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Lost Conversations, Recovered Archives

By Roslyn Poignant

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*The photographs included on this paper are from Axel Poignant's photographic trips to the Territory, in particular the making of the film *Namatjira the painter* in 1946, and his six week stay in Arnhem Land in 1952.*

INTRODUCTION

The 1995 Eric Johnston Lecture was delivered by Roslyn Poignant and concerned her late husband Axel's photographic trips to the Territory, in particular the making of the film *Namatjira the painter* in 1946, and his six week stay in Arnhem Land in 1952.

Axel Poignant was one of the most distinguished Australian photographers in the three decades following World War 2. His work was featured in numerous exhibitions, both here and abroad, and he contributed photographs to the most prestigious journals of the time.

The National Library of Australia holds Axel's huge output of photographs, but some of his Arnhem Land work is to be found in *Bush Walkabout*¹, a children's picture book published in 1972. The magnificent photographs in this book show what a great talent he had, not only to take photographs, but to put his subjects at their ease and to act naturally.

Roslyn has curated Axel's photographs for many years, and has put together many exhibitions. She was the 1995 Sir Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia, where she curated another touring exhibition of Axel's work (and wrote a book on his Arnhem Land experiences)².

In this lecture she takes us behind the scenes of the making of the *Namatjira* film, to listen to the bureaucratic squabbles and the critical comment on a film ahead of its time. We look at Axel Poignant the photographer, who used his camera to record a passing moment of time, and also make a social commentary for those who could see.

1. Poignant, Axel. *Bush Walkabout*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972. (Originally published in 1957 as a Piccaninny Walkabout)
 2. Poignant, Roslyn. *Encounter at Nagalarramba*. National Library, Canberra, 1996.
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Lost Conversations, Recovered Archives

By Roslyn Poignant



*Mother with newborn baby,
Canning Stock Route, 1942.*



Namatjira and Battarbee



*Early morning of the lost conversation,
Wellington Range, 1952.*

Photographs by Axel Poignant

There was a story about Axel in circulation in the early fifties - probably originating with the film-maker, Lee Robinson, which went something like this: The cameraman Axel Poignant was photographing the arrival of a plane at Katherine, or maybe Tennant Creek. The door opened and the passengers climbed out. First came three nuns, followed by a government official, a station manager, an Aboriginal stockman, and the pilot, and as they passed him each said "Hello, Axel." The point was supposed to be that he spent so much time in the Territory everybody knew him. But it was an outsider's joke - of course, the insiders, the Territorians, knew who the strangers were...

The anecdote and the memoir are among the ways we represent the past to ourselves, and although an apocryphal tale such as this is not the lost conversation of my title, I am interested in the intersections between oral recollections and recovered documentation, both visual and written. To stay with this simple example: the basis for this tall tale can be excavated from a production report of 9th October 1946 for the film, *Namatjira - the Painter*, which was directed by Lee and photographed by Axel for the Film Division, attached to the Commonwealth Department of Information.¹ Robinson notes:

Poignant today left on the first leg of the Wyndham trip which will take him through Vaughan Springs, the Mount Doreen wolfron (sic) fields, the Granites and Tanami gold fields, along the Ord River Valley, through all the cattle stations near the Western Australian border and up to Wyndham and return by the same route.... 12,700 miles in five days!

It seems that on that journey Axel was shooting footage, not for the *Namatjira* film, but for two other productions *Top End*, a film sponsored by Connellan Airways, and for an elections information film (a matter I'll return to later).

The many soaring aerial overviews Axel took with his still camera on that series of flights, and on others he made over the following years, convey something of a sense of release, which, after the years of war, the Territory experience provided. They stand as visual metaphors for the opening of the Territory's spaces as sites for National image making by the artists and poets, writers and broadcasters, film-makers and photographers who converged there. Most of them were outsiders, although a few, such as Xavier

Herbert and Bill Harney, were not. Today we would say they formed a network of mostly men and a few women who knew each other, occasionally worked together, and were sometimes friends.

