

Thinking about Grain of the Voice

By Arthur & Corinne Cantrill

There are many strands in our filmmaking practice, which now spans 50 years [ed. and over 80 films]. Quite early we became interested in the Australian landscape as our subject and inspiration.

In 1973 we became aware (thanks to the film/video maker Joseph El Khourey) of the 1901 film documentation of Arunta ceremonies by Walter Baldwin Spencer, and of his writing in *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*.¹ Intrigued with Baldwin Spencer's writing on the Arunta people, his photographs and film work, we set off to visit Uluru, Katatjuta, Unthurqua, and to travel along the MacDonnell Ranges. We undertook a constant filming practice, and recording of ambient sound.²

Before leaving Melbourne on this "expedition" we had obtained permission to visit the Areyonga Community, with a view to recording some traditional singing, which we might use to accompany the landscape films. It must be stated honestly, that we wished to engage, even at a surface level, with indigenous tribal people – even just to have a clearer understanding of what was taking place, out of sight of the city, with government policies obliging people to live in communities such as Areyonga, far from their tribal lands.

For us, there has always been the understanding that until relatively recently this was an Aboriginal, indigenous landscape – and evidences, traces, clues of this are everywhere.³

One aspect we noticed was the appropriation by Arnhem Land singing of local bird song and rhythms, which seemed to correspond to our own use of insect sounds and bird calls as "music" in our other landscape films. Yet our practice has primarily been concerned with the film image, both in the filming and the editing process. As we work on the image, we have several possible ideas for the sound, drawing upon our field recordings of wind, water, birds, insects, etc., and these may be used as unaltered sound, or mixed, slowed or manipulated in other ways. Possible sound ideas are tried out against the edited film; if interesting, the idea will be further developed, otherwise abandoned, and after considering as to why a

sound has not worked, another sound idea is pursued.

Our driving took us through South Australia into the Northern Territory and along the western MacDonnell Ranges. Yet the journey was a disheartening experience! Everywhere, the great

mythical landscapes and sites, described so vividly in anthropological writings had been corralled into cattle stations, tourist developments, and picnic spots. Unthurqua, the sacred place described in such detail by Baldwin Spencer, was especially painful to come upon.

We arrived in Areyonga (360 kilometres west of Alice Springs) at a difficult time. It was in transition from being controlled by the Lutheran Church, as a sub branch of Hermannsburg Mission, to being run by the Federal Government, on the way to being controlled by the people themselves. It was also a time of internal upheaval as there had been some deaths or killings just

before we arrived. It was also a period when young men and women were being initiated, and segregated from wider contact.

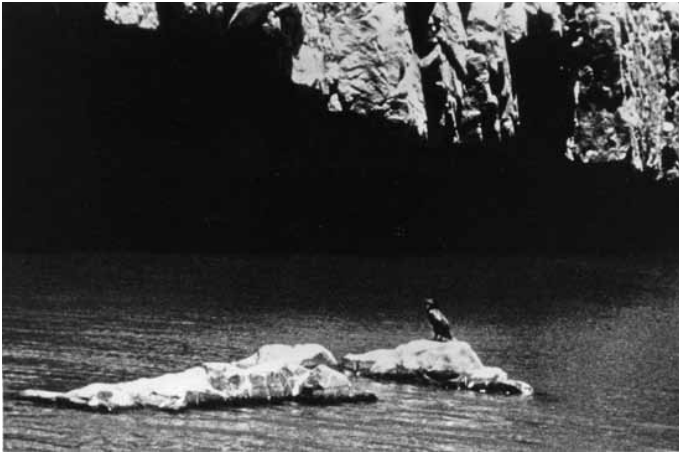
Although we had written ahead to say that we would like to record traditional songs, we were directed towards younger men who were into Country and Western music – a specialty of the community – with which we declined to be involved. We were finally introduced to senior Songmen and Songwomen – tribal elders in the Pitjantjatjara community.

They were quite circumspect, and no definite arrangement was made. A few hours later, a group of women arrived, to say that they were ready for us to record their singing. We went down to a dry riverbed outside Areyonga, and set up our Nagra, our Beyer microphone, and prepared our non-synch, hand wound 16mm Bolex camera, which we intended to use sparingly.

There were three older Songwomen, and behind them a large group of younger women and children who were to listen and to beat a rhythm. The Songwomen did not speak English. They were to sing an important traditional song cycle – "Two Women" – a story of two ancestral beings, travelling across the Central Australian landscape, stopping on the way at special sites: waterholes, gorges, etc.



Grain of the Voice with Corinne Cantrill as protagonist; La Mama Theatre, Carlton, Australia, 1980. Born from a dissatisfaction with the ambience of conventional film screening an expanded cinema approach with elaborate set design was utilised to represent aspects of the Central Australian landscape and experience.



Still image from the film, *Grain of the Voice*

The song cycle was in a series of “verses”, with pauses in between, during which there would be whispered discussions, possibly about the development of the narrative, laughter, coughing, mixed with the ambient sounds. There was an interesting arrangement of the three voices – each of the women had a distinctive voice quality that brought a tonal complexity to the sound of the song cycle.

We were very reluctant to film during the singing, suspecting they were more comfortable with sound recording (one young indigenous woman also recorded the songs on an audio cassette recorder). We filmed the group before, as the singing began, and then finally as the song cycle was concluding, all in black and white. Fortunately, our reel of quarter inch audio tape ran long enough not to need changing.

We did not ask for a translation of the words. We had already been told that it was the story of two ancestors travelling through country, stopping, resting, and then continuing their travels.

Everyone’s spirits were lifted by this experience, and it was decided to sing another shorter and well-known popular song cycle – “Seven Sisters” (the Pleiades⁴), to which younger women present joined in.

The women had apparently “tested the waters” with us, as it led to the senior men coming forward the next afternoon for us to record with them. This was a larger group of about six men, with a similar arrangement of different voice qualities among the principal Songmen. The song cycle recorded was “Rock Wallaby and Black-bird” – again the travels of ancestral beings through the landscape. Once again, we did some preliminary filming before and at the beginning of the singing. This time the men progressively decorated their bodies with ochre as they sang.

We left Areyonga the next day, as the weather was worsening, and also knowing that there were serious tensions about the recent deaths in the community.

The experience of being at Areyonga and in touch, however superficially, with these remarkable senior tribal men and women, left us deeply and powerfully moved.

When we returned to Melbourne a few weeks later, we got to see the hours of film we had shot along the MacDonnell Ranges, and to begin thinking about the image and the possible soundtrack. There had been no definite decision to use the recordings we had made at Areyonga with the film, although we realized that we had filmed along the MacDonnell Ranges, travelling east to west, as did the subjects of the songs, and that we had stopped at particular places, waterholes, riverbeds, gorges for more detailed work.

Of course, there was no literal interpretation of the song cycles – we were not stopping at the places described in the songs – any such connection is metaphoric only.

When we tried the song cycles against the film material we found a surprising relationship, a harmony of the two working together – one

seemed to be made for the other. We agreed that this was the way we would proceed. We decided not to edit the sound recordings in any way: the pauses between verses, coughing, laughter, whispering, the dogs barking, a donkey braying, the occasional false start were all a part of the song cycles.

We borrowed the series title for the three films from Roland Barthes’ essay “The Grain of the Voice” (first published in 1972 as “Le grain de la voix”), which we had read earlier.^{5,6} We had our own interpretation of the phrase ‘grain of the voice’ – we had an interest in how each society, each culture manifests itself through the voice qualities of language, speech, singing, laughing, music – qualities of softness, harshness, texture, precision, etc. – and that through these, and without the need of translation, we can learn much about the culture. Barthes wrote of “the grain” being “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue; ... the body in the voice as it sings . . .”, and this also connected with our project.⁷

Just as the song cycles were unedited, there is little editing of the film image. We largely adhered to the travelling from east to west along the MacDonnell Ranges for *Two Women* (1980), with the pauses between verses often coinciding with stopping at particular sites. Our journey corresponds to the songline and perhaps as a result, a serendipitous coming together of image and sound occurred in this project. This was in contrast with our usual approach to film-making, where close editing is often paramount.

There was a sense in the films that the disembodied voices, leaving the confines of Areyonga, were freed to visit the ancestral lands. At the end, when the camera returned to the singers at Areyonga, there was a feeling of sadness and loss.

