



Sentience and Sentimentality in *Remembering Yayayi*

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Remembering Yayayi is a film about repatriation. An ugly word, a colonial word, repatriation means, of course, the return of valuable objects to their rightful owners, in this case, to Pintupi Aboriginal people of the Western Desert of Australia. But *Remembering Yayayi* is not ugly and nor does it feel colonial. It is the work of affect that ultimately drives the film, rendering a clearly bounded sense of who the film belongs to or whose past it ultimately represents—colonial/Indigenous; Pintupi/non-Pintupi—complicated, entangled and enmeshed. The title of anthropologist Fred s's own paper on the making of this film is *Whose story is this?*, identifying precisely an ambiguity of what I argue here is the work of affect in the film. And indeed, why affect matters.

Remembering Yayayi collapses boundaries and temporalities and disrupts any number of versions of progressivist histories returning us to a largely unknown and undocumented period of time and to a community which, in fact, no longer exists, thus enabling a distinctive minoritarian or counter-history to emerge for the first time. But it does so through what becomes a highly Pintupi-directed and, specifically, Pintupi-affectively-driven presentation of this history (despite Pintupi not ever being themselves behind the camera nor at the editing desk). This is film-specific historiography, in which time, history and the cinematic itself become a vehicle for a uniquely Central and Western Desert version of temporality, which is less about the past than what others have identified as “remembering forward” or “remembering the future.” *Remembering Yayayi* in this way becomes part of a greater genre of what Faye Ginsburg has called “screen memories”: Indigenous recuperative strategies of harnessing what are colonial documentary forms and archives (which represent a potent primary phenomenological record) to different self-determined ends than those for which they may have been originally produced.¹

How did a film that was shot and edited by non-Pintupi become a Pintupi production? What is it about the work of affect in the film that enables this critical re-rendering?

The making of *Remembering Yayayi*

In 1974, the ethnographic filmmaker Ian Dunlop shot thirteen hours (approximately twenty-six reels of thirty minutes each) of 16mm footage in Yayayi, a (then) Australian Central Desert community of approximately 300 Pintupi people. Pintupi (technically Pintupi-speaking people; one of approximately twenty-five language groups of the Western Desert) had already gained the attention of national media at the time, as the purported “last” tribe of traditional Aboriginal people to be forcibly rounded up and brought to live in the larger community settlements which were then being established by the Government for purposes of assimilation and sedimentation during the 1950s and 1960s.

Yayayi was an outstation of Papunya, one of these larger enforced community settlements and, indeed, one of the most famous (historically accredited as the original community to spawn the Western Desert Painting movement or Papunya Tula movement, as it is also called, flagging the title of the first community-directed Aboriginal art cooperative, which itself also took take shape at Papunya during this same period). Yayayi was established when the Outstation Movement was first thriving, a movement which saw the return of Aboriginal people to their own homelands, in order to live in smaller, traditional country, settlements. The larger communities the Government had established and forced people to live within—Papunya, Yuendumu, Lajamanu, and elsewhere across the Desert—had come to be considered unhealthy places for Aboriginal people to live.

Hard as it is to imagine now—and the film asks us explicitly to remember this period today—the Australian Government supported the Outstation Movement. Yayayi was one of the places Pintupi went once leaving Papunya, before the outstations of what are now the permanent communities of Kiwirrkura and Kintore (both of which were themselves, originally outstations). Yayayi itself no longer exists (as many outstations of the period have now closed or been abandoned due to lack of resourcing), a fact, which, itself, sets the stage for the kinds of “remembering” the film actively asks us to participate in.

