

5. Dancing Into Film

Exploring Yolngu motion, ritual and cosmology in the Yirrkala Film Project

Fiona Magowan

You can see the bubbles (now rock) of the water goanna... but in earlier times, the water goanna was rising from the sea, at only Gurka'wuy. All this rock is something important for Djarrka, for the water goanna. And this is something, the bubbles thing (the bubbles of Djarrka turned to stone). (Dundiwuy Wanambi cited in Dunlop 1990a: 44,46)

In the film *Djungguwan at Gurka'wuy* (1990), Dundiwuy Wanambi's evocative comments emphasise movements of the Yolngu environment that convey the ancestral past as immanent.¹ The Djungguwan initiation ritual comprises one film in a remarkable series of twenty-two ethnographic films made by Ian Dunlop between 1971 and 1982, available as part of the Yirrkala Film Project collection.² This film project arguably constitutes the largest single ethnographic film collection from any region in Australia, unique for its breadth of inquiry into Yolngu life.³ Scholars of visual anthropology have considered the problems of interpretation via reflexive engagements with film technology and ethnographic textuality (e.g. Crawford & Turton 1992; MacDougall 1992; Ginsburg 1994). The relationship between text and film has also been explored through the lens of the camera as a kind of mind's eye raising questions about the nature of cultural understanding through the visible (Grimshaw 1997, 2001). Due to its form, theorists have largely concentrated on aspects of the seen—on ways of visualising and reflexively interpreting the sound-image record through historical and contemporary issues. Yet films and film collections are seldom considered as set texts for anthropological courses.

Kracauer (1960) first noted that film mirrors the experience of moving through space. Moving and movement are also pivotal in shaping Indigenous ritual in north-east Arnhem Land. While ethnographic films facilitate the viewing of ritual dance, and film narration gives some explanation of the

content, deeper connectivities beneath the meaning of ritual dance cannot be easily elicited in the film medium. The Yirrkala Project Films demonstrate that a deep understanding of cosmology is required to illuminate a complex play between social, cosmological and performative elements in the structure and content of ethnographic film. These films invite the viewer to see a landscape where the numinous is in a continual dialectic with the phenomenal, as movement is both visible and invisible—seen in spatial patterns and body movements and concealed in song texts, rhythms and musical dynamics, each shaping the spiritual force of ritual. In the verbal and non-verbal modalities of performance, singing is an active agency in ‘bringing forth’ properties of animation since it has the potential for both invocation and evocation (Weiner 1995). It also allows generative spaces of personal and public meanings to emerge from inside the Ancestral Law.⁴

In the study of ethnographic film, the viewer might only glimpse the surface complexities of the performance context due to the relative ‘non-transparency of ethnographic film’ as it recasts performance time and space as distinct from the experience of ritual (Banks 1994). Film is often thought to be an accessible mode of visual representation because it is concerned with the recording of transient cultural phenomena and affords opportunities for closer study and re-analysis, but it equally constrains and recasts performers’ and viewers’ ways of seeing and feeling (see Morphy & Banks 1997). As a mode of recording individuals and objects in ways that highlight and distance ritual elements, ethnographic film can also respond, convey, persuade, question and strategise the viewer’s engagement with performative experience. Consequently, the process of ‘reading’ ritual music and dance on ethnographic film cannot be taken for granted, as it requires interrogating the many-layered meanings of cosmology, place and personhood in time and context. In order to make sense of ritual movement and sound, this chapter begins by outlining analytical approaches to dance anthropology before elaborating an ontological and performative relationship between people, ancestors and place in Yolngu cosmology and exploring ideas of ritual evocation through film.

While some dance anthropologists have examined dance systems either as grammatical structures of communication (Hanna 1979) involving a semiotic and semantic system akin to linguistics (Williams 1976; Kaepler 1985), others have pursued dance as a means of embodying ‘cultural standards and values’ (Royce 1977: 216) or as a social and political statement of gender and transnational identity (Cowan 1990). More recently, scholars have considered the impact of the film medium for dance anthropology. In examining the process of filming the Javanese dancing body, Hughes-Freeland (1999: 112, 113) explores historical and social contexts which transform the actions of individuals. She suggests that dance is not interesting solely for its patterned

movement but rather ‘as the physical dimension of human existence which is at once embodied and imagined’. Hughes-Freeland (1999: 113) identifies a key problem from this observation, ‘What is movement and what does it measure under particular circumstances?’ If movement, as Kracauer and Hughes-Freeland state, is the key to exploring dance on film, how are we to understand the play between physical and spiritual forces that mediate the ontology of moving and cosmologies of movement? Furthermore, to what extent can the recording of ritual on film be used as a medium for foregrounding the problems of the intangible, ineffable, unspeakable and ‘intuitive’?