Most of what they produced took the form of popular culture. Even high art, such as the paintings of Nolan and Drysdale, frequently received considerable exposure, mainly because their subjects were considered to be 'exotic'. Although books of the travel genre, such as Colin Simpson's *Adam in Ochre*, and Ernestine Hill's *The Territory*, were widely read, feature films such as Harry Watt's *The Overlanders* and Charles Chauvel's *Jeddah*, documentaries like John Heyer's *Back of Beyond*, and government informational films such as *Namatjira - the Painter*, and some regular *Australian Diary* news items, probably reached a larger public. Therefore it was mainly via the screens of the commercial cinemas, and the many film societies scattered throughout the country, that themes relating to the Territory entered the popular imagination. The most persistent of these is that of the black-white relations that underpinned the social and economic life of the Territory. At the time, these productions seemed like the beginning of something new; looking back, the period can be seen to be as much the end of an era, when prescriptive attitudes dominated, and minority views sometimes joined and sometimes were subsumed in the mainstream. Change did not really begin until towards the end of the fifties. Among other things, the coming of television in 1957, with its insatiable appetite, helped the market to expand, and allowed a range of views to find their public. The history of the making of the *Namatjira* film throws light on how some of these social constraints operated.

The starting point for my narrative is 1952. In August of that year Axel spent about six weeks on Goulburn Island photographing the community and mission activities there. During that time he was taken to see the rock art at Nararan, a site in the Wellington Range on the mainland opposite. His guides were Namuluda and two Mawng brothers, Lamilami and Winunguj, who, I am sure, would be known to many of you as Rev. Lazarus Lamilami and George Winunguj. It was planned that the brothers were to accompany him later to the Liverpool River, and Axel partly saw the trip to Nararan as a preliminary to the longer journey. At the same time his Aboriginal companions were probably assessing his performance in the bush, before committing themselves to go with him to the Liverpool River.

The mission boat dropped the party on the mainland, in the late afternoon, at White Point Beach. For most of the way the track was a punishing one, across 'fine laterite, the size of small marbles', and after a few miles of this the Arnhem Landers politely consigned his Yukon pack to the fork of a tree - to be recovered on the return journey. As Axel was later to say, it was on this journey that he understood that he was a guest in their country.

A little further on they made camp - and Axel noted in his diary:²

After tea we talked about various things, but mostly about ART. Hermannsburg and the artists there. The carvings they make at Goulburn Island and the merits and quality and joy in doing the work.

He wrote the word ART in capital letters. What a lost conversation!

Although I must have read this passage soon after it was written, when I came across it forty years later I was about to make a journey of my own to Arnhem Land. I was trying to come to grips with the considerable body of work Axel had produced at Nagalarramba, on the west bank of the Liverpool River opposite Maningrida, and to resituate it not only in its period, but also in its relationship to the people photographed. My first thoughts were regrets that he had not recorded the conversation. But it hardly would have been possible with the bulky sound recorders (wire, not tape) of the day.

Without a text, however, I was free to traverse the spaces between the lines.

I knew that Axel regarded the experience of making the *Namatjira* film - the journeys to painting locations with Namatjira, some of his family, and their kinsmen, the Pararoultja brothers - as both a learning

experience in relation to Aboriginal peoples and culture, and formative in the development of his own photographic approach. In seeking to understand his reasons not only for undertaking the self-generated Arnhem Land assignment in 1952, but also for his determination to be independent of government aegis, I was already retracing the trajectory of that development. My focus on the making of this short film may appear to be a narrow one, but I hope that it also opens a path to reflection on issues relating to the nature of representation and the formation of attitudes in the immediate post-war decade.

Although my approach may appear to be broadly biographical, my concern is less with the personal or psychological self than the '*cultural self*'.³ For in a consideration of any photographer's work I believe that attention must be given to both content and construction: to the choices of subject, and the photographers rhetorical stance, which I see as encapsulating both personal and social attitudes - which are given form and expression through a coalescence of technical skills and sensibilities. Additionally, there are questions to be asked relating to the use of pictures, such as the relationship between commissioned and freelance work, and the published and the unpublished.

Investigation of such questions involves consideration of the social constructions that filtered the flow of images and shaped attitudes. Axel's shorthand reference to this conversation, however, points to the possibility of recovering another dimension: the response of the people photographed - to being photographed.

I asked myself, why was the work of the Hermannsburg artists the focus of this particular discussion, at that moment, and in that place?

Something of the spirit of the place where the conversation took place is transmitted in a photograph taken, just after sunrise, of their camp among the rocky outcrops of the range and the cycad groves. In the rock shelters nearby, where Lamilami had occasionally camped as a boy, where Namaluda talked about the figure of a Spirit Being painted by his cousin, and where the Great Rock Python's presence is imprinted on the rock-face, there is an extensive visual archive, rock paintings that mark the passage of strangers on that coast from Macassan times to the recent past. There are grazing buffalo, ocean liners, sailing ships, and several of the small steam launches that worked along the coast. Clyde Fenton is there, near his aeroplane, and there's a bicycle - almost certainly belonging to the photographer, Edward Reichenbach, known as Ryko, who photographed the Iwadja at Joe Cooper's buffalo-shooting camp at Alligator Head, and also the beginnings of the Goulburn Island Mission in 1916... some of the older people of the Waruwi community still recall there were stories about him.