The footage was shot over the course of a month by Dunlop (accompanied by a sound recordist and an additional camera assistant). Fred Myers, who was conducting his primary fieldwork at the time in Yayayi, acted as an advisor and translator for Dunlop and features prominently in the film, both in Dunlop’s original footage and in the newly shot footage. One year later, in 1975, Myers had travelled with two Pintupi men, Freddy West Tjakamarra and George Yapa Yapa Tjangala, to Sydney to translate and comment on this footage, also recorded in full on fifteen double-sided ninety-minute cassettes, according to Myers.² But Dunlop himself never utilised this material or

completed the film project he undertook. Apparently dissatisfied with the filmic quality of his work and claiming he couldn't "find an organising principle for the film," he archived the footage and sound material for close to thirty years, at the National Archives of Australia.³

In 2006 (funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], the Australian Research Council and supported by the National Museum of Australia, Papunya Tula Artists and the Australian National University), Fred Myers returned to Yayayi to see what if anything Pintupi might themselves want to do with this archival footage. Over the next seven years (2006-2013), a film was made about the repatriation process through a complex collaborative project, what Myers identifies as an explicitly intergenerational project, involving Dunlop and four Pintupi consultants who identified themes for a first cut with Pip Deveson (sound recordist, editor and long-term collaborator of Dunlop's).⁴ This cut was then supplemented by digital footage, shot in 2006 by Myers (in conjunction with his former PhD student Dr. Lisa Stefanoff and partner, Basil Schild) in Kiwirrkura, and cut back together again by Deveson with more extensive footage shot by Deveson of Myers and Nampitjinpa, and Myers and Dunlop, in discussion. The final hour-long film, edited by Deveson, features narration by Myers but is primarily narrated by Marlene Nampitjinpa Spencer, who had been a young girl at the time of the film making, later a long-time health worker for the Pintupi Homelands Health Service and now a spokesperson for the Western Desert Dialysis Project.



Fig. 1: Marlene Nampitjinpa Spencer from the film interview, Alice Springs, 2013. Photo credit: Pip Deveson

The film premiered at the Margaret Mead Festival in 2014, accompanied by Marlene Nampitjinpa, Pip Deveson and Fred Myers, and at the National Museum of Australia in 2015, with Nampitjinpa, Deveson, Dunlop, Myers, and another Pintupi consultant on the project, Monica Robinson Nangala. In 2016, it was shown at the Jean Rouch International Film Festival in Paris. It is soon to be distributed by Documentary Educational Resources (DER).

The making-Pintupi of *Remembering Yayayi*

The film is structured by a sharp delineation of past from present by the footage. We aren't just told by the voice over (Fred Myers) that Dunlop's film is old; we see and feel its age directly. The colour tint is somehow wrong, washed out, faded, time-stamped in this immediate sense, particularly in contrast to the sharp and rich saturation of the (digital tape) contemporary footage of Myers and Marlene in conversation, and especially the close ups of Marlene's face. There is an aching historicism of over-exposure and too much light, perhaps particularly in the opening shots as we adjust our perception, as if a certain technical apprehension haunts the entirety of the project and announces in advance that what we are here to witness is never going to be simple. The "gravitas of age," as Rachel Moore calls the material claims old photographs and films have upon us; the deep ambivalence and 'sensate longing' of the modernist dilemma for the "strange and familiar ... of the archaic past."⁵

It isn't just the grain of the celluloid that feels old. It is the camera angle, the wide and long shot pans of camp life, of ceremony, of meetings and gatherings. For those who were raised professionally, as it were, on the films of Jean Rouch, Robert Gardner and Timothy Asch, Dunlop's footage is decisively high ethnography; it makes the world of others look not as if it were there simply to be apprehended but, indeed, that it needs to be apprehended in order to be understood. The world of culture, as ethnographic film constructs it, is complex and to be uncovered by examination and, specifically, by what the camera alone itself can reveal: not an obvious or self-evident gaze (for nothing in the early works of ethnography is easy or obvious). The task of visual anthropology was, as Howard Morphy describes it, to produce the logic of society as if revealing itself.⁶



Fig. 2: Anatjari Tjampitjinpa at Yayayi in 1974 with his daughter, son and nephew. Photo Credit Es Giddy

In Dunlop's footage, we enter a world of cinematic encounter and a right to look that has itself passed; the same era Okwui Enwezor based his 2012 La Triennale *Intense Proximities* (Palais de Tokyo, Paris) upon;⁷ an aesthetic at once dubious, difficult, fascinating and productive because it is (also) highly valued, tied to the critical legacy of the first half of the twentieth century and the avant-garde; the ethnographic poetics of André Gide, Lévi-Strauss, Walker Evans; a gaze that ties developments in Western aesthetics specifically to the colonial project of exploring, documenting and writing culture.

The camera angles are too close, too intimate. Contemporary filmmakers could not make work like this today. CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Organisation) trainees are explicitly taught to keep distance from, and thus respect, what they film. Outsiders such as me are rightly subject to not only Indigenous protocols now in place for protecting rights to be photographed and/or filmed, following the development of Warlpiri Media (now Pintupi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media) and other community-media organisations in the late 1970s and 1980s, but equally to rigorous HREC and other institutional ethics committees that now oversee any and all research undertaken today, ensuring against any possible illicit or un-approved photographs and specifically film.⁸ That Dunlop's footage, and indeed the larger project of *Remembering Yayayi* itself, could not be made today makes it all the more poignant because it claims in this further sense what only the passing of time itself really can: the fact that what becomes important, or might become valuable for the future, cannot be known at the time and,

indeed, can only be known after the fact. Walter Benjamin's Angel of History in this sense, indeed, can only fly backwards into the future.

It is thresholds more intimate than interiors that Dunlop's camera finds and fixes upon: camp life lived in front of door ways to humpies, to tents; the back of the truck at community pay day; over the shoulders of men at early meetings of Papunya Tula and in the writing/telling of Tjukurrpa, a Tingarri Dreaming story, to the anthropologist Myers, replete with his use of the furtive whisper for the sacred, to make the point that this is life from and about the perspective of an external gaze.⁹

An exquisite and painful uncanny—or is this specific to anthropologists such as me?—is the syncretism of Myers's embodiment, equally caught by and caught up in the work of the film. This is mimetic syncopation, what Merleau-Ponty called the primacy of a "corporeal schema," stylised ways of doing and being uniquely shared by members of a culture; an orientational posture and empathic generosity we also witness in the scenes with Marlene, where her expressions and sentiments are shared by Myers directly and in turn extend to our empathic response reciprocally, in viewing the film. It is not just that Myers has written prolifically, empathetically, over the same thirty years of this film's making, and is one of the first anthropologists to write on the importance of emotion itself but here we see and feel his empathy as a lived relation.¹⁰ Here, it is as if Myers's conceptualisation of the Pintupi term, *waltya*, analysed at length in his defining early ethnography, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* (1986), is immediately manifest.¹¹ What it is to be a person, a country-man (*waltya*), is literally seen in the film to be dependent upon inter-relationships. A profoundly social condition, made through reciprocal forms of co-recognition, shared with the bodies of others. Here, it is as if Myers's capacity to know and model this concept could only be a by-product of a lived ethnographic generosity, inhabiting a life world he extends, in turn, to our own. This is embodied and contagious sympathy that only film can enable: indexical ethnographic knowledge caught directly by the film or an "expression of experience by experience," as Vivien Sobchack originally described the distinctive capacity of the phenomenology of cinema.¹²



Fig. 3: Fred Myers, Marlene Nampitjinpa Spencer, and Pip Deveson in the lobby of the American Museum of Natural History for the screening of *Remembering Yayayi*. October 2014. (The installation of Gapuwiyak Calling is in the background). Photo credit: Francoise Dussart.

