and filmmaker, it *is* a result of that provenance. In *The Sri Lanka Series* my mother's voice articulates her ethnographic experiences and discoveries, I have positioned myself in the same interpretive relationship with my own footage, and the contrast between the two of us develops a meta-commentary surrounding heredity and inheritance. Similarly, the juxtaposition of my father's photography and my own explores the possibility of an inherited gaze without needing to address Geoff directly as a participating subject. A purpose and function

of the narration was to subtly direct attention towards the construction and 'behind-the-scenes' provenance without overwhelming participant narratives.

Superimposition & Transposition

One of the more challenging creative and technical dilemmas was how to integrate excerpts from my mother and father's films into a single screen display and simultaneously present participant reactions to the films. Multiple variations and manipulations of *The Sri Lanka Series* transposed as a screen within the screen of *My Mother's Village* offered a unique visual mise-en-scène and conceptual correspondence to a transgressive material provenance. Visual juxtaposition of thirty years in the composite scenes of *My Mother's Village* are initially established in the re-screening scenes but the appearance of the small screen increases as the narrative unfolds, becoming a disjunction between what was once shown and now said.

Since Méliès' or Chapman's achievements in superimposition and transposition techniques (see Section II), digital video has all but abolished the magic of multiple images appearing beside, within, or on top of one another. The malleability of digital video has made composite effects commonplace, although more often than not result in unharmonious mise-en-scène and overly "graphic" appearances that call attention to the effect rather than adding to the narrative experience. As Bazin critiqued in 1946, superimposition of transparent images overtly signals to the audience dreams, ghosts, and imaginary characters (2002). The use of multiple screens or split screens, however, has not been openly embraced by cinema, and unless conceptually foregrounded results in visual and narrative chaos.

When effectively employed, multiple screens can either undermine or heighten the present tense of the moving image. This is most obviously achieved through simultaneously showing what is occurring at the same time in different locations, such as the television drama *24*, in which "real-time" is retained through each hour long episode of a counter-terrorism expert's 24 hour adventure over twenty four episodes. This experiment was witnessed half a century ago when a diverse range of activities in Ontario was simultaneously presented in *A Place to Stand* (1967),

providing the impression of a bustling and multifaceted Canadian town. Composite images are also often employed to present non-linear narratives and psychological terrain, such as Hans Canosa's *Conversations with Other Women* (2005) in which the split-screen offers a combination of; multiple perspectives through simultaneous cameras, fragments of the characters' past, in addition to events occurring in other locations.

Beyond translocating time and place, superimposition can reflexively call attention to the materiality of film. On the set of shooting *The Sacrifice* for his biographical documentary on Andrei Tarkovsky, *One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich* (1999), Chris Marker superimposes a circular cropped frame from Tarkovsky's finished film. The image travels across the same landscape seen through Marker's video camera and is intercut with Tarkovsky looking through a viewfinder and gesturing directions with his hands. In this instance the screen within the screen enacts Tarkovsky's vision and instigations, the present and future images collide. Furthermore, the aesthetic rupture emphasises the material difference between Marker's hand-held fuzzy video and the glimpsed 35mm beauty of Tarkovsky's final film. In Marker's video space the provenance of images and audio are multifarious, leaping between time and location, subsumed by the author's personal experience.

Like the behind-the-scenes-in-the-scene superimpositions in Marker's portrait, the presence of *The Sri Lanka Series* in *My Mother's Village* as a composite screen within a screen highlights the original 16mm material provenance of my parents' films and the digital malleability of current imaging technology three decades later.

