

***Ten Canoes* and the Ethnographic Photographs of**

Donald Thomson

‘Animate Thought’ and ‘the Light of the World’

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—PROLOGUE: A GENEALOGY OF *TEN CANOES*

The release of the film *Ten Canoes* in 2006 has added momentum to interest in the ethnographic photographs of the anthropologist Donald Thomson, extending awareness of his work beyond the specialist fields where it was previously known.¹ Thomson’s photographic images, taken in Arnhem Land in the area of the Arafura Swamp in the 1930s, were pivotal in the genesis and production of *Ten Canoes*. Thomson’s research material—field notes, photos and collection of artefacts—make up the Donald Thomson Collection, which is known as ‘by far the single most important ethnographic collection made in Australia’.² His work, and stories about him, are widely known in Arnhem Land, where the 1930s are commonly referred to as ‘Thomson Time’.³

His photographic images are reputedly ‘the part of his work that Aboriginal people hold in the greatest esteem today’, and Museum Victoria, where the collection is now housed, sees a steady stream of Aboriginal visitors, particularly

from Arnhem Land and Cape York, come to reignite their connection with this ancestral photographic record.⁴

Ten Canoes draws heavily on Thomson's photographs for both its look and content. Thomson's image of ten canoeists on the Arafura swamp inspired the narrative of the film, and his images and field notes were also used as cultural source documents; for example, as documentation of techniques of body ornamentation in the 1930s—such as armbands—which were then duplicated as closely as possible in the film. The images and notes were also used as a guide to the construction of the canoes, mosquito huts, tree platforms and other elements of material culture.⁵ The overall look of the film also draws on Thomson's photographs for its inspiration. In the director's account of the origins of the film, it was his recognition of the cinematic quality of the ten canoes photo that convinced him in a flash that this could be the focus of the film. The black and white segments reproduce the ethnographic visual codes of many of Thomson's photographs: they



Figure 1: The film reproduces Thomson's eye. Left-hand image: Donald Thomson's original: Ganabingu and Djinba men use bark canoes in the Arafura Swamp, central Arnhem Land, Australia, May 1937, photograph by D.F. Thomson. Right-hand image: Still from *Ten Canoes*. Source: Photograph courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria (TPH 1090); Frame capture: *Ten Canoes*, Vertigo Productions, disc 2, extras: 'Thomson Time'. Reproduced courtesy Fandango Australia.

are largely shot in wide shot, setting us at a distance from characters, producing a panoramic perspective that emphasises human figures in the environment—‘people in nature’—and the camera is usually locked off, quite still. *Ten Canoes* also directly reproduces the compositional eye of a number of Thomson’s photos, in a range of precisely matched images.⁶

My initial aim in this project was to explore a genealogy for the ‘eye’ of the film—the look or the visual style—and, by exploring the source photos and the tradition they come from, to decipher a ‘cultural imaginary’ at work in the source images themselves and the influence this heritage has on the visuality of the film. The initial hypothesis was that the visual codes of ethnographic photography inherited from Thomson, particularly the wide shot composition, produce a sense of a world that we look at across a vast distance of time—a space that appears floating and otherworldly (figures 2 and 3). I believed that the monochrome sections of the film hook into deeply embedded ways of engaging with ethnographic images—in contexts where these forms have become familiar—that seem to reproduce what Faye Ginsburg has described as common colonial tropes that, to contemporary audiences, place tradition in a timeless, seamless past and traditional life as firmly rooted in that past, having no engagement with modernity.⁷ Ginsburg describes this as a ‘preexistent and untroubled cultural identity out there’.⁸

Whereas the film reproduces Thomson’s images as a source of authenticity, Thomson himself to some extent staged images in a way that reconstructed an imagined pre-contact past, taking ‘culture’ out of the context of historical changes that were happening at the time. Athol Chase writes that Thomson ‘wanted [his] photographs to represent the time before European intrusion, so [he] carefully arranged [his] subjects and locations and removed any signs of European influence’; he requested, for example, that the subjects of the photos remove their clothes.⁹ There is an endlessly recursive process as these conventions are then recycled in the film, and this becomes even more complicated when this same imaginary is projected into the future. After the making of *Ten Canoes*, the director, Rolf de Heer, participated in the production of *Twelve Canoes*, a beautifully conceived website that shows short films about life and culture in the community of Ramingining.¹⁰ On the website, *Ten Canoes* and its actors now represent the world of the ancestors.¹¹ These layers of the constructed imagined past keep twisting like a double helix. This raises



Figure 2. Stripping bark for the canoes. Right of frame: Jamie Gulpilil as Dayindi.

Source: Frame capture, *Ten Canoes*, Vertigo Productions 2006; reproduced courtesy of Fandango Australia.



Figure 3. Preparing bark for the canoes. Centre frame: Peter Minygululu as Minygululu.

Source: Frame capture, *Ten Canoes*, Vertigo Productions 2006; reproduced courtesy of Fandango Australia.

many questions about what it means when the image-making conventions of Thomson's ethnographic photography play such a pivotal role in the production of this cultural imaginary.¹²

At first encounter, Thomson's images appear to support the initial assumption of the detached observational eye of the ethnographic gaze, and the belief that images taken in wide shot and figures posed in landscape produce a sense of a pristine timeless past. This expectation was supported by some of the scholarship on Thomson's photographic work. Lindy Allen, Senior Curator for Indigenous Cultures at Museum Victoria, has documented the importance of the fact that Thomson used heavy glass plates to produce many of his negatives, and Diane Hafner claims that, because of the slow shutter speeds this technology required, many of his photographs, 'therefore seemed to take on the quality of tableaux or careful staging'.¹³ Hafner emphasises stasis and tranquility and the distance from the photographer, particularly in Thomson's panoramic images of women in the landscape.¹⁴ Kevin Murray also attributes to Thomson's images a 'dreamy fascination'.¹⁵

My initial expectations of this static quality were confirmed by the published reproductions of Thomson's images, but investigating his photographs more closely reveals something quite different and unexpected. It was Thomson's photo of the ten canoeists that initially prompted this particular film to be made.¹⁶ Reportedly one of the most well known of the Thomson photos in the community at that time, the image has also been reproduced in all the major anthologies on Thomson's work. What emerges, when one looks at the various published reproductions of the ten canoes image, is a vast difference in the quality of the images. In *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* (first edition), the reproduction of the ten canoes image is flat, lacks depth of field, contrast, texture and detail, and produces light like a wash over the image.¹⁷ It appears otherworldly and detached—a world that we look at across a distance. A reproduction in *Thomson Time* has more detail, contrast and depth, but in its sepia tones is very dark and the faces of the canoeists have no detail.¹⁸ Both these reproductions support Hafner's reading of Thomson's image as static.