In Dunlop's footage, we see the twenty-six-year-old Myers and in the contemporary footage, his distinguished silvered hair now, in mannerism aligned with the bodies of the men of Pintupi he worked and lived with, relatives as they identify him and themselves, in the opening scenes; standing as they do arms crossed waiting, in the background scene at the Yayayi community shop; sitting cross-legged and pronouncing word-perfect Pintupi-inflected English: "\$175 dollars" (the amount of a cheque for one of the Papunya Tula painters and even if this were for only one painting, and the film does not make this clear, it is an extraordinarily small amount for what have now become some of the most lucrative of all Western Desert art works, these early paintings on boards we also see in the film and in production; this particular scene is rendered even more poignant a moment because one of the painters calls out, Pintupi English again, "too much money!").¹³ And smoking, always smoking; notebook never far away; waiting for and being with, that is the real work of ethnography (what Kim McKenzie immortalises in *Waiting for Harry*)¹⁴—a kind of being with so *not* the purpose-driven, goal-focused, fieldwork of today, the era of consultancies, partnerships, collaborative projects, and indeed, repatriation. This is a film, then, also about age, aging, mortality; the transformation of a discipline, as much as it is about an Aboriginal people or place. In this sense, the film belongs (also) to the life work and life world of Myers, and would not have been successful without his social capital and capacities to navigate what he has himself modelled in his work, the "social field of Aboriginal art production."¹⁵

Any sense of the camera as unnoticed by the Pintupi is thwarted by the original film footage itself. In-sync conversations are (equally) caught and preserved by the camera and, indeed, translated later by subtitles (although clearly not understood by Dunlop or his assistants at the time). There is nothing passive or powerless about Pintupi. The film is punctuated by their (supposed) off-screen side-comments and directives: "Leave that stick, they are filming you"; "They photographing us sitting here and talking"; "I'm only standing here for the money"; "Keep talking so they can pick it up." And, the scene in the contemporary footage of what Myers jokingly calls "the endless boomerang"; a scene in which Anatjari Tjampitjinpa (with Pinta Pinta Tjapanangka) is shown to be carving for a long time a boomerang, in which, as Dunlop discusses with Myers in a contemporary scene, he (Dunlop) kept thinking, "when on earth will he finish?," and Tjampitjinpa was getting crosser, wondering when the filming would ever finish: "I'm getting very tired," with his wife announcing she was "getting sick of the sound of it," all caught in the same moment.

Thus, despite the protestations of Marlene (and, indeed, the underlying premise of the film) that at the time Pintupi were *ngurrpa* (ignorant) of cameras, of photography, Pintupi in fact show no small degree of familiarity with scopic expectations and perform themselves, perform culture even, no less, for Dunlop's camera.

Marlene Nampitjinpa's narration activates and directs the film's mode/s of attention. Her "emotional tones for remembering" drive our own, what we should be "seeing" or noticing in a scene, what is important to remember, what should not be forgotten. Here, memory is an incomplete project, and film a unique vehicle for "remembering other people's memory."¹⁶ An active process—the capacity of the film to reveal memory—becomes what the film is about. We not only hear Myers's voice-over telling us how positively and with what joyousness Pintupi experienced seeing the original Dunlop footage in the film (and witness shots of the community viewing it in the contemporary footage) but we see and experience this pleasure directly. Moments of emotional intensity and high Pintupi drama (pleasure, shame, grief) are brought out to us by Marlene's narration, as much as by her expressions and gestures. Pintupi and English combine and/or vie for representational primacy and perform an intercultural savvy that would be otherwise be very hard to explain. Marlene repeats herself to Myers and to us; and moves to which ever language, idiom, serves her purpose best in order to translate what of course is, and isn't, on the screen itself, in nuanced bilingual dexterity. Her voice, in this way, becomes the authoritative voice-over of the film.



Fig.4: Marlene Nampitjinpa (center) with some relatives watching some of Dunlop's footage on a laptop at Kintore, 2006.

Two such moments specifically stand out for me.

One is what I want to call the shame scene or *kurnta* (*kurnta* means at once, shame, embarrassment and shyness, in Warlpiri but also in Pintupi). The fact that Pintupi were actively aware of, and not exactly comfortable with, the camera takes shape in an early scene, particularly, as Marlene narrates it, in front of her mother's camp, where, she tells us, "a thousand people must be inside that tent from the camera," watching this scene with us as she does, laughing and participating both at once in the scene (inside her mother's tent) and commenting upon it, thus, effusing the scene with a profound sense of the absurdity of this otherwise sombre ethnographic realism. Marlene reads this scene for what it should be for us; her own playfulness combines with the capricious capacities of her kin to hide, to laugh, to be ashamed of/from that camera and of course, not, and in turn, to make us, the audience, thirty years later, able to laugh empathetically at the (shameful) invasiveness of the camera and the Pintupi response, and at ourselves in turn, all at once (and be ashamed yet, that we keep looking today). What is unspeakable and unintelligible ultimately and precludes the purposefulness of the documentary mode is here what matters most.