The rock shelter with its record of previous encounters with outsiders provided an evocative setting, but the fact that an adult conversation on a subject of mutual interest took place at all, of course, owes everything to Lamilami's grasp of English. However, the role of visual language in making connections across cultures should not be ignored.

Ryko may have been the first to introduce Western Arnhem Landers to the bicycle, but it was not their first acquaintance with the camera. In my forthcoming book, *Encounter at Nagalarramba*, I have explored the Arnhem Landers' exposure to both movie and still photography from the late 19th century. Briefly - as was also the case at Hermannsburg - the Arnhem Land missions' use of prints of the life of Christ, and lantern slides and photographs of mission activities, familiarised the people with Western graphic representations from an early date. According to Gordon Sweeney's oral account in the NT Archives, 'moving pictures' were one of the attractions which drew people from the mainland to Goulburn Island at Christmas time - and were also a factor in attracting them to Darwin, from the 1930s on.⁴ One example, which is documented, is a Native Affairs Branch requisition order for 3/- for tickets to the Star Cinema, lodged on the 1st of January 1940, on behalf of three trial witnesses who had been brought in from Liverpool River. The feature was *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, which I understand is still a very popular movie in Aboriginal communities, but the supporting comedy *45 Fathers* may have also had its attractions for an Aboriginal audience. To see it a permit also had to be issued for the three men to be '*within the prohibited area of Darwin after eight o'clock in the evening*'.⁵ On the other hand, because of the double standard which prevailed, Aboriginal people were prohibited altogether from seeing other movies, such as *South Sea Sinners*, which, it was stated, might weaken the authority of non-Aboriginals.⁶

Although I have no direct evidence (yet) that the film *Namatjira - the Painter* was shown either in Darwin or at Goulburn Island mission between 1948 and 1952, it was shown in other Aboriginal communities and it seems highly probable that a screening of the film was the main source of Lamilami's information about Namatjira. On the other hand, the reasons against it being shown were the depiction of men's ceremonial, in the film as first released. However, the scene may have been excised as I understand it was elsewhere, after an incident during a screening at Hermannsburg to people from Haast's Bluff.⁷ Neither Mountford's book, *The Art of Namatjira*, published in 1944, nor newspaper and radio items, would have been as accessible to Aboriginal communities as the film. And, according to Sylvia Kleinert's researches, the dissemination of Namatjira's paintings in the form of popular prints, calendars and greeting cards did not take off until later in the fifties.⁸ Of course, transmission of information by word of mouth cannot be discounted. Men - and women - travelled from remote parts of Arnhem Land and mixed together with other Aborigines, working in Army camps during the war and in demolition and clearing of munition dumps, immediately after. There were other possible routes. For instance Bundubundu, a young Kunibidji, who Lamilami knew well, had been attached to Kyle-Little in the Native Affairs Branch, and travelled to Alice Springs in 1947 to act as an interpreter in a court case.⁹

The narrative structure of the *Namatjira* film, despite being situated firmly within the assimilationist policies of the period, did play a part in the projection of a positive image. However the information was acquired, Namatjira's achievements were a source of pride among his own people. To Christian Aborigines like Lamilami and his brother (20 years his junior), Namatjira would have been a role model. If they did not already have expectations of Axel, as a man who had met the Hermannsburg artists and photographed them, perhaps they were formed somewhere in the course of this conversation. And during these first few days spent together in the bush, away from the mission, Lamilami's willingness to become Axel's intermediary on the Liverpool was probably settled.

The discussion about wood carvings done by Namaluda, Nangulamin and others led to Axel sending several to me straight away, asking me to investigate the possibility of an exhibition at David Jones's Gallery in Sydney. Although an exhibition of Arnhem Land figures collected by the Berndts had been shown a few years earlier, these carvings were considered more naturalistic and less 'authentic', and my attempts were totally abortive.