However, there is a striking reproduction in *The Native Born*, a catalogue of an exhibition of objects and images from Ramingining. This is a larger, higher quality print, which opens up an entirely different reading of the photograph.¹⁹ This image

is incredibly dynamic. It is printed in high contrast, in a way that brings out the depth, texture and clear compositional schema of the photo. The image is composed with a vanishing point into the trees, and three diagonal lines clearly divide it into the foreground, midground and background: the first diagonal recedes to the right, marking out the swamp grass in the foreground; the second diagonal is made by the line of the canoeists spread out across the swamp to the left; the third diagonal comes from the long shadows of the trees cast across the swamp, receding to the right tip of the photo.

Laid over this compositional structure is a density of detail in every plane of the image. The most striking difference is the detailed texture of the swamp grasses in the foreground of the image, leading in all directions, capturing the light at many different angles. In the mid-field, the men have detail in the pose of their bodies, their taut muscles and the way the light catches their gestures. The canoeists are vigorous and by no means static. Their facial features are quite distinct, such that individuals could be recognised. The detail is not only in the human figures. The grasses themselves seem alive, animate. The image is printed so that the contrast brings out the texture, angle and detail of every blade of grass in the foreground, the quality of light reflected off the grasses and the matted chaos of reeds in the swamp. The paperbarks at the top of the image also have detail and texture and the shadows passing across the reeds have solidity and compositional strength.

What is clear from this reproduction is that, even with the cumbersome glass plate technology that Thomson was using, the photographs he produced should not necessarily be conceived as static. Each time the image of the ten canoeists has been reprinted, it has been printed with a different emphasis or interpretation—there is a static and a dynamic version of this image—a timeless one and one that brings the specificity of the present moment into sharp relief.

After seeing this image, it became imperative to see the prints struck directly from Donald Thomson's original glass plate negatives, to determine how in fact he had conceived this image. Many of the prints held in the museum were printed not by Thomson himself but by the Lands Department in the 1970s. According to Rosemary Wrench, Senior Manager of the Ethnohistoric Collection, it is not possible to know which prints were printed by Thomson. The closest we can get to an assessment of his original conception is his glass plates. Indeed, the print of the ten

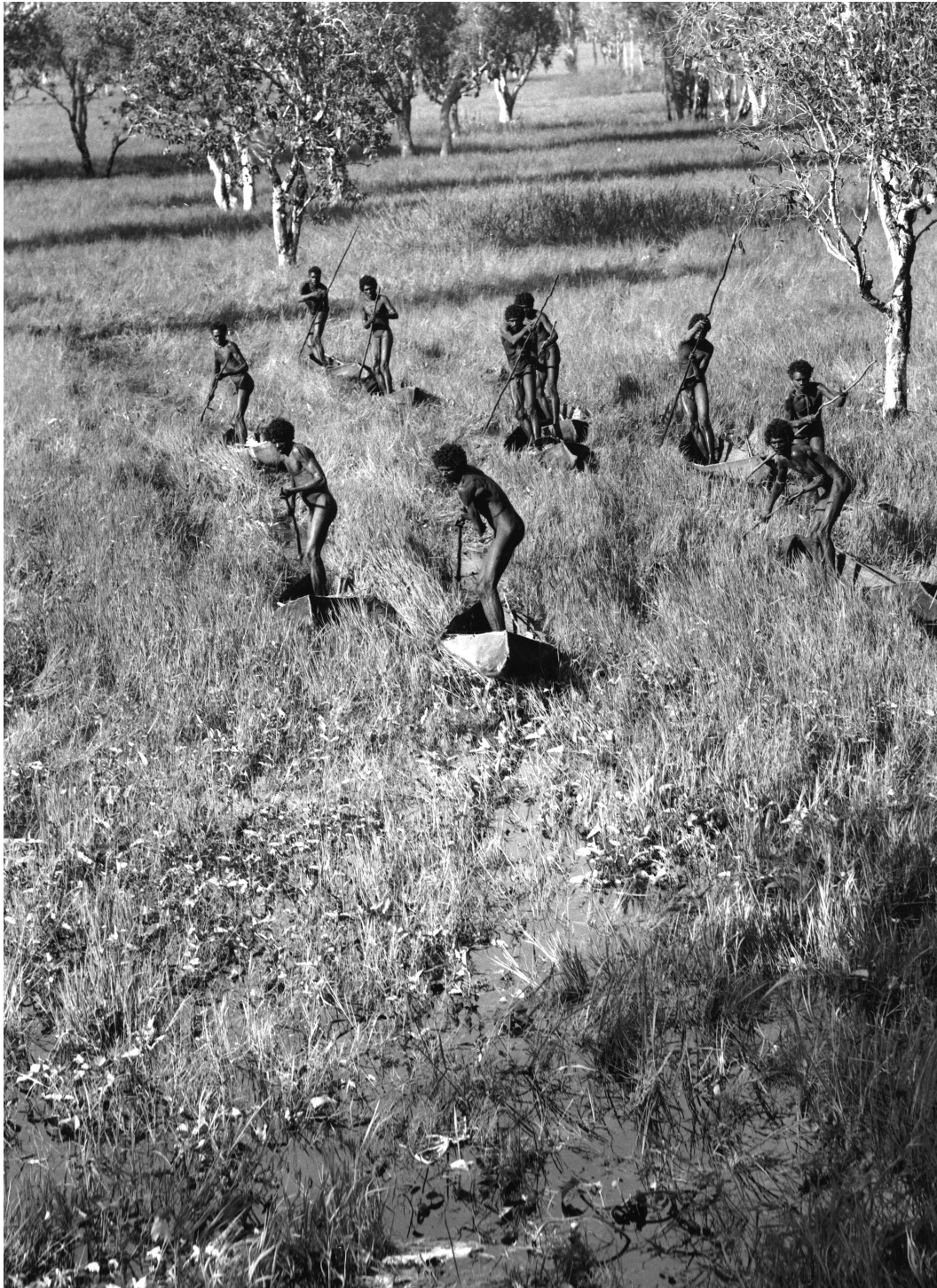


Figure 4. Photograph by D. F. Thomson, Ganalbingu and Djinba men use bark canoes in the Arafura Swamp, central Arnhem Land, Australia, May 1937