In this chapter, I have selected excerpts from two of Ian Dunlop’s films, *In Memory of Mawalan* (filmed 1971, released 1983) and *Djungguwan Ceremony at Gurka’wuy* (filmed 1976, released 1989) as these ethnographic films were ‘intended to be “read” as a monograph, chapter by chapter or in this case, sequence by sequence, and then selectively re-read and studied’ (Dunlop 1990a: 3). However, in this analysis sequences have been selected to illustrate specific cosmological points which highlight aspects of Yolngu concepts of movement, place and being. The excerpts also portray two of the most important rituals still practised, albeit infrequently, in Arnhem Land. The first excerpt, taken from one phase of the *Ngärra* ceremony in the film *In Memory of Mawalan* illustrates how invocation and evocation are critical to sensing and making sense of the two Djangka’wu ancestral sisters’ performance of the landscape and seascape.⁵ The second excerpt explores elements of interanimation in the music and dance of the Djungguwan ritual of the two ancestral Wawilak sisters. I do not provide a detailed account of the Ngärra or Djungguwan ceremonies nor do I critique the filmic process, but the aim of this analysis is to allow the reader to engage more deeply in aspects of movement, dance, and ritual cosmology whilst viewing these films.⁶

In Memory of Mawalan: Making and erasing the landscape

In Memory of Mawalan details the journeys and ancestral dances of the two *Djanka’wu* sisters and illustrates how patterns of naming are critical to sensing and making sense of ancestral movements in song and dance.⁷ The Ngärra ceremony is held in honour of the memory of an outstanding leader, Mawalan, and relates the journey of two sisters and, in some versions, their brother called the Djangka’wu, who belong to the Dhuwa half or moiety of the Yolngu world.⁸

The film tells us how two sisters travelled by canoe from the west, across the sea to Yalangbara. At each place they came to, they gave birth to the land and emplaced its Law and the language of the people through the songs they sang, the dances they performed and the designs they created. As the ancestral

beings travelled, their songs tracked the country by leaving signatures of the sea in the land and the land in the sea. The white paint on their faces is the foam and seaspray, while around the canoe the water bubbles up and the waves break on the shore from their wake. Once ashore, the Djangka'wu begin to track the country in rhythm and motion. Singing and dancing, they imprint, infuse and impregnate the landscape that, in turn, is complicit in embodying their actions. As they walk over the sand hills, they plunge their digging sticks into the ground at Yalangbara and through their invocations the land births people from the earth. Today, men lead these dances following the movements of the first ancestral sisters. The sounds of their singing, like the piercing of the earth, enables the landscape to evoke its power because 'songs have the capacity to call the spirit into the presence of the songs; and the spirits have the power to manipulate the environment' (von Sturmer 1987: 71). Ancestral power is visualised and evoked by repeating dance patterns—as the Djangka'wu travel across the sand dunes, they leave their undulating shape in their dance movements. Swaying their hips as they dance, the women emplace undulations hill by hill; the contours of the country are palpable in the shapeliness of their bodies. Ancestral essences are danced into the ground through repeated thrusting motions of their digging sticks generating sacred wells. The subtitles over the men's singing read:



'The canoe the Djangka'wu Creation Ancestors paddled to Yalangbara still rests on the sand among the waves. This sacred rock is called Guluwurru' (Isaacs 1995: 32; photography courtesy of the Marika family, Yirrkala).



'The Djangka'wu dance in progress. Dancers strike the ground with the wapitja (sticks) which represent Djangka'wu mawalan or djuta at the place where they made fresh water. Wandjuk Marika directs the ceremony in memory of his father Mawalan' (Isaacs 1995: 139; photography courtesy of the Marika family, Yirrkala).

The water bubbles up from the sacred well. By stamping their feet the water bubbles up. Swaying our hips as we walk towards the sand hills, swinging our sticks walking through Yalangbara, Calling names of the sacred *mawalan*. With white hair and white beard from the sea spray. Plunging our sticks in the ground making the *djota*. (*In Memory of Mawalan*, Film Australia)

The Djangka'wu sing of shellfish and other edible roots they gather as they travel along. Singing over objects is a way of conversing with the land and emplacing identities within it, just as singing about the white clay on dancers' faces and bodies is a means of emplacing the signature of the country on their bodies. The meaning of their dancing is beyond dance; it is not a form, but a force of becoming one with the landscape. Just as the land is embodied in them, they are embodied in the land. The ability to birth it, procreate from it and within it, and then return back inside it are all imaged and imprinted in their movements. As they walk upon the land and leave their footprints, the motion of their walking imprints the land with the rhythm of their singing, and in its future invocation is the potential for the procreation of the land. Thus, the rhythmical fusion of their step and song is a pulse flowing through the land, animating it, bringing forth its people, creatures and habitat. Again the men sing: