

David MacDougall: The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses

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Educated at Harvard and UCLA and living in Australia since 1975, David MacDougall has been making ethnographic documentaries for over three decades. His first book, *Transcultural Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998), has become a touchstone in the field of visual anthropology. This latest book

consists of ten essays loosely concerned with the topic of corporeality in images and image-making. The author treats us to his thoughts on the body both before and behind the camera, on the role of children in film, on the making of his five-part documentary about an elite Indian boarding school, on the unrecognized sensitivity and visual humor of Jean Audema's colonial postcards, and on the history and future of film in anthropology. The common thematic thread running through this eclectic collection is the author's conviction that Western societies should reexamine their emphasis on the written word in creating and transmitting knowledge and consider the unique qualities of visual representation.

In the first essay, for example, MacDougall analyzes several films to "underline the centrality of the human body in almost all films" (p.15). The body in question, however, can be found not only on the silver screen but also in the seats before it, with a "continuous interplay and bodily response" going on between the two (p.20). In another essay on the cinematic representation of childhood, the author argues that the subjects of such films "remain largely instruments and vehicles of adult concerns" (p.71), cleverly comparing the unknown (or forgotten) terrain of (pre-)adolescence to the mystery of otherness in exotic cultures. In perhaps the most touching essay, MacDougall traces the aesthetic history and economic fortunes of portrait photographers over a century and a half in Mussoorie, a hill station at the foot of the Himalayas. Combining archival images, contemporary photographs, and personal interviews, the author subtly demonstrates how Indian tourists – despite dressing in period costumes that belie both their station and historical moment or posing in frontal positions that recall a colonialist past – use these staged portraits to *create* a new reality, rather than to discover (or uncover) another one (p.169).

MacDougall displays familiarity with any number of visual theorists (Walter Benjamin, Linda Williams, Klaus Theweleit, Roland Barthes, Dziga Vertov, Susan Sontag, and Christian Metz all make cameo appearances) without ascribing to any particular theoretical approach. The prose is jargon-free, lucid, and, at its best, poignant, especially when the author writes about the now-grown child subjects of his documentaries or about the long-dead colonial subjects of his treasured postcard collection.

The interests of full-disclosure compel the following quibbles: Though the book-jacket blurb exclaims that "*The Corporeal Image* presents the latest ideas of one of our foremost thinkers," at least one of the essays dates from 1997 and another from 1992. In the rapidly evolving and highly contentious discipline of visual anthropology, a decade is not an insignificant amount of time. Furthermore, though MacDougall includes two essays on his experiences and insights while making the *Doon School* sequence of documentaries, these films seem to be available only at institutional prices and not at all through the usual commercial

outlets. Good luck to those not living near a university with a well-funded anthropology department library.

MacDougall concludes with an essay on where visual anthropology has been and where he believes the discipline needs to go. He urges scholars to see the visual as a complement rather than as a substitute for the verbal, as a language with its own vocabulary and potential. Given the author's obvious accomplishments in both forms, his long and successful career stands as the best evidence for the validity of his argument.

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