Bi-lingual Subtitles

Lastly, in keeping with producing *My Mother's Village* for a Sri Lankan audience I worked closely with Lalith Manage - a Theertha artist and linguist, to develop Sinhala and English subtitles, making it a completely bilingual production. Lalith's collaboration in the analytic and interpretive process was incredibly helpful. He eagerly explained the nuances of Sinhala while I did my utmost to account for the subtleties of English. Literary Sinhala, as it appears in most written forms, is of a

markedly different form to spoken Sinhala. We tried to keep to the spoken form, as though the words are being vocalised rather than written. Lalith helped me understand unique facets to peculiar dialects and vernacular spoken by various participants. While we attempted to relay an authentic conversational tone, for the most part these nuanced distinctions would ultimately be lost in translation and paraphrasing. For example, Vimalasiri from Pelpitigoda speaks in a rural village manner that was sometimes difficult for Lalith to interpret. This might not be such an issue for eventually translating the meaning of what was spoken, but in the context of questioning a shifting identity of the village, for instance, these communication markings become an important consideration. Prioritising an audience helped to negotiate these decisions, for instance we could assume that a local Sri Lankan audience would be aware of vernacular variations, but for a foreign audience it was more important to clearly and consistently relay the meaning of what was spoken and avoid trying too hard to match the dialogue with equivalent literary devices.

The visual presence of the subtitles, like the screen-in-screen superimposition of *The Sri Lanka Series*, calls attention to the digital provenance of *My Mother's Village*. I was initially concerned that too much subtitling would detract from the visuals, however, their constant presence seems to neutralise their imposition.

Alongside the appearance and disappearance of *The Sri Lanka Series* screen, the conflation of text and visual stimulus reiterates the complexity of cross-cultural navigation. I hope the dual language subtitles, occasionally even competing in the same scene, prompts a reflexive engagement with the inter-cultural provenance and audience of the project. For me, the presence of a foreign script in addition to the English subtitles questions the assumption that foreign languages will always be relayed in English. MacDougall warns of the readiness of subtitles to induce a false sense of cultural affinity, lending the impression that people and societies are reducible to simple expressions (1998: 175). Perhaps witnessing your native language being interpreted into a foreign script, often of varying lengths and durations, leads to questioning the comprehensiveness of the process, which then hopefully leads to a more general doubting of the authority of subtitles appearing

in your own language and perhaps a broader acknowledgment of the imperfect nature of translation. Hence, I hope the presence of bilingual text functions as a reflexive corrective to cultural reductionism.

Conclusion: Future Provenance

As I write these concluding remarks my fingers are crossed that *My Mother's Village* will have its world premiere at the 2013 Sydney Film Festival. Mum and Dad's film *Four Women* premiered at the 27th Sydney Film Festival in 1980. Since I submitted my entry a few weeks ago I have enjoyed toying with my emotions by imagining an acceptance call or what I would say to the audience at the festival screening if asked for director's comments. I imagine relaying how much the Sydney Film Festival means to me personally, of how my father would pull me out of school and from our seats C32, C33 we would bask in the sparkling light and shadows that shot across the majestic State Theatre, escaping the biting city winter three or four films at a time. I might recall how door staff occasionally attempted to block our path at the sight of a young boy, eighteen being the minimum age for entry, and my Dad waving us through like a Star Wars Jedi Mind Trick, insisting I was his responsibility and they need not worry. Or I could tell the audience the story of the time I got mugged in Hyde Park, having a break from the festival program while my mother and father were in a session. How I remember running down the theatre isle bruised and battered searching the hundreds of illuminated faces for the comforting gaze of a parent. People at my screening might also like to hear about how before I was born my mother and father religiously attended the festival, and they both speak fondly of the rare exposure it offered to diverse cinema from around the world. And they might be interested to know that the first film I had a major role in as Editor, and worked closely with my father as Writer/Director, *The Fall Of The House: Eugene Goossens* (2004), premiered at the Sydney Film Festival. I can also imagine breaking down in tears uncontrollably as I did more recently at a postgraduate seminar during a screening of a short film I made about my grandmother, at a time we were sure she was about to die. Then I imagine the rejection letter, which would not detract from the project in anyway. I would likely console myself with a bitter reminder that in recent years the festival has become no more than a series of red carpet premieres of films guaranteed to attract the crowds but will no doubt have cinematic distribution or television broadcast only weeks after the curtains close.