Source: Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria (TPH 1090)

canoes image held in the Thomson collection in Museum Victoria, struck directly from Thomson's glass plate, is a revelation. The first thing that is noticeable is the difference in tonal quality. Thomson was meticulous about the photographic paper he used, requiring a fine-grained stock made with linen, which registers light and texture and the gradations of the greyscale in exquisite detail, and this was clearly an integral part of how he conceived the images.²⁰ In the print of the ten canoes photo held in the museum, the image has a sensory density entirely lacking in the published versions. There are multiple points of light in the foreground and you can see the detail of leaves and grasses and the verticality of the reeds. The water in the foreground has an inky, opaque quality that shows up the point of contact of each individual reed with the surface of the water. The bodies are more moulded, sculpted, less abstract than the figures in the copies. Not only are the facial features of the men quite clear; the image also picks out the precise quality of the musculature on their backs. The museum print allows both recognition of individual characteristics of the men and individual identities, and also close attention to the material world in which they live.²¹

In the first generation photographic print, the whole field of the image is more even in the gradations of grey rather than separation into black and white: the grey scale of the swamp goes all the way across the plane of the image. The images in the background are more clearly exposed and so there is a stronger depth of field. There is so much space in the foreground that it highlights the quality of the swamp itself. The greyscale means that the texture of the reeds in all different directions has a sensory density that constantly pulls the eye into the foreground. There is movement and dynamism in the reeds themselves and there are many more directions going on in the image—a cacophony of textures. It is a dynamism that makes the image bristle with contrasting planes, which confound the rules of perspective by their multiple points of focus within the frame, and produces a sense of human figures as agents in an environment in which every other element of that environment is just as alive and animate as the people. This is a fibrous world of reeds, leaves, reflections, feathers and shadows. It is an image of a swamp as much as it is an image of people in the swamp. It creates a sense of a world that swirls around the figures.²²

Thomson's concern with material culture, his remarkable observational skills as a natural scientist and his engagement with the culture and community of the Arafura swamp people are all integrated in this remarkable image.²³ The ten canoes image, with its figures nested in a world of swirling textures, produces a sense of proximity that far exceeds the observational eye of the scientific gaze. David MacDougall has written about a split within ethnographic film and photography, differentiating between works that address only conceptual knowledge and those that also engage with a perceptual knowledge—a knowledge grasped through the senses.²⁴ He talks about an approach to ethnographic images that sees them simply as documentation, reduced to meaning, in which the encounter with the world of the subject has a flatness about it, as if the filmmaker and viewer are 'separated from the subject by a pane of glass'.²⁵ On the other hand, he describes a counter-tradition of radical ethnographic image-making which explores what he calls 'a knowledge of being', the subjective experience of the material world.²⁶ The ten canoes image suggests that Thomson's photographic work belongs to this counter-tradition.

The image of the canoeists is not a one-off in Thomson's work. This same sensibility recurs across many of his photographs: details of the environment registered as accurately and in as much detail as the human body; bodies set in a world of fibre whose own textures come forward to grab our attention in the frame itself; human figures against a ramshackle textural density of detail of grasses, reeds and feathers.

It may be a man standing with geese in a boat in an inky swamp, where Thomson has exposed the images not for the human figure—there is minimal detail of the face, muscle tone and skin tone—but for the maximum contrast between the reeds and leaves in the shiny surface of the water. Here, it is as if the paper itself is not a flat surface but the texture and the densities of it sink into its layers, bringing out the twisted contorted angles of the reeds, the strong vertical line of the man, the diagonal of the canoe and the shadows, and the 360-degree knotted texture of shining water and matted reeds. This is an extraordinary surface against which to photograph a human being.²⁷



Figure 5: Photograph by D. F. Thomson, Goose hunter, Arafura Swamp, central Arnhem Land, Australia, April 1937

Source: Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria (TPH 1109)

It may be a man in the middle of reeds that are matted, angled in all directions, as if the man himself is in a nest of reeds, just as the magpie goose eggs are in a nest in the foreground (Figure 6). Here it is the reeds themselves that have the material density. Or it may be a man in a canoe where Thomson's exposure has maximised the glimmering, shining plane of the water in the swamp (Figure 7). It may be that this occurs on different planes of the image—the foreground may be densely textured matted reeds and the middle ground the ripple patterns across water cut by a horizontal axis of dark canoes moving across the water.

This sensibility extends to the way Thomson works with light, how he exposes his images (Figure 8). There is a copy of this image available for viewing in the museum, in which smoke forms a kind of glow around the figures, that look as if they are bestowed with light from above, producing an aura around the figures. This is a familiar trope from European painting that produces the sense of a divine light that comes from a single source outside, into or onto the world. The photographic print is very different to this: the smoke from the fire diffuses through a much smaller part



Figure 6. Photograph by D. F. Thomson, Goose hunter, Arafura Swamp, central Arnhem Land, Australia, April 1937

Source: Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria (TPH 1133)

of the image and the whole surface of the image is much more densely packed with detail and texture. There is just a white wisp of smoke—a material result of burning. The men are not surrounded by a glowing light and the area around them has detail of the environment registered across the gradations of the greyscale. The print has an entirely different feeling: the greyscale emphasises the density of the world. Light exists in the way things collect it—it does not emanate from one source, but from hundreds of mini focuses, picking out points of detail, variations of density and texture. Light here is not a metaphor: it is not an ethereal divine light—the biblical ‘light of the world’—it is a material thing grounded in the animate world. To establish how extensive this sensibility is in Thomson’s whole body of photographic work would require much more study of the collection; however, it is certainly characteristic of many of the images he took on and around the Arafura swamp in 1937. A closer scrutiny of many of the other previously published images, and a



Figure 7. Photograph by D. F. Thomson, Goose hunter in bark canoe, Arafura Swamp, central Arnhem Land, Australia, April 1937

Source: Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria (TPH 1107)



Figure 8. Photograph by D. F. Thomson, Marrakaywarra, Ngulmarmar and Mangan, Arafura Swamp, Northeastern Arnhem Land, April 1937

Source: Courtesy of the Thomson family and Museum Victoria (TPH 1118)

comparison of them with prints taken directly from Thomson's original glass plates, gives hints of this same aesthetic across a wide range of photographs.²⁸

Writers such as Athol Chase have discussed Thomson's commitment to an anthropological approach that emphasised material culture, and how this informed his photographic focus on 'natural humanity in seamless interaction with the biophysical environment'. Chase argues that Thomson's work pioneered what would later become the 'research paradigms ... of ecological anthropology and cultural ecology ... with their intellectual lenses focused clearly upon groups living in particular local biophysical environments and whose social and cultural existence was closely attuned over time to these environments'.²⁹

Thomson's initial training was as a natural scientist and his natural science images demonstrate his astute observational skills and keen interest in the

biophysical world. He sketches and photographs in exquisite detail the biological species he studies, such as the detailed structure of the hand (*manus*) of a common striped possum, or the precise imprint of an agile wallaby in the desert sands. These specimens are photographed extracted from context, as objects of scientific study.³⁰ Elizabeth Edwards notes that ‘anthropology ... adopted much of its method from the biological sciences ... observation, recording and classification’.³¹ Many of Thomson’s contemporaries photographed Indigenous people similarly, as detached objects of the scientific gaze, in the interests of a ‘classification of the races’. Allen notes that the earliest portraiture work Thomson did ‘adopted the classic method of taking a profile and front view of subjects with a white backdrop’, but he abandoned this convention by the time of his Cape York work [in 1928, when] he is no longer using the white cloth backdrop’.³² She writes that he never imaged people against anthropometric grids and measuring scales, which was the customary ethnographic practice of the time.³³ This shift suggests his growing awareness of and sensitivity to photographic conventions and their effects.³⁴

Thomson’s is a self-conscious, deliberate, philosophically and scientifically informed construction of the image. He has the professional eye of a naturalist, an ‘ecological eye’ trained to discern differences in the characteristics of species and habitats. Cristina Grasseni highlights the importance of recognising that ‘vision is not necessarily identifiable with detached observation ... skilled visions are embedded in multisensory practices, where look is coordinated with skilled movement, with rapidly changing points of view, or with other senses, such as touch’.³⁵ We can assume that Thomson’s fieldwork also involved an ‘apprenticeship’, as Grasseni describes it, in the culturally specific ‘skilled visions’ of the Yolngu: an ‘education of attention’ to the taxonomies, signifying practices and environmental knowledges embedded in the ways that Yolngu see, as well as to their embodied, sensory dimensions. Jennifer Deger gives an example of the ways Thomson may have been enculturated into Yolngu ways of seeing, when she writes of ‘a strong sense [in his field notes] of the pivotal role of seeing in relation to *bir’yun*: ‘a mesmerizing quality of light and movement ... an effect of shimmering brilliance’ that Yolngu artists aim to produce in their work.³⁶

I would argue that there is a third layer to the training of Thomson’s eye: that his approach to image making is also a profoundly aesthetic one. Grasseni writes of

the skill required to produce images that make ‘one’s expertise visible to others’.³⁷ To produce photographic images of the quality and calibre of Thomson’s would require a fine-tuned sensibility to the aesthetic qualities of the medium—its capacity to embody both the detail and quality of experience—that defies the traditional Enlightenment assumption of the separation between ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’.³⁸ While his aims may have derived from the desire to document in the most precise detail, the skill required to do so with such acuity suggests a passionate interest in and commitment to the exploration of photography itself as a medium. Thomson processed his images as he went, working deep into the night in the swamp to develop his negatives.³⁹ It is not a huge leap to imagine, as he laboured into the night, drawing the chemical emulsion out of the glass plates to produce a finely composed, differentiated image that draws out the contrasting textures, shimmering reflections, the matted grasses, the inky murky surface of the swamp, the ripples of wind and water, the shimmering reflections of the fibrous bark of the *Melaleuca* and the variety and density of the reeds, that he was training his eye to go back into the day to see anew, that he was immersed in a passionate encounter with the light of the world.

Tim Ingold gives us a conceptual framework to think about Thomson’s work. He has written of a conventionally understood contrast between the scientist and the painter. The official versions of what allows the scientist to know, he argues, ‘make it impossible for scientists to *be* in the very world of which they seek knowledge’ (*italics mine*). The experience of the painter, by contrast, is, in the first place, an opening of oneself to the experience of the world of light, to an encounter that involves ‘openness rather than closure, and engagement rather than detachment’, and to the ‘sheer astonishment of ... being able to see ... the magic or delirium of vision’.⁴⁰ Ingold argues for the integration of this engagement into the self-understanding of the scientist—observation, he argues, requires participation. He compares the experience of the painter to a mode of animate thought common to indigenous cultures in which beings do not simply occupy the world, they inhabit it with a heightened sensitivity to an environment that is always in flux. He claims that, in many indigenous cultures characterised by this animate mode of thought, it is unthinkable that life is played out ‘across the inanimate surface of a ready-made world’, or that things happen in front of landscape, as if it is scenery.⁴¹ Beings don’t

move across the world, they are in it; environment is 'a domain of entanglement' and this entanglement is the texture of the world.⁴²

Ingold draws a very broad brush across indigenous cultures as a group—as an 'undifferentiated other'—which needs to be taken very cautiously.⁴³ However, Thomson's Arnhem Land photographs seem to be characterised by a profound existential encounter with the ways in which a similar worldview is embodied. Thomson wrote extensively on aspects of economic practice, social structure and ceremonial life in Arnhem Land. Whether he is articulating, in his images, his understanding of the life world and experience of the people he is living and working with is a matter of conjecture. What we can say is that Thomson's images cross the boundaries between scientist and artist; they invite the viewer to go into that perceptual world in a way that defies the separation between image and viewer, and opens up the possibility of envisaging this encounter as a cultural one. Thomson is thinking in images. This not just a style or a look; it is a mode of sensible thought. He is 'giving body to' a concept of self and culture through the materiality of photography.

This raises the question of what, in Thomson's context, gets codified as knowledge, documented in the discursive modes of science or ethnography into description and analysis, and what is the excess of that—the perceptual experience that is pushed through those filters—the thickness of experience that is excluded from the paradigms of scientific knowledge at the time. Perhaps it makes sense that Thomson did not commit any reflections on his aesthetic practice to words—that this was the site where all the wordless richness that could not be contained in the epistemological frameworks of the day could spill out.

In a critique of *Thomson Time*, an anthology of Thomson's photographs, Kevin Murray argues that, for Thomson, photography comes 'without strings': that his work lacks a self-conscious approach that, Murray implies, is an essential dimension of a postcolonial sensibility.⁴⁴ He claims that the anthology assumes 'a seamless transparent ethnographic purpose' for photography. He commends, by comparison, a published collection of photographs taken by Axel Poignant in Maningrida in the 1950s, as an example of work that does not 'pretend to speak outside the scene of photography'. Murray argues that the narrative text that accompanies Poignant's images acknowledges the personal encounter between photographer and subject

and therefore problematises the unquestioned colonial assumptions of the ethnographic gaze, situating the photographs within 'the more reciprocal ethics of cultural exchange'.⁴⁵

Without question, Thomson's photographic work forms part of what Ginsburg calls the 'unequal "looking relationships"' characteristic of ethnographic image making.⁴⁶ Only one person in this exchange had the means to preserve a photographic record of his perception, which then takes on the status of a historical document. Whereas some later ethnographic work adopted dialogical and reflexive strategies to shift these relations, Thomson does not. Thomson's images do not overtly acknowledge the structuring gaze of the photographer or the performative role of the subject, by foregrounding the 'I' in a reflexive way or highlighting the relationship of exchange. His gaze is integrated into a whole philosophical schema that incorporates a systematically theorised approach to human culture and the environment, and material culture, but I would argue that his is not a detached scientific gaze: it implies an aesthetically attuned immersion in embodied perceptual experience. In Thomson's images the self is veiled, but is present in a different kind of encounter. This is a world of the senses—palpable, tactile, fibrous—and he engages with it as such. He produces images that enhance that sensory engagement. He does not just gaze with his eyes but also with his body—it is a mimetic encounter with the textures of life that flow between people and environment. His images show us that the observational eye need not be a closed-off one, detached from the flux—the becoming—of the world. His images do not necessarily mirror back the 'I', but to some extent contest its primacy and universal position.