In my forthcoming book I have sought to show the way Aboriginal expectations were an important factor, both in establishing a climate of consent within which Axel was able to photograph at Nagalarramba on the Liverpool River, and in the Aboriginal shaping of events, such as the performance of a Rom ceremony for him. In a later decade (the 1970s) both Peter Sutton and David McDougall have also written about the similar way in which another Aboriginal community, at Aurukun, Cape York, recognised the story-telling potential of film, and the advantages to be gained, both within the community and outside it, of being 'in' a film, and 'on that screen'.¹⁰ I see Aboriginal responses to Axel's presence in 1952 as an earlier manifestation of the same recognition of the power of photographs and film to communicate, and of the strategies that might be adopted by them to influence what was photographed. On the other hand, I am not suggesting that this was manifest in the earlier 1947 *Namatjira* film.

Although Namatjira was a willing subject, the film was made about him and his achievements, rather than with him. For its time, however, it represented a radical view, as has been asserted in a recent history of Australian film available on video.

The film, which was a product of the not long established Film Division, is usually referred to as a documentary. But documentary is an umbrella term. Although the *Namatjira* film is about an artist, it does not pretend to be an art film. It is based on a treatment by Charles Mountford, who received credit as assistant producer, but it is Lee Robinson's narrative style of scripting and direction which places it firmly in the genre of the human interest story. It was initiated under the production supervision of the Canadian, Ralph Foster, and completed after the Briton, Stanley Hawes, had taken over as Producer-in-Chief of the Division. According to oral accounts, and as the departmental file attests, throughout its production the film was contested ground - including between Mountford and the professional film-makers.

Firm official control of the film was asserted by E G Bonney, Director-General of the Department, when he informed Foster - before the shooting started: *'High national policy is involved...in so delicate a topic as the Australian Aborigines'*. And he warned that he would not authorise the first payments until he saw the script: *'I do not think you should take it for granted that the board has approved of the film in all its aspects.'*¹¹

In the following months, the Department was also under pressure from special interest groups. One of these was the Contemporary Art Society, whose spokesman, John Reed, protested to the Minister of Information, Calwell, that:

*[I] have no desire to belittle Namatjira's talents but.... In my opinion any use of this aboriginal's work is an "exploitation" in as much as the painting he is doing is entirely false to his own culture and is merely the aping [sic] of a completely different one. To send this [film] overseas ... is only to invite, at the very least, a dismissal of our cultural discrimination...'*¹²

It was only after several decades that the art establishment began to re-evaluate Namatjira's work. For example in 1986 art historian and arts administrator, Daniel Thomas wrote:

*His art which we perceived in its day as European is now re-Aboriginalised. Our altered understanding permits us now to admire it more fully, and to be moved by it.*¹³

How we look at it today is mediated, of course, not only by the emergence of a contemporary Aboriginal art movement, in all its rich complexity, but also by the detailed reappraisal of the Hermannsburg school in terms of aesthetics and meaning, as well as the economic and historical aspects of the work. The attack of the modernists - represented in this instance by the Contemporary Art Society - on the work of Namatjira has been well documented and analysed, and turns on issues of appropriation, and what constitutes authenticity. As Hommi Bhabha has argued about the colonial situation, it is *'the doubling'* - that is to say, the appropriation by the colonised of the representational systems of the colonisers, and their transformation to sing a subtly different tune, that produces a destabilising mimesis - of camouflage rather than harmony. In Namatjira's case, his painting of a landscape which looks like a European watercolour, produces a work of art which - as Burn and Stephen have noted - *'resists interpretation'*. Though the personal cost was appalling, the fact that Namatjira found a way, through his art, to subvert the repressive social system must be recognised for the *'revolutionary step'* it was - (to give a phrase coined by Phillip Jones a slightly different connotation.)¹⁴

The other party with a special interest was the Native Affairs Branch, attached to the Department of the Interior. In this instance, however, the demands made by its Director, E W P Chinnery, seem to have been precipitated by Mountford who, it was said, behaved as if *'he had the perfect right to go anywhere and do anything.'* Chinnery advised the Secretary of his own department as follows:

*I suggest you request the Department of Information to allow your officers to examine the script and the photographic material so that any consideration may be given to the deletion of matter inconsistent with the policy of the native administration and welfare before the films are released for publication.*¹⁵ [Emphasis added]

The support of the Administrator, A R Driver, for Chinnery was tempered not only by the need for inter-departmental diplomacy, but probably also by an awareness that the days when such restrictions could be imposed on visiting representatives of the media were over. Indeed, there were contrary pressures from entrepreneurial forces within the Territory to encourage publicity. The evidence for this leaps off the page of Robinson's final report, which he made in November 1946, after the unit's return to Sydney. In it

the Namatjira project has been subsumed under a grand new heading: *Northern Territory Filming Tour*. Robinson wrote:

Connellan Airways in Alice Springs were so interested in the work the unit was doing to publicise the Northern Territory that they made aerial transport available to us whenever required, not only on the Top End film, but also on the shooting of the 'Namatjira' film, the two newsreel stories ('Caparilja Springs' [a local holiday commemorating piped water to Hermannsburg] and 'Mica Mines') and the sequences for 'School in the Mailbox' and the 'Election' film... [The extra] 14,650 miles cost the Department absolutely nothing.¹⁶

Connellan had also supplied the raw stock for *Top End*, which was described as a scenic film on the Northern Territory. Only the sequences shot for the last two of the titles - the correspondence school film, and the election information film - were official projects. In his report, Robinson justified what was clearly extra-curricular activity:

We decided that this shooting could be worked in during the period we were waiting between final shooting of the 'Namatjira' film and the notification of possible retakes.

The frenetic activity this entailed included Axel's trip to Wyndham and return, and Lee's to the Mica Mines of Wittenoon Gorge.

Not surprisingly, the two film-makers had seized the opportunity to cover the other stories for the extra experience it gave them, both of filming, and of the Territory. But the Canberra-based accountants grumbled that new *'project numbers will be needed'*, and funds will have to be reallocated.

The story of the dispute over the shooting of *Top End* for Connellan is complex and would take too long a detour to tell. Eventually the spin-offs were released as either magazine items or separate films. But from the point of view of the administrators things had got out of hand. As the Director-General was later to comment (27.08.47) *'The Namatjira film has been a headache to everybody.'*

His lament notwithstanding, the completed film, which cost about £3000, was to be both prestigious and profitable for the Department. Before that point was reached, however, there were to be other disputes. For instance, before the final recording, the administrators challenged the accuracy of the script on several counts. Before dealing with their objections I shall summarise the script itself briefly.

It subscribes to the orthodoxies of the time. It juxtaposes the so called primitiveness of Namatjira's culture and his achievements as a watercolourist. However, his ability to paint is attributed to his innate intelligence, as well as to the special observational skills derived from his Aboriginal life-style. The story of his mission upbringing and Battarbee's role as teacher is dramatised. Part of Namatjira's success is attributed to the role his painting played in introducing *'an urban people...[to] a region they had never seen and whose beauty was a revelation.'* Two voices over, in praise of the work, are offered instead of other analysis. The only mention of economic issues is the suggestion that painting will *'put Namatjira on the road to independence'* (it was still early days). The observation is also made that others at Hermannsburg were beginning to paint - *'grasping at the opportunity to improve their conditions.'* The commentary concludes, however, on an affirmative, up-beat note:

When they have been given the opportunity Aborigines have never failed to meet the common standard of the nation.

It lists the contributions Aboriginal Australians had made in many walks of life, and acknowledges the leadership Namatjira gave his people.

In retrospect, the sentiments expressed in the script do not appear so very radical, until one encounters the objections that were conveyed to the Film Division's Producer-in-Chief by the Chief Publicity Officer of the Department. On 14th January, 1947 he wrote:

You might consider two other passages in the commentary worth a second look. The first is the rather exuberant praise of Namatjira's art expressed by 'the voices' on page 6. The second is the glowing reference to the attainments of aborigines in the third paragraph of page 7. In the interests of documentary accuracy and the understatement which you and we have always preferred to overstatement, you might wish to refer both passages to a competent authority for further opinion. [Emphasis added].

To which Stanley Hawes dryly replied (23rd January 1947):

The attainments mentioned can all be substantiated ... [but] I understand that the aboriginal architect in Sydney is not a particularly brilliant one, so we will leave out the reference to architecture.

The voices 'in praise', he said, were actual statements made by the *Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* critics, but he agreed that perhaps the hyperbole of one of the writers would be best replaced by an alternative opinion which was also an 'actual criticism' - which he quotes:

There is ... something of his people which places him [Namatjira], in one respect, superior to any white artist Australia has yet produced - [it is] sensibility - the pure expression of art.

Hawes concludes, ironically perhaps:

What makes you think I prefer understatement? Bombast is more my line!