Even if *My Mother's Village* doesn't make the Sydney festival program there are numerous other film festivals to submit to and plenty of opportunities for independent screenings. From large international festivals or academic conferences to intimate showings with friends and family, as Laura Marks (2000) has theorised, each screening bears its own provenance to the story and becomes etched into the film as a palimpsest. A screening at the Brisbane International Film Festival would celebrate my formative years in art college up river from the festival cinemateque. *Four Women* screened as part of the 1980 Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York, and for *My Mother's Village* to be included in the 2013 program would underscore the intellectual and creative provenance and visual storytelling tradition of my endeavour. The same rings true of the Jean Rouch International Film Festival in Paris, the trajectory of influence by such groundbreaking storytellers as Rouch and Mead, honoured through these occasions, would enrich the topography and cultural value of *My Mother's Village*. Yet I expect it will be the humble projections in Sri Lanka, where the personal and political can really ignite, that the sensuous topography at play is at its richest intricacy of nodes and historical undulations.

Conversely, and quite unexpectedly, I feel the most pivotal screening has already occurred in our living room in Austinmer. When I first set out to make *My Mother's Village*, like many documentary storytellers my impetus was to bridge cultural understanding and broaden Australian perspectives. After living in Sri Lanka, however, forging intense friendships and re-screening *The Sri Lanka Series*, I came to realise how much more significant these stories will always be for a Sri Lankan audience. It is their story and their history. Hence while I initially set out to create a series of experimental and avant-garde video works, the imperative rapidly became to maintain the integrity of *The Sri Lanka Series* and achieve a similar depth to telling the story of the ensuing generations of villagers. The resulting narrative reflects my efforts to produce a sequel of matching quality and tone. Where I have introduced contemporary filmmaking techniques that reflect shifting documentary epistemology since the 1970s, respond to Sharon's 'post-scripts', and attempt to incorporate the personal meta-narrative of being the son of a filmmaker

and anthropologist, I have been cautious of my imposition on participant stories. Nevertheless, it wasn't until I screened a rough cut to Mum and Dad that I realised at a subconscious level they were the audience for whom I was primarily crafting the story. When they expressed how much they liked it, how flattered and impressed they were, I immediately levitated through the dense foliage of anxiety, rising above Heidegger's forest of nothingness to a place of fulfillment and meaning, of the fullest appreciation of Being. And it is here that I finally comprehended what the participants of *My Mother's Village* smiled at through fresh tears, namely, the existence of their mothers and fathers. My story is about the filmmaker, participants, and audience, navigating the heredity and inheritance of their provenance.

While *My Mother's Village* can be interpreted as an act of reverie towards my parents and their work, my intentions from the beginning have extended beyond this point - of telling an engaging and creative story to the wider population, of critically contextualising my creative practice, of developing my filmmaking skills and furthering a professional career. But the question of audience raises an interesting dimension of provenance in personal documentary, what if I was only making the film for my mother and father? As my research and filmmaking has revealed, the material and creative ecology exists to hold on to personal intentions, as opposed to sacrificing them to "industry standards" and genre conventions. The potential is there in this multi-node media arts topography for all manner of intentions to be embraced as experimental avenues for storytelling, and for the global niche to intersect through personal provenance and experientially informed storytelling.

Furthermore, as I deliberate on the distribution potential and material provenance of *My Mother's Village*, and imagine its potential successes and rejections, I find comfort in reminding myself that the final product is not the complete story. Personal provenance heeds the reminder that the journey, navigating the sensuous topography, is what makes the effort worthwhile; the time I spent in Sri Lanka, the engagement with my parents and their creative collaborations, the workshops, exhibitions, entering into my own 'relationships of dependency' and emotional

mosaics with all the faces I would never have encountered if not for embarking on this project. These are the aspects of provenance that foster ethical and 'mutually exploitive' research well beyond a submission date or festival premiere.

In addition to these more personal and emotional manifestations, provenance as a guiding methodology evidently has the future in mind. The experimental traces I leave behind have and will inform the meaning of *My Mother's Village*, and as the diaries of deceased anthropologists or the absence of Kevin Carter's story attest to, these traces build a personal voice and develop trust in the storyteller. As my mother and other New Ethnographers have argued, the personal tribulations and ruminations scribbled in diaries, letters to loved ones, and the testimonies of chance encounters are often what render the stories of intrepid ethnographers and journalists so much more fascinating than the abstracted information they publish. My own experiments with creative and material provenance, of consciously marking a trace included: publishing an online journal during my fieldwork; 'The Distance of a Whisper: Notes from the Field', a photo-essay from my fieldwork in Sri Lanka published and exhibited in various forms and locations including the *My Mother's Village* website - mymothersvillage.com; there was the string of workshops and presentations I gave in Sri Lanka and academic seminars in Australia, and beyond the addition of numerous Facebook 'Friends', hopefully these events foster professional opportunities in the future, influence audiences, or at the very least be notable additions to my CV, that is, my pedigree; then there was the dual screen installation ³³ I produced for the 2012 Colombo Art Biennale, another story that might be raised again elsewhere; and the current possibility of publishing a limited edition book of this exegesis, beautifully bound with a red ribbon bookmark, featuring glossy images and a Blu-Ray disc of the film. Then of course there is the provenance to be shaped by others, largely out of reach of the storyteller, such as the online 'shares' and 'likes', the reviews and opinions of bloggers and critics, and perhaps even the occasional YouTube piracy and DVD duplication. Contemporary art topography extends well beyond the artefact, and my research has demonstrated how experimenting with provenance is crucial to the interpretation of decentralised works of art and documentary storytelling.

My Mother's Village has revealed how a personal approach to documentary can have a profoundly constructive influence on the political and intellectual provenance of storytelling. One of the more captivating revelations of my research concerns how personally affecting my mother and father's ethnographic filmmaking has been for all involved, as opposed to some kind of ambiguous building block of Knowledge. Strict methodologies of extensive fieldwork, language skills, and relentless attempts towards authentic representation aided their films to become invaluable personal and historical records. The ethnographic mode of production my parents employed resulted in performances of profound emotional poignancy. Yet it wasn't the genealogy charts or detailed dissections of traditional rituals that my mother painstakingly recorded in her fieldwork notebooks. It was the unhurried patience of 'participant observation' born out of genuine personal interest in how others live, in other words my mother and father 'being themselves in the field', which resulted in sincere interviews and acute observational recording.

The mistake of traditional ethnographic storytelling, as Taussig (2011) makes clear, is for researchers to put aside their personalities in order to conduct the business of the Academy. The mistake of creative practitioners dealing with similar cross-cultural interpretation, like Benjamin's detached novelist, is the lack of rigorous research and experience-based understanding. My own fieldwork admittedly lacks the depth of cultural understanding Sharon accomplished, nor does my filmmaking meet the refined craftsmanship demonstrated by Geoff, but if someone were to visit the individuals that participated in *My Mother's Village*, or reach them through Skype or Facebook, I hope they receive a similar response about our collaboration to the warm impressions I encountered again and again as the son of Geoff and Sharon.

As my mother has suggested since her initial fieldwork, intellectual provenance ought to be informed by the unique experiential encounters of the researcher (Bell 2004); the 'impurities of the field', the 'significant others', in addition to immersing yourself in the scholarly and creative canons before you. It is this combination of pedigree and experience, of 'earning the right' to tell the story, as Muecke (2012)

encourages, that makes documentary storytelling a powerful tool for cultural critique and for advancing the project of 'Others knowing Others' (Bell 2004).

