



## A CHANGE OF DIRECTION DAVID MACDOUGALL

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David MacDougall was born in 1939 in the USA and now lives in Australia. He was educated at Harvard University and the University of California at Los Angeles. His first film *To Live With Herds* won the Grand Prix “Venezia Genti” at the Venice Film Festival in 1972. In 1973 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. His films, many co-directed with Judith MacDougall, include a trilogy on the Turkana of northwestern Kenya, comprising *Lorang’s Way*, *A Wife Among Wives* and *The Wedding Camels*, which was awarded the Royal Anthropological Institute’s Film Prize in 1980. From 1975 to 1987 he directed the Film Unit of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, producing twelve films on Aboriginal communities. In 1988–89 he and Judith MacDougall filmed *Photo Wallahs* (1991) on local photographers in an Indian town. In 1992 he filmed *Tempus de Baristas* (1994) about three generations of mountain shepherds in Sardinia. This won the 1995 Earthwatch Film Award. Since 1997 he has conducted a study of the Doon School in northern India. This will result in five films, the first two being *Doon School Chronicles* (2000) and *With Morning Hearts* (2001). Retrospectives of MacDougall’s work have been held in New York, Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich, Freiburg, and Tokyo. His publications include “Beyond Observational Cinema” (1975), “Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise” (1978), “Photo Hierarchic: Signs and Mirrors in Indian Photography” (1992), “Social Aesthetics and the Doon School” (2000), and *Transcultural Cinema* (1998). He is currently a Professorial Fellow at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University. – Address: Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia.

*The Work:* My aim in coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg was to spend a year writing about film and visual anthropology. It would also be an opportunity for reading and reflection, away from the films I was currently editing. I wanted to examine the theories and approaches that had grown up around visual anthropology and suggest some alternatives for the future.

I made an outline of chapters for a book and then spent several weeks staring at it. I spent several more weeks struggling with the first chapters, only to discover that they interested me less and less. I had said many of these things before, and my recent work in India had raised new questions that interested me more. In the dark days of December, I decided to abandon the outline and work on a group of separate essays about film, ethnography, and the senses. It remains to be seen whether these will make a book, but with this change of direction I began to enjoy my stay at the Kolleg much more.

These teething problems aside (which afflicted others too, I am glad to say), I found the other Fellows congenial and the weekly colloquia a constant source of pleasure. It was a privilege to listen to so many extraordinary thinkers, from so many disciplines, discussing their work. Often those who seemed the least driven were the most interesting intellectually and the most generous spirits as well.

*Wiko:* Given my interest in social aesthetics and small communities, I should perhaps have paid more attention to Wiko as an institution than I did. I have to confess, though, that my mind was often on other subjects. I did make some rudimentary observations. I noted the cautious way the Fellows addressed one another at the beginning and how the early conversations gradually developed into something more relaxed and substantial. I noted the Kolleg's strategy for encouraging collegiality through joint meals and the weekly colloquium and how this partially succeeded, despite the Fellows' resistance to being directed. I was amazed by the commitment of the staff to helping the Fellows and their equal care not to be intrusive. Indeed, there was something magical about the staff presence, as though they were working behind the scenes of a stage production.

As for ourselves, the Fellows, it was difficult to identify any set of issues that motivated us all. What was at stake for us? What mattered? In a sense, everything mattered – that was part of the problem. Despite this, there were certain definite trends in the air, evolutionary theory being perhaps the most prominent. There were also noticeably different styles of working and interacting, ranging from the quiet dedication of some Fellows to the formal approach of some European scholars to the nervous, make-or-break quality of North American academia. Intellectual ties and friendships deepened during the year, as

one might expect, although perhaps this process was somewhat retarded by the sense many of us had of being birds of passage. This might have been different in my case if I had been part of a focus group, as had been mooted when I was first invited in 1997. Unfortunately, I couldn't make it that year. I should have liked very much to have been part of a group exploring visual images and social research. Some of us might in fact have formed such a group on our own, but this never quite happened. Perhaps it was our own fault, perhaps it was because we were a little too far apart in our interests. Whatever the reasons, I regret that it did not.

It was interesting to observe the ways that different Fellows conceived knowledge and the degree of confidence that went with these conceptions. An informal meeting was held in May to discuss this very matter. For some, knowledge seemed to be less a problem in itself than a matter of degree or of certainty. For them, what was not provable was not really knowledge, but supposition. For others, the forms of knowledge seemed to be pigeonholed according to kind and quality. I wanted to ask if knowledge could exist in the absence of anyone knowing it; or whether there was such a thing as visual knowledge; or how other Fellows categorized the forms of knowledge in their own disciplines. Unfortunately we never really got to these matters. During the year, I noticed some stirrings of anxiety and self-doubt among several Fellows as they became exposed to the very different styles of others. This was most pronounced in the long grey days of winter.

*Berlin:* I could never quite decide whether Berlin was a sad city or a happy one. The question is almost meaningless, of course – more a projection of one's feelings than anything to do with the city itself – but it is still the sort of question one asks oneself. Living in the park-like Grunewald was an insulated, privileged existence. Everything seemed a little distant, a little imaginary. When I made a brief trip to India, returning to the silence and twilight was like being wrapped in cotton wool. During the winter months it was especially necessary to get resensitized to life by making weekend forays into Mitte, Kreuzberg, and farther north and east. Concerts and museums were another, very different kind of pleasure, often more accessible than films, which, when they were not dubbed into German, seemed to start at odd hours or late at night. Nevertheless, we liked the atmosphere of some of Berlin's scruffier art cinemas, institutions that unfortunately seem to have gone out of business in many other countries.

I thank the Kolleg for small pleasures like these and for the intellectual stimulation that was its primary aim and for the friendships that happened along the way.