Second, a scene of high visual poignancy: an almost still-life-like portraiture, signified as important by Marlene as much as by the camera, which focuses, zooms in upon, one very old man sitting at the opening of a smaller humpy, alone. “*Old Kulitu, Tjamu, poor thing,*” Marlene calls him, “*Grandfather*” (and repeats again that *Tjamu* means grandfather). This is not a nameless ethnographic “elder,” rather, this is Marlene’s “*Grandfather,*” who she then describes, in English, as “like a little king looking out,” identifying in an instance the fact that Pintupi are, specifically, landed gentry, royalty proper, on sovereign country, then as now. Her “*Grandfather*” appears a king in her eyes and is pointedly made one for us, in turn, by her language and figure. (And it is this old man, who respectfully, shamefully, turns away first from the camera, rather than the other way around, reminding us equally, acutely, that we have been looking too long in a mutuality of the gaze that is not mutual, not equal).

Remembering Yayayi concludes with Marlene overtly claiming the film as her own. This “*is my story,*” she says, because she has “*seen it*” and “*it really touched me, in my heart.*” Her claim, her certitude, is that this history and Yayayi as a place and time were then “*healthy and happy.*” People were “*living a normal life, not sick.*” This was a time “*before white men’s rubbish food,*” as she notes in close and specific detail of what was hunted, eaten and cooked by people then, how. In a concluding scene, it is meat cooked in *kapi* (boiling water) on the campfire, no oil, no butter, as she greatly admires. While it may be sad that this time has passed, and she is bowed over literally by grief, as well as brought to tears by the footage, Yayayi is in no sense a scene of trauma or duress. Markedly unlike a generic “remote” of how people once lived or indeed, are seen to live now in the media-depicted dying-sunset and/or dysfunctional Aboriginal “remote” (as specifically, current Intervention or Stronger Futures national government policy would have it),¹⁷ that is, “remote” communities as impoverished, deprived, marginalised, Marlene instead reveals a period of time in which life on country, in place, in community, with family, was plentiful and happy. Here indeed is a Pintupi future-becoming potentiality for living-on, for endurance: a future-becoming potentiality for Pintupi taking shape in the contemporary, for the temporality of the film is compellingly now and future-directed, in a context where life in the Aboriginal remote is itself under threat.¹⁸ Why again the work of affect, the work of *Remembering Yayayi* matter most, because it tells a story that simply cannot be heard otherwise.



Fig. 5: Pip Deveson, Fred Myers, and Marlene Nampitjinpa answering questions at the screening of *Remembering Yayayi* at the Margaret Mead Film Festival in New York City, October 2014. Photo Credit Unknown.

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Remembering Yayayi (57 mins)

A collaborative film project

Directors: Pip Deveson, Ian Dunlop and Fred Myers

With Special Thanks to Marlene Nampitjinpa Spencer

Camera: Ian Dunlop, Pip Deveson

Additional Footage: Basil Schild, Lisa Stefanoff

Narrated by Fred Myers

Translation and Documentation: Fred Myers, Freddy West Tjakamarra, George Yapa Yapa Tjangala, Monica Robinson Nangala, Irene Nangala, Bobby West Tjupurrula, Jimmy Brown Tjampitjinpa, Peter Thorley

Photographs: Ian Dunlop, Ed Giddy

2014 Australian National University and the Pintupi Communities of Kintore and Kiwirrkura

<http://rememberingyayayi.com/>

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-10/pintubi-yayayi/6384406>

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Notes

- ¹ Faye D. Ginsburg, "Screen Memories: Resignifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media," in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, edited by Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 39–57.
- ² Fred Myers, "Whose Story Is This? Complexities and Complicities of Using Archival Footage," (unpublished, 2015), 1-63.
- ³ Myers, "Whose Story," 8.
- ⁴ Myers (2016), personal communication, March, 2016. For further discussion, see Myers, "Whose Story".
- ⁵ Rachel Moore, "Love Machines," in *Technologies of Magic: A Cultural Study of Ghosts*, eds John Potts and Ed Sheer (Sydney: Power Publications, 2006), 14-29.
- ⁶ Howard Morphy, "Becoming a Visual Anthropologist", in *Perspectives on Ethnographic Films: The Films of Ian Dunlop*, ed. N. Finj and P. Deveson, *Humanities Research* 8: 1 (2012). <http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Humanities+Research+Vol+XVIII.+No.+1.+2012/10401/cover.html> accessed 25/3/2016.
- ⁷ Okwui Enwezor, *Intense Proximities: An Anthology of the Near and the Far* (Paris, Centre National des Arts Plastiques Tour Atlantique, 2012).
- ⁸ Australian Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).
- ⁹ Tjukurrpa, glossed as the Dreaming in English, refers to the complex period of time in which Ancestors first roamed the country and made the country, flora, fauna, weather and people as they are today; a period of time at once in the past and co-present materially in the traces, marks and designs that are everywhere manifest in the contemporary. For further discussion, see Fred R. Myers *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1986).
- ¹⁰ Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*.
- ¹¹ Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, 106.
- ¹² Vivien Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.
- ¹³ This scene features early Papunya Tula painters, Uta Uta Tjangala, Shorty Lungkarta Tjungarrayi, Yala Yala Gibson and their works. Later, in the film, John Tjakamarra and Tim

Payungka will also figure, amongst others. This part of Dunlop's footage had been used previously for the exhibition "Pintupi Painting: Out of the Desert" (2007, National Museum Australia) and also includes crucial scenes between early art centre manager and advisors, Peter Fanin, Jeff Stead, Bob Edwards and Roy Monks (who asks for twists on the end of the boomerang and for signs of the rasps to be smoothed over, "otherwise its not real" and "Whitefella been here"); the demand for authenticity and traditionalism even then, when painting was, for the first time in fact, generating traditionalism as we now take it for granted.

¹⁴ *Waiting for Harry*, Kim McKenzie (Producer, Director, Photographer, Editor), Peter Barker (Sound), Les Hiatt (Anthropologist) English narration, Anbarra (Burrarra) language with English subtitles (Canberra: AIAS Film Unit, 1980).

¹⁵ For further discussion, see Myers, *Whose Story*; and Fred Myers, *Painting Culture: The Making of Aboriginal High Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁷ In 2007, the national Australian Commonwealth Government seized, by compulsory acquisition, seventy-three "remote" Aboriginal townships and communities, deploying over six hundred soldiers and detachments to "stabilize and normalize" what was constructed as an emergency national humanitarian crisis. This has, in turn, seen the roll out of a series of new statutory laws and agreements applied only to so-called remote Aboriginal communities and people, called originally the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and more recently, Stop the Gap or more simply, the Intervention. While the deployment of Australian Defence Force military police to targeted remote communities ceased formally in October 2008, since that time an increasing number of institutions, agencies, and government personnel have now replaced established Aboriginal local councils and Traditional Owner authorities of self-governance, resulting in transformations in health policy; the compulsory leasing by Aboriginal people of Aboriginal lands, and of housing in traditional Aboriginal countries; and tenancy and truancy commissions with explicit powers to regulate welfare expenditure, curtail the purchase and consumption of alcohol, and ensure attendance at school by all Aboriginal school-aged children. In 2012, the Australian Government passed, with bi-partisan support, a new policy platform called Stronger Futures, committing resourcing to these same "remote" policies for the next ten years. For further discussion, see Jennifer Biddle, *Remote Avant-Garde: Aboriginal Art under Occupation* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ For further discussion, see Myers, *Whose Story* and Biddle, *Remote Avant-Garde*.