The intersection of personal and political provenance is particularly pronounced in media landscapes like Sri Lanka, where personal narratives represent an important opposition to the dominant state owned media. In an environment where political voices are predominately government controlled and journalists are frequently harassed, intimidated, even killed for opposing the powers that be, the alternative production and distribution possibilities of personal documentary offer liberating pathways for contemporary Sri Lankan storytelling. The marginal but growing presence of documentary modes in Sri Lankan contemporary art, independent cinema, and online publishing, is a positive indication that increased access to technology is fostering greater opportunities for freedom of expression.

In safer storytelling ecologies like Australia, a similar political benefit can be found in distinguishing personal provenance from the template consumer driven narratives and commercial agendas of national broadcasters and print media. This extends to online environments like Facebook and YouTube, where users are presented with a surrogate provenance in the form of a 'timeline' to curate and control, but all within the parameters of 'shares', 'likes', 'friends', word limits and internet speeds. As I imagine Walter Benjamin would have protested, this overwhelming 'data-stream' lacks the space for boredom, the time and space for deep reflection, criticism, and creative deliberation essential to effective storytelling.

I have interpreted the current function of personal documentary in contemporary art as analogous to the politically charged works of art Benjamin envisioned for 'the age of mechanical reproduction', and for also fulfilling the demands of the mode of storytelling he found waning due to the same symptoms of modernity. It is in the boredom of white and black cube galleries and theatre spaces that ethnography, documentary photography and film, have converged as a potentially 'authentic' and experientially based contemporary art form with the primary agenda of cultural critique.

In contrast to the traditional application of the term, I have retheorised and 're-practiced' the concept of *provenance* to become the creative process itself. The five dimensions of provenance my research has drawn upon - creative, intellectual, political, material, and personal - demonstrate the ethical foundations and inter-disciplinary adaptability underlying provenance as a conceptual framework. While I have intentionally avoided a structural application of the framework, the five dimensions of provenance isolated here have the capacity and versatility for a plurality of methodologies across a diversity of creative and scholarly projects. Furthermore, it is the idiosyncratic navigation through the sensuous topography of personal documentary - the encounters, contingencies, shared boredom, and instigations - which establish authenticity, and highlight the social implications of storytelling within our cultural ecology of interconnectedness. Provenance is a necessary concept for distinguishing, critically understanding, and producing personal documentary as art, and serves as an essential framework for developing experimental and inter-disciplinary knowledge through storytelling.

I am indebted to the dancers, fishermen, and four women for once again opening their homes to the ambiguous ambitions of an outsider. I'm afraid my own efforts to understand and interpret fall short of the depth and integrity you and dad left behind.

You mentioned being frustrated by the beauty of the jungle and beaches masking the poverty and hardship of village life. Now, as the jungles and beaches are increasingly masked by concrete, village life seems even more mythologised and ephemeral.

It seems to no longer be about the way things are, but contingency and encounters, an ongoing transformation of stories.

Rather than at the distance of a shout, perhaps now, when we visit our mothers' villages, we can meet at the distance of a whisper.

- My Mother's Village

Post-Script

With the benefit of time, distance, and accumulation of feedback I now have the opportunity to critically reflect on the film and exegesis. I feel it is important to discuss the life of *My Mother's Village* since its completion and to review the conceptual framework of *provenance* developed through this exegesis.



Figure 4.6 *My Mother's Village* promotional banner made by the University Filmmakers Club at Sri Palee Campus, University of Colombo, located near Kanewala, the village where my mother based her research.

Despite the ambitious predictions I outlined in the Conclusion for the screening life of *My Mother's Village*, unfortunately it failed to be selected for the 2013 Sydney Film Festival, nor did it make the cut of the other major festivals mentioned. This has prompted critical reflection with a combination of factors obviously at work, including; the film's unseasonal 105-minute duration, its comparatively less dramatic topic or tag line than most contemporary narratives, the complex terrain

the film navigates, the sheer quantity of high quality documentaries being produced, and from a more realist perspective the economic imperatives that dictate festival programming.

Nevertheless, as I more accurately predicted, the most rewarding screenings of *My Mother's Village* took place in Sri Lanka when I toured the film around the island and neighbouring India over November and December 2013. A total of fourteen official screening and discussion events were held across institutional and organisational settings, including nine different university venues. University audiences represented a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds including social sciences and anthropology, media studies, as well as visual and performing arts. The high level of audience engagement across all the screenings is a testament to the cross-disciplinary framing of provenance to academic inquiry. Audiences generally consisted of undergraduates, post-graduates, and faculty staff. Perhaps reflective of a more traditional teacher to student dynamic than I am familiar with in Australia, undergraduate students in Sri Lanka were noticeably reserved and discussions often required prompting from graduates or staff. Not surprisingly, the most vocal audiences were from an older generation whom had evidently lived through or had intellectually engaged with the topics and issues raised in the film. The premiere screening in Sri Lanka was held at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Colombo.

As part of a new government policy it was required the film be passed by the censorship board prior to any public screening. Curiously, although not to the surprise of my Sri Lankan colleagues, *My Mother's Village* was denied public screening approval on the grounds that particular surnames attributed to social caste distinctions mentioned in the film were still in use and the present day association may cause offence to viewers. However, the only time such names are mentioned in the film are in an excerpt from my parents' film *Dancers Were Only Allowed to Dance* when the main character Juse lists well-known families which he associates with high-caste positions, and whom he paints in a positive light as breaking from British colonial influence. Again, my friends and colleagues in Sri Lanka were not particularly surprised by the censorship board's ruling and offered

a range of hypothetical 'real' explanations of why the film was banned such as government discontent with ICES and NGOs in general, the film was made by a foreigner, too much attention is paid to the Christian fishing community (as opposed to Buddhist traditions), sex is openly discussed, and that the high-caste families mentioned largely remain the ones with political influence in Sri Lanka. Thankfully the censorship board otherwise complimented the historical value of *My Mother's Village* and granted limited academic and private screening permission.

MY MOTHER'S VILLAGE

FREE SCREENING & DISCUSSION WITH FILMMAKER අපේ අම්මාගේ ගම

A FILM BY AARON BURTON

Two generations of Sri Lankan villagers share their lives with two generations of Australian documentary filmmakers.

A journey of inheritance

In the late 1970s my anthropologist mother, Sharon Bell, lived for two years in Sri Lanka researching village life. Together with my cinematographer father, Geoff Burton, they made a series of films documenting this experience. Four women, a community of fishermen, and a dance instructor became their subjects and friends.

I was born a few years after the films were completed and am now the same age as my mother when she conducted her fieldwork. Like her, I am in the pursuit of knowledge through academia. Like my father, I am engaged in the art of visual storytelling. Taking cue from my provenance, I have the privilege to re-visit the villages where my mother lived, and focus my lens on the next generation of cultivators, fishermen, dancers, and family friends.

'My Mother's Village' is a personal documentary film investigating how the next generation of Sri Lankan villagers are, like the filmmaker, navigating heredity and inheritance.

Aaron Burton

Duration: 105 min
Language: English & Sinhala

www.mymothersvillage.com
www.facebook.com/mymothersvillage

Friday 22 November 4:30pm

ICES 02 KYNSEY TERRACE, COLOMBO 8, SRI LANKA

International Centre for Ethnic Studies

Figure 4.7 *My Mother's Village* promotional material for the premiere in Sri Lanka at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo.

The most unfortunate consequence of the censorship board's ruling was that I was advised not to hold public screenings in the three villages featured in the film. I was only able to distribute numerous DVD copies to all the participants involved and invite them to attend permitted screenings. Indeed one of my key ambitions

for touring *My Mother's Village* across Sri Lanka was to strategically drop multiple DVDs and digital files in the hope it is reproduced and distributed organically to a wider audience.

The response from Sri Lankan audiences to *My Mother's Village* was overwhelmingly positive and screenings were usually followed by stimulating discussion. Audiences seemed to find humour in the predicted places and remain engaged throughout the complex narrative. The 105 minute duration, which I often questioned audiences about due to my own concerns, appeared not to be an issue.⁶⁷

A common response which echoed the screenings of *The Sri Lanka Series* a couple of years earlier was a sense of nostalgia for the village way of life, and the surprising rate at which 'the village' has transformed within one generation. On a few occasions it was noted how easily cultural norms and customs change over time yet are often purported by community leaders as set in stone, such as what is considered acceptable clothing for women to wear. Another shared response with *The Sri Lanka Series* was how candid the female participants are, particularly Priyanthi discussing her sex life, and how encouraging that degree of honesty is for women in Sri Lanka.

Largely due to the censorship board's ruling, caste was also a recurring theme of discussion and despite the participants in the film professing it was no longer an issue in contemporary Sri Lanka the general impression I received from audiences was that caste still plays a role in marriage arrangements and employment opportunities. Audiences also noted it is difficult, however, to distinguish between social caste as opposed to social class determinates.

In a few instances concern was raised about specific aspects of the film. However, the objection was always given from a hypothetical perspective. For instance, the small boy seen urinating on a wall during the Passion Play was the subject of one

⁶⁷ Motion picture films produced in India and Sri Lanka are generally longer in duration than Western standards, often running over three hours.

such concerned viewer who professed to not minding at all themselves, being a Buddhist, but found it offensive for Christians. Similarly, in an otherwise positive email response one viewer was outraged that I featured a dog during a Buddhist ritual yet he went on to explain how he was a Christian. I received these as legitimate concerns and was glad to have the opportunity to discuss my intentions and their inclusion as signposting a personal perspective in order to avoid a more problematic authoritative position. I had been careful to double check with participants if any of my creative decisions caused offence and they were unanimously agreeable with the final edit.

I want to refrain from reading too much into discussions with audiences and risk presenting unqualified generalisations, but I think they are worth raising as revealing indicators for situating *My Mother's Village* in relation to historical and contemporary documentary filmmaking within Sri Lanka. Like *The Sri Lanka Series*, *My Mother's Village* has been embraced by audiences as a rare and historically significant document. While it is commonplace in Sri Lanka for anti-imperialist sentiment and Marxist intellectualism to readily dismiss perspectives of foreigners, it is also commonly acknowledged that outsiders are able to traverse social issues without the fear of persecution experienced by Sri Lankan citizens. For example, regardless of cinematic narrative devices I understand it would be problematic for a young local Buddhist filmmaker to show the boy urinating during a Christian ritual, or a Christian filmmaker following a dog around a Buddhist temple, or for anyone to be discussing sex on camera. Unfortunately in contemporary Sri Lankan filmmaking these appear to be privileged liberties afforded to foreigners. From my experience contemporary Sri Lankan documentary cinema continues along the Griersonian tradition of intending to teach audiences about social issues from a personally removed distance. The more challenging independently produced documentaries I have encountered focus on controversial issues without re-considering the relationship of the 'artist' to the 'subject' or 'audience'. As discussed in Section II, limited freedom of expression and the risk of persecution remains a troubling reality for Sri Lankan storytellers. Nevertheless, the young filmmakers I engaged with during screenings are rapidly gaining access to high quality media production equipment, accessing infinite online resources, and

distributing their productions over the Internet and alternative screening venues such as gallery spaces and film festivals. Within the challenging context of Sri Lankan filmmaking, *provenance* offers an enabling framework particularly suited to independent production.

'What village are you from?'

While I felt the conceptual framework of 'provenance' in personal documentary was a useful creative methodology it was not until screening *My Mother's Village* that I felt I was able to comprehend the project's significant alignment with Sri Lankan cultural norms. In Sri Lanka, audience responses and discussions frequently focused on the conception of the 'village' and its cultural meaning. The intercultural significance of what Marks' identifies as a 'slim thread back into the strata of history' (2000: 30) is on one level explicated in *My Mother's Village* through the narrative of archival and contemporary recordings, but it was the revelation of my own 'lineage' traced through the documentary to our mothers' 'villages' that underpinned provenance. In other words provenance aligned the relevance of the narrative to audiences culturally. The practice of situating strangers through the question "Oyage gama kohede?" (translated to "What village are you from?") is a critical aspect of identity formation for Sri Lankans, indicating not just birth place but clues to class, caste and religion. I realised more powerfully that my own 'lineage' together with the artefact of the earlier films gave me not just a 'subject' but entry as a trusted individual whom people could situate in relation to the communities that are the subject of the films. Pursuing personal provenance and locating myself in addition to the films participants, presented the opportunity to critique my role as a foreign researcher in an honest and productive way alongside Sri Lankan colleagues. This positioning ultimately enabled robust discussion and critique of the participating 'subjects', 'audience', and myself as the 'artist' reaffirming that provenance is integral to the film narrative rather than incidental.

The unique provenance I brought to the research also generated tension for some non Sri Lankan audiences: the lineage that created positive meaning in Sri Lanka

could also be read as a narrative of privilege by those not familiar with Sri Lankan identity formation. There is a risk that the gaze of familiarity praised in one cultural context could be interpreted as uncritical deference to my parents in another.

In this context I have reflected upon whether revealing so explicitly the personal provenance of my project (through both the film and the exegesis) might generate the associated risk of being interpreted as an act of appropriation or even worse narcissistic reconstitution of the 'self in frame', begging the question, if the archival footage was not generated from within my own family would I have used it in the same way? Perhaps I would have engaged in a more robust critique of the work. Moreover, the question remains as to the role of the exegesis in ameliorating these tensions or if it adds to them with the collusion of multi-disciplinarity and the crossing of professional and personal boundaries of identity. Even so I have continued to interrogate my own intentions and recognise that such examples of crossing cultural boundaries have been retained as deliberately disruptive elements of the documentary, designed to generate discomfort, to capture the idiosyncratic experience and to eschew the tendency, particularly in the representation of ritual, of separating the sacred from the profane, which in reality are always in dynamic tension (Bennett's 'casuistry', 2012: 14). The uniqueness of the process - the encounters, contingencies, and instigations - establish the authenticity of the production, but simultaneously generate the risk of failing to comply with audience expectations.

The screening process in differing cultural contexts offers a reminder that navigating heredity and inheritance across two cultures is a complex process that renders 'provenance', in Benjamin's revolutionary context of 'a dynamic understanding of processes, intentions, and storytelling throughout artistic production', a higher risk strategy than originally envisaged. The screening experience suggests that despite the alkaline taste of anxiety of the tensions associated with 'being looked at in terms of one's provenance' (Benjamin 1999 [c1931]: 520) the framework of 'provenance' in personal documentary offers an ethical and creative methodology for inter-disciplinary visual research that,

through the negation of hegemonic versions of history, enables audience engagement and critique. The archival films and my lineage gave me a passport to my mother and father's Sri Lanka, but the creation of *My Mother's Village* depended on being able to evidence understanding, to forge meaningful relationships with my contemporaries and to situate the 'artist' in a manner that resonates with contemporary audiences. The creative outcome (following Muecke 2008) is an attempt to connect creative production to the real itself, rather than a set of representations playing catch up. Again at the risk of generalisation this strategy has, perhaps for the cultural reasons outlined above, been more accessible to Sri Lankan audiences, as they in good faith work to find a place for the problematic foreign researcher, than it has to audiences from the Western academy. Embracing Taussig's 'uncertainty' in the story telling, especially when combined with narrative complexity, is a potent yet testing addition to the search for documentary authenticity. A reminder that, as the artist tests boundaries and assumptions, unpredictable audience responses are part of the topography.

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Four Women (The Sri Lanka Series) 1978, 16mm, The University of Sydney & Kurrajong Films, Austinmer, 55min.

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One Day in the Life of Andrei Arsenevich 1999, DVD, Arkeion Films, Paris, 55min.

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Appendix

My Mother's Village, Blu-ray Disc, 105 min