A little earlier (November 1946) Lee and Axel, in an interview on the ABC (for which some rough notes have survived), placed more stress on the importance of the earnings from paintings for Namatjira and his community, than was done in the film. They also loaned the paintings and artifacts they had brought back to SORA, the Society of Realist Artists, for an exhibition.¹⁷ The paintings were not for sale; it was a fund-raising event to purchase artists' materials for the 'less successful' artists at Hermannsburg. When the Department got to hear of it, the two men were reprimanded. Lee replied to the Director-General on behalf of both of them (15 November 1946):

If you will be in Sydney next Friday night, we would be very pleased to see you along at the exhibition. The show, of course, has nothing to do with Axel or I as Departmental officers. All we have done is make the paintings available. Even if you can't attend the exhibition you may be interested enough in its cause to help the fund, preferably with a donation from the Department. All these young artists were most generous with their time and energy when we were shooting the Namatjira material and a gesture from the Department would mean a lot to them.

The official reply (18 November) predictably stated that: *'The department is not empowered to make donations to aborigine artists or anybody else.'* Coupled with it is a warning that: *'It is for the Minister or myself to determine how, if at all, the work of the Film Division is to be publicised'.*

That the filmmakers' stance was regarded as radical is also confirmed from another source. The finished film was previewed in October 1947 by a selected audience of critics, writers, and members of the film industry, who wrote brief reports. Most liked it, except for the Mackerras music track. One person, however, wrote anonymously, and somewhat confusedly:

The film is not one to be shown in all places. I would keep it from the lands of the coloured peoples, simply for [reasons of] political expediency.

I have not been able to trace whether or not the practical support extended to the Hermannsburg artists by SORA amounted to much, but it is worth mentioning because evidence of such events are so ephemeral. It also helps to balance Sylvia Kleiner's opinion that the Social Realists did not support Namatjira until *'his trial, imprisonment and death in 1959.'*¹⁸

It is true the gesture would have been no more than a drop of fellowship in a sea of indifference towards the artists who produced the work. On the other hand, the art they made was appropriated to *'the National Picture'*, through productions such as the *Namatjira* film. On its release, copies were sent abroad at once, to New York and London, and soon after, a 35mm *'blow-up'* was made for commercial release. It looked really terrible, but the 1940s public was less discriminating. There is no doubt that the film was circulated widely, particularly on the film society circuit, but unfortunately Part II of the file, which would have supplied details of distribution, is missing.

Looking back, it is evident that the official message of the film owed less to the Left than to a more prevalent, though perhaps still radical, minority view that drew on the authority of the new international definitions of human rights. As C D Rowley's investigations of the press files of the period have shown, Aboriginal issues were sometimes discussed in terms of their rights to the *'four freedoms'*. This case was argued strongly by Colin Simpson, in the last chapter of *Adam in Ochre*, (published 1951) which has the title *'They are not dying out'*, and in which he drew attention to the long history of annihilation and abuse, and castigated his fellow Australians for the searing racism of their attitudes, for their neglect of health and education issues and their failure to learn much about Aboriginal culture and languages or to extend citizenship rights.¹⁹ Although such arguments in a popular book no doubt played their part in airing the issues, and perhaps impinged on attitudes, the remedies proposed still fell within an assimilationist framework.

My narrative so far has concentrated on the social forces brought to bear both on the making of the film in several stages of its production and on the role it may have played in shaping attitudes. I want now to return briefly to explore my earlier assertion that the making of the film was formative in the development of Axel's own approach to his chosen medium of photography. The making of a film is, of course, an endeavour shared by several talents, particularly the director and the photographer, but I think that some of the still photographs Axel took during the filming have a bearing both on his relationship to the film, and on his own preoccupations. There are a number that amount to stills of the movie, such as an image from the sequence which refers to Namatjira's hunter-gatherer culture, and another which evokes the skills learned in childhood - and the fun of it. There are several snaps of Namatjira with others on location - such as one taken with Battarbee, which shows the bond of friendship between them. Then there are casual shots, such as one of two young girls gossiping, which does what only still photography can - preserves a suspended moment, an actual moment, rather than a fictional one. Finally there are a series of formal portraits:



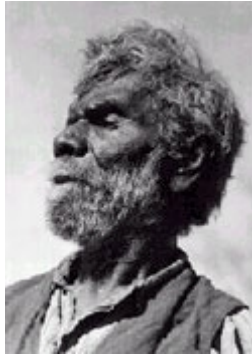
Namatjira and his wife Rubina

Namatjira fills the frame with his dignified presence.



Group portrait of the family.

The formality is accentuated by their being taken in the open air.



Jonathan Namatjira, the father of Albert.