See *Cantrills Filmnotes*, Double Issue #33/34 (August 1980) for a longer and more detailed account of this work as film, and as a film-theatre-performance work given at La Mama, Melbourne.

Endnotes

- 1 Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., London, 1899 (Reprinted by Dover Publications, New York, 1968)
- 2 Our Baldwin Spencer obsession led us to make *Reflections on Three Images by Baldwin Spencer* (1974), and *Studies in Image (De)Generation* (1975). These are silent, as all efforts to arrive at sound for these films failed – the 1901 silent footage, reworked on an optical printer, had inherent visual rhythms which had no need for audio accompaniment.
- 3 In a quartet of our early films *The Native Trees of Stradbroke Island* (1964), and even in some of the episodes of our 1961 children’s series *Kip and David*, filmed on Stradbroke Island, Queensland, and elsewhere in the Bush. In an episode of *Kip and David*, ‘David’ climbs a huge midden heap on Stradbroke Island and finds stone tools crafted for opening shellfish. (The rows of midden heaps have since been destroyed by sand mining.)
- 4 In 1969, considering the sound for films such as *Bouddi* and *Earth Message*, we asked the Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS) if we could use some of Dr. Alice Moyle’s recordings of non-secret, secular songs from Arnhem Land to accompany the landscape images. We received permission to do this and were provided with tapes of the music. We would not have considered this, even a few years later – we would have made our own recordings, or used ambient landscape sounds as a basis for the work. At the time these films were a means for us to engage with the authentic Australian culture, after four years in Europe.
- 5 Greek mythology associated with the Pleiades open star cluster in the constellation of Taurus. It is among the nearest star clusters to Earth and is the cluster most obvious to the naked eye in the night sky. Pleiades has several meanings in different cultures and traditions.

- 5 Three films with the generic title of *Grain of the Voice* were produced: *Two Women* (1980), *Seven Sisters* (1980), and *Rock Wallaby and Blackbird* (1980).
- 6 Roland Barthes, "Le grain de la voix", *Musique en jeu* 9, 1972 (Published in English as "The Grain of the Voice" in *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes, *Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, Fontana, Glasgow, 1972)
- 7 *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes, *Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath*, Fontana, Glasgow, 1972, p. 295

ARTHUR & CORINNE CANTRILL have been making films since 1960; at first documentaries on art, then experimental film since 1969; and they edited and published *Cantrills Filmnotes*, a journal on film and video art, from 1971 to 2000.

They have been active in several directions of film research (and have made more than eighty films, many of them quite provocative), such as multi-screen projection, and film-performance; single-frame structuring of film; landscape filmmaking, and all of their work deeply explores the process of filming and the audience perception of visuals with a particular fixation upon the use of landscape in order to create a national identity.

Their filmwork and publishing is well-known internationally; they are represented in several film collections including those of Musée national d'art moderne (Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris), New York Museum of Modern Art, The British Council, and the National Library of Australia. Their films have been shown at the Centre Pompidou and The Louvre in Paris, the New York Museum of Modern Art, as well as numerous art museums and film festivals.

In 1996 Arthur Cantrill retired as Associate Professor at the University of Melbourne.

Photo Essay: Orthopteroid Insects in the Muller Range, Papua New Guinea

Photos & Essay by Dave Rentz

In mid September 2009 I had the privilege of accompanying a group from Conservation International into the Muller Range, Western Province, Papua New Guinea. This is located in the "Karst District", a region of karst topography, which of course, would mean a limestone substrate topped with about a foot of topsoil. The

fauna was fantastic but not easy to see. One had to wander about at night with a torch and be very alert. None of these katydids or crickets were heard or recorded in the field. But there are some things we can say about them based on related species and our knowledge of the behaviour of rainforest orthopterans. – *Dave Rentz*



Fig. 1. An important insect component of tropical rainforests, katydids control excess growth of plant life, assist in pollination, and provide food for myriads of other organisms. They have remarkable cryptic adaptations. This one resembles bark with lichens. It sits motionless during the day on appropriate trees where it is usually overlooked by potential predators. Alike to the katydid in figure 4, this specimen can be expected to stridulate at irregular intervals, apparently to avoid tracking by predators.