To look long enough at the prints struck from Thomson's original glass negatives, one after another, has the potential to evoke an experience of the same moment of revelation, a sudden breakthrough when the images open up and they become moments of encounter, each one a stepping stone on a journey into the light and density of the world. Thomson's photographs remind us of the primacy of images as a sensory medium—that photography is a kind of sensory thought—a process of writing through the senses. It appears that Thomson's scientifically trained ecological eye, his cultural apprenticeship in Yolngu ways of seeing and his saturation in the capacities of the photographic emulsion to capture and reproduce the qualities of this astute visual engagement come together to open him to a

profound immersion in the luminous qualities of the material world. What emerges is an intimation that Thomson's own boundaries have become permeable in this encounter: that this encounter is a process of becoming—of coming into contact with 'the flesh of the world'. It is only by having this profound encounter himself that he can produce something similar for the viewer, that his eye has the potential to open up to us an experience of the astonishment of vision.⁴⁷

Writing in the early 1990s, Joanna Scherer talks of the suspicion of photography in anthropological contexts—as a sensory medium—one which she argues was considered in phenomenological terms not amenable to the clear-cut extraction of meaningful data.⁴⁸ It is telling that, a decade later, this same phenomenological quality is elevated by David MacDougall to a primary source material itself—a primary characteristic of a counter-tradition in anthropological photography—its ability to engage with dimensions of experience that cannot be reduced to linear meaning or constrained within predetermined parameters of interpretation.⁴⁹ This is not to posit the senses as outside enculturation, but to redeem the knowledges available through the trained, enculturated sensorium. MacDougall cites Jean Rouch's account of making films as writing 'with one's eyes, one's ears, one's whole body', as an exemplar of this sensuous apprehension.⁵⁰ His approach makes clear to us that a medium that works through the senses should be perceived with and by the senses, and that our critical practice for reading images has to acknowledge this dimension. It also suggests that the represented time—the way the codes of the image may cue us into interpretations about historical time—is always in a dialectical relationship with the present of the moment of experience of the image. The powerful presentness of this encounter complicates the understanding of the temporality of the photographs—making them less an 'out there then' and more of a 'here now'.

In the theorisation of photography, we have heard time and again the mantra that meaning does not reside in the image but its uses—that it can be read not from the surface of an image but the way it is deployed in different discourses for particular purposes. In the context of anthropology, Scherer argues the importance of exploring the social, cultural and historical contexts of production, circulation and interpretation, in order to read ethnographic images. In Thomson's own context, the photographs he took on the Arafura swamp form part of his field material, anchored

by detailed descriptions of material culture, such as the precise manufacture of canoes, linguistic and cultural notes, accounts of seasonal food gathering, such as goose egg hunting, as well as detailed observations of plant and animal life.⁵¹ Thomson's photographic work required a high level of assistance and cooperation from the Aboriginal people he was living and working with, and the field notes situate the research material in the precise moment in which it was documented: the date, what was happening at the time, often the names of people photographed and the exchanges he had with those people, all of which locate the photographs within a dynamic living culture, and a precise historical moment.

Thomson was adept at deploying his images for different purposes in different contexts. Allen writes that 'he used his photographs both to educate the public and to influence public opinion by including photographs in nearly everything he wrote or presented whether scientific paper, newspaper article or public lecture'.⁵² Athol Chase compares Thomson's images with those taken by Edward Curtis in America, but argues that Curtis's images present Native Americans as 'noble savages', whereas Thomson's photographs 'reveal a deep sense of personal recognition, concern and attachment'.⁵³ Thomson's project documenting traditional culture was complemented by his passionate advocacy for justice for Aboriginal people: for sovereignty, land rights, pride and cultural preservation.⁵⁴ His repeated insistence on the dignity of traditional Aboriginal culture gives another framework within which to read his images of traditional people's 'seamless integration' in their own country. As Allen writes, to fully appreciate Thomson's photographic work, 'all the dimensions of his work as journalist, naturalist and campaigner for social justice as well as anthropologist' need to be taken into account.⁵⁵

To place Thomson more comprehensively within traditions in ethnographic photography—or photography more broadly—is another project, outside the scope of this one, but it is interesting to read Thomson's images against other aspects of his own work. Thomson was a popular writer of considerable skill. To read his narrative accounts of his expeditions into Arnhem Land reveals a similar transposition of his skills of detailed observation and attunement to the natural environment into the construction of his narrative prose, and also a romantic sensibility which drove his early desire to join Mawson's Antarctic expeditions and no doubt fuelled a sense of his role as a rugged individualist and an intrepid explorer

of new frontiers.⁵⁶ The narrative account of his expedition across remote areas of Arnhem Land gives a sense of the quality and flavour of this writing: it integrates exploration and observation with the passionate existential dimensions of his whole project.⁵⁷

How Thomson's images are used in contemporary contexts is another question. Allen has explored the kinds of engagement that Aboriginal people have with Thomson's photographs, and notes that the photos are, above anything else, valued as images of family and cultural pride. The meanings ascribed to the images, of course, can never be discerned from the photographic codes; nor can the emotional affinity people have with them or the ways the images have been reinscribed into contemporary cultural practices of commemoration in the ongoing construction of cultural identity and continuity.

In contemporary contexts, widespread challenges to the ways power is embedded in the relationship between photographer and subject and in the archive itself have led to moves by indigenous peoples to reclaim cultural authority over the photographic record and acknowledge moral ownership of the concrete individual histories of those snapped anonymously by the colonial photographers. Lindy Allen writes that 'Aboriginal people have initiated a dialogue on the sensitivities and cultural issues relating to collections of photographs not just in museums, but in library archives and public records.'⁵⁸

Allen recounts that, in the context of the Thomson collection, 'attention was drawn by the Aboriginal people working at the museum to the inherent obligations in the management of this collection'. This was because there is 'a particularly unique relationship ... encountered when you deal with photographs. You are dealing with individuals and their families.'⁵⁹

Thomson's images are by no means neutral, anonymous artefacts: they are documents of known ancestors, of kin and culture:

The importance of these images for [individual] Aboriginal people was very clear and for many it was a very strong and personal view. Here were family members in photographs previously considered unknown—just faces without names looking down the lens of a camera! Now they constituted recovered histories and personal journeys which, for most,

brought both tears and joy. They felt responsible for the images as part of their responsibility for their families and others in the photographs.⁶⁰

The protocols put in place at Museum Victoria, custodians of the Donald Thomson Collection which includes the photographs, closely manage access to and use of the images by those not from the source communities. These protocols mandate an awareness of issues of ownership and cultural sensitivity. They challenge the propensity of photos to circulate as free-floating, anonymous artefacts in an information economy and attempt to ensure that their use and interpretation are anchored in the context of concrete personal and cultural histories.

Increasing Indigenous empowerment in relation to photographic collections, such as the Thomson collection, fundamentally challenges the assumptions of scholarship, throwing the spotlight back onto the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of research, forcing it to reckon with the culturally specific perspectives that inform research goals and priorities. These challenges render problematic any reading of photographs outside the contexts of their production, circulation and interpretation as social artefacts. This raises the question of whether this reading of Thomson's photographs is totally antithetical to one that focuses on the cultural contexts of production and the significance and uses of the images in specific cultural contexts.

In Museum Victoria's commission as managers of the Thomson collection with a mandate to facilitate engagement with the source communities, the museum aims to provide communities with the best possible quality prints of the ethnographic photographs for circulation and preservation in communities.⁶¹ Why does the quality of these prints matter? Is it the vitality and vigour of the images that give them such a strong social presence? Would Thomson's images have the same credibility or be held in such esteem today if they were merely cold, detached scientific documents—if they did not stage an encounter with both people and environment that is one of such intimacy? Is it that they fulfil the desire that John von Sturmer writes of that:

images can awaken ... a resurgence of pleasure ... a certain refulgence, vividness, a heating up of the body; the pleasure of re-presencing, of being brought back into the presence of, not a mere experiencing ... but a re-being, the beingness of this or that moment[?]⁶²

How much does it matter that the images have a sensory quality that can, across the decades, transmit a spark of the wonder of that initial encounter, that the trace they carry is not only of the light bouncing off bodies and swamp hitting the glass plate but a trace of the astonishment of that encounter with, that entanglement in, the animate world of light? What can we learn from this method of analysing an image as a sensory artefact, a visual encounter? How much can this approach tell us about Thomson's images? Commentators invariably talk of the exquisite quality of Thomson's photographic work, his consummate skill as a photographer, but this commentary needs also to address what it is about his photographic images that is so remarkable. This project suggests that part of that exploration should specifically address the phenomenological and aesthetic qualities of Thomson's work.

—EPILOGUE: THOMSON AND *TEN CANOES*

What is the significance of a reading of Thomson's photographic work for our understanding of cinema? This question is one for which we may have had an answer. In addition to his still photographs, Thomson shot 22,000 feet of cinefilm, which, it was anticipated by those who saw the footage, was destined to become 'one of the great documentaries of the world'.⁶³ This footage, which Thomson considered to be a major part of his life's work, was destroyed in 1946 in a fire at the Commonwealth Cinema branch of the Department of Information, where he had lodged it specifically for its protection.⁶⁴ A tragic loss of cultural heritage for those whose ancestors he had filmed, this is also a major loss to Australia's cinematic history and to the understanding of how Thomson may have translated his photographic aesthetics into cinematic form. This missing link gives another dimension of significance to the way *Ten Canoes* takes up the photographs and brings the world they document to life in a cinematic interpretation.

So what of the heritage of Thomson's photographic aesthetics in *Ten Canoes*? The visual codes of Thomson's ethnographic photography can easily be read in the compositional characteristics of the black and white segments of the film—its tableau framing that locates human figures in panoramic perspective, a *mise en scène* that emphasises environment as much as figures. But what of Thomson's extraordinary attention to texture, his intimacy with fibre as much as figure, his

exposures that force us to grasp the sensory density of the physical world? Does the film share his delirium of vision?

Clearly the methods for analysing a still photograph cannot be applied directly to the cinema, imbued as it is with an entirely different temporality. These properties could never be fully reproduced in a cinematic image which, despite the much greater ease of contemporary technologies, has so many more variables, particularly when shot on location with all the logistical problems of a nonprofessional cast that often mandated only single takes and on-the-run decisions. And of course, neither the temporality nor the quality of experience generated by a film can be judged by attention to its visuality alone: in *Ten Canoes*, the masterful soundscape produces a sonic texture with a phenomenological density of its own, an aural encounter that produces and amplifies a sense of immersion into the environment of the swamp.⁶⁵ But focusing in this way on visuality, reading the film against the photographic tradition suggests that we need to look at the images holistically—it complicates our understanding of how the visual codes of ethnographic film work in *Ten Canoes* and reminds us that there are other layers of the image beyond those that can be accessed semiotically: that we need to look at other dimensions of the cinematic encounter.

In considering the temporality and spatiality of these monochrome segments, we need to pay attention not only to the ethnographic conventions of tableau and static camera but also to what those conventions enable. On one level, we could say that the wide shot contextualises characters in the environment, but these images do much more than that. These codes may, in some contexts, produce a sense of distance and with it an implication of pastness, but an image, and specifically a cinematic image, has other dimensions beyond these codes: they are complicated by the potential quality of presence the image can produce.

In a film, no image exists in isolation: the film itself sets up its own aesthetic economy within which each image functions. In *Ten Canoes*, the black and white 'ethnographic' sections are juxtaposed against the dramatic style of the colour segments—editing between close-ups, mid-shots and wide-shots, and the use of the mobile camera. For many viewers, the devices used in the dramatic sequences were very pleasurable—actors talking directly to camera, elements of play in the dramaturgy—but many critics and reviewers singled out the exquisite black and

white cinematography of the film. The black and white sequences rest the dramatic impulse that motivates the colour sequences and allow for a different engagement with the physical world of the swamp. It is here that the quality of the encounter unfolds: in *Ten Canoes*, the swamp glows, shimmers, draws us into the world of light. Thomson's observational rigour, combined with his photographic vision, gave the film a *mise en scène*. His eye set the stage for a cinematic encounter whose sheer presence defies any simplistic reading of codes or constrained temporality; a film which also shimmers on the cinematic screen.

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—NOTES

¹ *Ten Canoes*, directed by Rolf de Heer, Vertigo Productions, 2006.

² Nicolas Peterson, 'Introduction', in Donald Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, compiled and introduced by Nicolas Peterson, revised edition, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2003, p. 20. For an account of the extraordinary scope and diversity of the collection, see 'Tons and Tons of Valuable Material: The Donald Thomson collection', in Nicolas Peterson, Lindy Allen, and Louise Hamby (eds),

The Makers and the Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008, pp. 387–418.

³ Lindy Allen, 'Donald Thomson, Photographer, and the Donald Thomson Photographs', *Bulletin of the Conference of Museum Anthropologists*, no. 30, 1999, pp. 15, 18. Thomson took around two thousand five hundred photos across many parts of Arnhem Land. An account of what Thomson's work in Arnhem Land means to the people of Ramingining today can be found in 'Thomson Time', on the *Twelve Canoes* website, <<http://www.12canoes.com.au/>>. See particularly the paintings, 'Thomson' and 'Ten Canoes Story', by Bobby Bununggurr, made after the work on the film, <<http://www.12canoes.com.au/Gallery>>.

Museum Victoria manages the Donald Thomson Collection on long-term loan. Following her husband's death, Mrs Dorita Thomson gifted the ethnographic material to the University of Melbourne; the Thomson family retain ownership of photographs, field notes and other written material constituting Donald Thomson's literary estate. The latter component, known as the 'Ethnohistoric Collection', was inscribed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register in recent years, <<http://www.amw.org.au/citation/25>>.

⁴ Lindy Allen, 'A Photographer of Brilliance', in Bruce Rigsby and Nicolas Peterson (eds), *Donald Thomson, the Man and Scholar*, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Canberra, 2005, pp. 60–1. Thomson completed two periods of fieldwork in Arnhem Land, in 1935–1937 and 1942–1943 (Allen, 'A Photographer of Brilliance', p. 46). The Ethnohistoric Collection is known for the remarkable archive of 11,000 photographs Thomson took in Arnhem Land, Cape York and central Australia from the late 1920s through to the 1960s. Lindy Allen has recounted the deep affection of many Aboriginal people for these images.

⁵ Lindy Allen, personal conversation; *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes*, a documentary on the making of *Ten Canoes*, also shows the director discussing the production of the canoes with members of the Ramingining community and making sure that they are as close a replica as possible of the ones described in the field notes. Rosemary Wrench, Senior Manager of the Donald Thomson Ethnohistory Collection, has pointed out that many people in Arnhem Land have known about Thomson's photos for many years, and there have been ongoing close relations between Donald Thomson's family and the source communities. According to Wrench, there is evidence that, before the collection came to Museum Victoria in the early 1970s, Aboriginal people from the source communities came to Melbourne University to visit Donald Thomson and view items in the collection, and later in the 1970s Athol Chase brought Aboriginal people down from Lockhart River to access the collection.

⁶ A set of five of these matching images that highlights the similarities in composition, can be seen on the DVD extras of *Ten Canoes*.

⁷ Faye Ginsburg, 'Mediating Culture: Indigenous Media, Ethnographic Film and the Production of Identity', in Leslie Deveraux and Roger Hillman (eds), *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology and Photography*, University of California Press, pp. 256–90. See also Faye Ginsburg,

'Screen Memories: Signifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media', in Faye Ginsburg (ed.), *Media World: Anthropology on New Terrain*, University of California Press, Ewing, NJ, 2002.

⁸ Ginsburg, 'Mediating Culture', p. 265.

⁹ Athol Chase, 'Anthropology Through a Biological Lens', in Rigsby and Peterson (eds), pp. 18–19.

Rosemary Wrench points out that Chase here refers to some occasions where this practice was recorded in particular locations, and suggests that there is no indication of how frequent this request was (personal conversation, June 2010).

¹⁰ <<http://www.12canoes.com.au/>>, accessed 8 May 2010.

¹¹ <<http://www.12canoes.com.au/>>, 'Our Ancestors' (navigate through the paintings).

¹² In another twist, Djon Mundine writes that George Malibirr, the son of Ngulmarmar, one of the ten canoeists in the photograph, 'was later to refer to a similar painting composition of goose egg collecting as his 'Donald Thomson painting', after seeing this photograph four decades later in the late 1970s'. John Rudder, Bernice Murphy and Djon Mundine (eds), *The Native Born: Objects and Representations from Ramingining, Arnhem Land*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1996, p. 55.

¹³ Diane Hafner, 'Images of Port Stewart: Possible Interpretations', in Rigsby and Peterson (eds), pp. 211–30, 217. Hafner is referring to images taken in the Port Stewart area in 1928–1929, eight or nine years before the images discussed in this article, by which time one would expect Thomson had refined his skills as a photographer. Lindy Allen writes that Thomson chose to use this bulky, cumbersome technology, even though more lightweight cameras were available, specifically for its stability and quality, but that 'the technology imposed constraints on the photographer, in particular slowing up the process of taking photographs, so that many of the black and white images had to be created within a carefully negotiated and staged environment.' Allen, 'A Photographer of Brilliance', p. 47; In addition to glass plates, Thomson did produce some nitrate negatives.

It is essential to recognise that what we see in Thomson's images is a *mise en scène*. This is not the same as the studio stagings of a photographer like John William Lindt, who in the 1870s places Aboriginal people in a tableau with artefacts, flora and fauna—a kangaroo fur, a boomerang and a few sprigs of grass against a painted studio backdrop of landscape—in a kind of epigram of colonial assumptions of the 'noble savage' (see, for example, *Portraits of Oceania*, (ed.) Judy Annear, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, 38–44). Thomson's images are taken in the environment, not the studio, but they are a conscious staging nonetheless—a staging mandated by the slow shutter speeds. The story they tell is a different one but a story still.

¹⁴ A selection of the images Hafner is referring to can be seen in Hafner, pp. 218–22.

¹⁵ Kevin Murray, 'Reviews of Poignant and Thomson', *Australian Book Review* May 1997, <<http://kitez.com/texts/nagalarramba.htm>>, accessed 4 October 2008. For a detailed account of Poignant's work, see Roslyn Poignant, *Encounter at Nagalarramba: Photographs by Axel Poignant*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 1996.

¹⁶ The press kit and interviews with Rolf de Heer mention the initial exchange in which David Gulpilil told the director that, in order to make a film, they needed ten canoes and he showed him the photograph of ten canoeists on the Arafura swamp that gave the film its name.

¹⁷ Donald Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, first edn, (ed.) Nicolas Peterson, Curry O'Neill, Melbourne 1983.