The ration, Wave Hill Station, c. 1946

Photographs by Axel Poignant

It is apparent that these are all considered moments, taken with permission. What Axel was aiming to say can perhaps be better understood if I paraphrase an explanation he himself gave an outdoor portrait taken 4 years earlier on the Canning Stock Route. He wrote that his focus on the face was deliberate : he saw the land as reflected through the faces of its occupants.²⁰

Axel also asserted that the time spent with Namatjira and his kin was significant because it was his first experience of reading the country through the eyes of Aboriginal mentors as they travelled slowly through it by camel. The elevated position gave extra visibility, and also meant that there was minimum disturbance of the wild life. Consequently, I had always assumed most of the four months location travel was done that way. And there is a photograph of Axel on a camel. Unfortunately the field reports which have survived cover only the last dozen days on location, during the period when Lee and Axel were shooting scenes for several of the projects at the same time. During that time it seems that they travelled constantly by every means of transport available - including plane, truck and pack horse - but not camel. Time and space in the imagery of recollection takes on different dimensions, according to the significance of the experience. The reports, however, do create a sense of immediacy and actuality. For example (13.9.46)

Unit [the two men] saddled up the pack horses and hit the track early. Arrived at the Ormiston in the afternoon and found Battarbee and the Pararoultja brothers in full swing ... Complete sequence showing the Pararoultja brothers living and painting at their camp in the Ormiston Gorge.

After the *Namatjira* film, Axel returned to the Territory whenever freelance assignments made it possible, so that photographs taken during these years are scattered through journals, newspapers and books. As

with all photographs, the meanings of single images, and sometimes even groups or series are mediated by their captions or the stories they illustrate. Therefore to gain more than a fragmented picture of Axel's output it is also necessary to resort to the archive. Let me compound the offence by condensing my account of what I mean. For instance in 1948 he made an extensive coverage of a Tiwi mourning ceremony. Some of these photographs were used both in an article in *A.M. Magazine* and in Colin Simpson's *Adam in Ochre*, where several were either cropped, or the figures cut out to produce a graphic effect. Such a use is acceptable, but it is only when the images are left uncropped that the ceremonial context of their taking is evident. On the other hand, because of the instability of film colour dyes at that time, these newspaper reproductions of the Pukamani are the only record of the original transparencies.

The importance of the experience for Axel of making the *Namatjira* film can perhaps be better grasped, however, by considering for a few moments its pivotal relationship to both earlier and later work. Axel's first experience of the interior was on the Canning Stock Route in 1942, and some of his preoccupations were crystallized into practice on that journey. His head was full of stories of pioneering, the evidence for which is in the books of newspaper cuttings he kept. But the evidence is also there for the beginnings of his involvement with Aboriginal peoples. When one looks at the photographs he produced it is as if his passage through the interior exposed him to different perceptions of the land, each of which he translated through his lens. The low angle landscape, with the heat distorted figure of the man on the camel, has the appearance of a stage upon which the drama of white exploration is being enacted. On the other hand a visual counterpoint is provided by his instantaneous response to the nurturing image of the young Aboriginal Mother, who seems to embody the land itself. I have written elsewhere about the significance of this image of Aboriginal presence in reformulations of national identity in the 1940s. Here my concern is with the tensions these two opposing views of land exerted on work Axel did in the Territory.²¹

His main preoccupation continued to be with the land itself. There were the voluptuous overviews mentioned earlier, and aerial landscapes, that symbolised the imprint of the cattle industry on the land. By contrast there was the appropriation of an already occupied land, as reflected in the ironic and tragic portrait: Paddy King of Ord River, taken against the background of his country. His name wasn't Paddy, of course, he had merely had the breast-plate passed to him when he became the senior elder. These contrasting views of the land reflected an ambivalence which ran deep in Axel's work, and was shared with other commentators of the period.

Several of the photographs taken during these years Axel considered to be amongst the most significant of his work: *The Aboriginal Stockmens' Camp*, and *The Ration*, both taken at Vesty's Wave Hill in 1947, but neither were to be circulated until two decades later, when they were exhibited in support of Aboriginal Land Rights.²² The burden of the message was that the Territory's spaces were closed to the small man, and that the changes Australian society was undergoing were taking place in the cities. To put it brutally, in terms of market forces, it was rare to have such photographs published overseas. Whatever Axel's personal views, or political stance, there was no market for these pictures. Although the documentary movement was inspired and fired by social purpose, in Australia - as it was elsewhere - it informed, rather than instituted, change. Axel later wrote that he doubted if photographs could change anything. He saw himself as a photographic witness, impelled to record the social environment within which he was situated, and of which he was a part.

To return to the point at which I started: Arnhem Land in 1952.

For Axel the next stage was to turn to the inhabited landscape of Aboriginal Australia. These early morning photographs taken in the Kunibidji encampment at Nagalarramba are of a peopled landscape. I see them as depicting the land as nurturing. Although the making of a photographic record of which these images form a part is - as they say - another story, I want to conclude by recounting what happened when Axel applied for permission to enter the Arnhem Land Reserve to undertake this assignment.

The Minister, Hasluck, sought opinions from others, including the Department of Information's News and Information Bureau. Its Director advised that the project should only be undertaken under the Bureau's direction, and then, '*apart from any anthropological and archival value [the work might have], this Bureau would probably obtain very wide local and overseas placement of the material...*' However, the Minister

decided *'Mr Poignant's request for support is modest'* and offered him a choice of limited assistance or being seconded to the Bureau. In his reply Axel acknowledged he would be better off on wages but - not surprisingly - in the light of his experiences on the *Namatjira* film - he took the independent option. He wanted to be free from the pressures of returning with a pre-defined story. Instead, the strategy he adopted was to allow the story to emerge out of the experience.²³

Afterword

In my preparations for this paper I searched for a copy of *Namatjira - the Painter* and found only the revised version released in 1974. The commentary is almost completely changed, except for about five lines towards the end. The faded images remain as a permanent visual layer onto which has been grafted another version of the narrative.

The images have been cut loose from their historical anchorage, and the original representation of Namatjira's story - with all its flaws, as well as the insights it provided into attitudes of the time - has been overwritten. The image projected on the screen has been treated as a palimpsest: the earlier message has been erased and another inscribed. The credits remain the same; the authorship of the new message is unattributed. After all, it was an official film and the official line was merely being updated. The visuals now carry the weight of a commentary that is pedestrian in its attempt at political correctness, and pathetically inadequate in its response to the tragic death of Namatjira. After recounting in three lines the story of his arrest for supplying alcohol to another Aborigine, his three month gaol sentence and subsequent death, it concludes:

In many ways a sad figure but one who did much to win respect for his people. Albert Namatjira died 1959 aged 57.

There is also an end title that belatedly acknowledges the co-operation of the Hermannsburg artists, Rex Battarbee and the Mission.

Another twenty years later - today - the only thing this representation of an earlier representation has to tell us is the continuing inadequacy of attitudes towards Namatjira in his own day. If there is anything to be recovered of the earlier narrative it is in the visuals. Of course these too can now be changed. They can be colour corrected and digitally enhanced in tone and line; figures can even be added or subtracted. In the artfulness of representation we have already crossed another threshold.

Footnotes

1. *Namatjira* file, Australian Archives, ACT.
2. Annotated copy lodged in the A.P. Collection, National Library of Australia.
3. Term used in the introduction to Paul Rabinow's *Fieldwork in Morocco*.
4. Sweeney taped interview 1980 NTRTS 337 (p 10-11)
5. Series CRS F3, item 20/91, Australian Archives, ACT, and advertisement in the Northern Standard 29.12.1939.
6. Series F315, item 49/451, Australian Archives, NT.
7. Footnote 82, p. 136, Phillip Jones, in Hardy, Megaw and Megaw, 1992.
8. See Kleinert, in Hardy, Megaw and Megaw, 1992.
9. Kyle-Little, 1957, p. 67+
10. See Sutton, 1978, p. 2, and McDougall, in Crawford and Simonsen, 1992, p. 37-38
11. All the following references to official correspondence are from Series CP 815/1/1, item 3/100 Pt.1 (Pt. 2 is missing.) Australian Archives, ACT Branch. Each item will be designated by its date only.
12. Two letters, 30 July and 2 October, 1946.
13. In Hardy, Megaw and Megaw, 1992 p. 209
14. Ibid. p. 275-277 and p. 107

15. 13 August 1946 (signed Chinnery), 21 August (signed Driver)
16. Memo to Film Commissioner, 11 November 1946
17. Formed in 1945 by a group of artists including Herbert McClintock, Rod Shaw, Hal Missingham and Roy Dalgarno. Several Social Realist Artists, such as Yosi Berger and Noel Counihan, were active in Melbourne in the 1930s
18. See Kleinert in Hardy, Megaw and Megaw, p. 226
19. 1971, 2: 36-40
20. Camera class, A.M. Magazine, May 1952
21. Poignant, 1993
22. Also, Langton, M. *On Aboriginal land*
23. For detailed references to the exchange of letters between the Minister, the Bureau, the NT

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- Newspapers and cuttings, Northern Territory Library Service

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