¹⁸ Judith Proctor Wiseman, *Thomson Time: Arnhem Land in the 1930s: A Photographic Essay*, Museum of Victoria, Melbourne, 1996.

¹⁹ See image in Rudder, Murphy and Mundine, (eds), *The Native Born*.

²⁰ Lindy Allen, personal conversation, February 2009. Allen has recounted that, in one exhibition, 'Drawing from Nature', at Museum Victoria in the 1990s, the photographers used the same paper that Thomson would have used to print the images. Several of these exquisite photographs are hung in the corridors of Museum Victoria.

²¹ Allen has written of the process of travelling to the community with Thomson photos, meeting with the old people, scrutinising the images, and finding that most people could name the individuals in the ten canoes image and other photographs ('Donald Thomson', pp. 26–8). Allen and others talk of the very strong emotional affinity felt with these ancestors and with images that evoke a time that represents cultural integrity, when incursions of the balanda (Europeans) were still relatively limited. The press kits for the film and the documentary on the making of the film document the intense personal, familial connection that the Ramingining community felt with the characters in the film—the ancestral connections played out and, in particular, the claims of ownership based on recognition of the individuals in the original Thomson photograph.

²² This recourse to scrutiny of the prints struck from the original glass plates is not a return to the notion of aura: any copy struck with the same sensibility from the glass plates could reproduce the extraordinary qualities of the original prints. This is about exploring the sensibility the images encapsulate and how the technical specificity of the originals renders this possible or legible.

²³ Thomson's initial training was as a natural scientist and his images, for example, of grasses in the desert and moles burrowing into the desert sands, have a similar astute attention to precise detail of the physical environment. He published a book on birds in Cape York Peninsula, a detailed study of mammals and fish in northern Australia and was also renowned for his work on snakes. Claude Levi-Strauss wrote, of Thomson, 'in the face of such accuracy and care one begins to wish that every ethnologist were also a mineralogist, a botanist, a zoologist and even an astronomer', quoted in Ian Temby, 'Ecologist and Public Educator', in Rigsby and Peterson (ed.), pp. 63–70, p. 70. Temby cites Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 1962, p. 45. No doubt the accuracy and detail he achieves in his photos of the Arafura Swamp would allow those who know the environment to identify the specific species of swamp grasses and seasonal variations.

²⁴ David MacDougall. *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2005, p. 5.

²⁵ MacDougall, p. 238.

²⁶ MacDougall, p. 6.

²⁷ The polyfocal construction of the image challenges our assumptions about the way images focus our attention in a way that is reminiscent of the challenge to figuration presented by the conglomeration of textural and surface detail sprawled across the whole plane of a Jackson Pollock painting.

²⁸ See, for example, many of the swamp images in *Thomson Time*.

²⁹ Chase, pp. 20, 21; see also Nicolas Peterson, 'Thomson's Place in Australian Anthropology', in Bruce Rigsby and Nicolas Peterson (eds), *Donald Thomson: The Man and Scholar*, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Canberra, 2005, with support from Museum Victoria, 2005, pp. 29–44.

³⁰ Donald F. Thomson, *Donald Thomson's Mammals and Fishes of Northern Australia*, edited and annotated by Joan M. Dixon and Linda Huxley, Nelson, Melbourne, 1985.

³¹ Elizabeth Edwards, 'Introduction', in Elizabeth Edwards (ed.), *Anthropology and Photography 1860–1920*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, in association with the Royal Anthropological Institute, London, 1992, pp. 3–17, p. 6.

³² Allen, personal correspondence, June 2010 and 'A Photographer', p. 56.

³³ As above.

³⁴ One example of this is that Thomson specifically refused to allow publication of images he had taken of impoverished Aboriginal people dressed in rags, Chase, p. 19.

³⁵ Cristina Grasseni, 'Introduction' in Cristina Grasseni (ed.), *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*, New York and Oxford, Bergahn Books, 2007, pp. 6–7, 4. I am grateful to Alison Leitch for referring me to this link with Grasseni's work.

³⁶ Jennifer Deger, *Shimmering Screens: Making Media in an Aboriginal Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2006, pp. 190, 192.

³⁷ Grasseni, p. 7. Thomson developed his skills in photography as a hobby while he was still at school, and there is apparently no record of him studying photography formally. Thomson admired Arthur Haddon and Baldwin Spencer for their use of photography as an anthropological tool, but it appears that there is no material available about where or how he developed his own photographic aesthetics or any traditions in photography that might have influenced them. Lindy Allen comments that, despite searching for it, she has not been able to find anywhere in Thomson's writing where he reflects on his aesthetic approach to photography (personal correspondence, April 2010).

³⁸ For a discussion of how this assumption plays out in the rhetoric of documentary film, see Michael Renov, *Theorizing Documentary*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, p. 13.

³⁹ Allen, 'A Photographer of Brilliance', p. 51; see also Thomson's own narrative in *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*.

⁴⁰ Tim Ingold, 'Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought', *Ethnos*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2006, pp. 18, 19. Ingold here cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', trans. C. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*

and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics, (ed.) J. M. Edie, Northwestern University Press Evanston, IL, 1964, pp. 159–90, p. 166.

⁴¹ Ingold, p. 17.

⁴² Ingold, p. 14.

⁴³ John Rudder gives a much more culturally specific account of a ‘domain of entanglement’ in his description of Yolngu language and classificatory systems. He writes of a system of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ knowledge, according to which objects, plants, creatures, sites and people are all intermeshed: ‘not only people and sites but every living thing is related to every other living thing, through a matrilineally structured set of relationships between sites’, John Rudder, ‘The World of the Yolngu: The People of North-east Arnhem Land’, in Rudder, Murphy and Mundine (eds), *The Native Born*, pp. 113–26, p. 126. A short footnote cannot do justice to the complexity of Rudder’s explanation, which should be read in full.

⁴⁴ Kevin Murray, no pagination.

⁴⁵ All quotes from Murray, no pagination.

⁴⁶ Ginsburg, ‘Mediating Culture’, here cites Jane Gaines, ‘White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory’, *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 12–27.

⁴⁷ This is not to suggest a return to ideas of the ‘transparency of the medium’, but to bring more explicitly back into cultural discourse a recognition that the photographic process is an encounter in which the presence—not absence—of the photographer is pivotal. Photographers, of course, know this, but the phenomenological frame allows us to redeem an awareness of the knowledges embedded in the skilled visions of photographers into contemporary theory. This kind of embodied knowledge, and the importance of taking the time to develop the skill of looking with care and attention, has of course been fundamental to methods of field work that have been central to anthropology but have become relatively marginalised in a contemporary cultural theory no longer grounded in these methods. The immediacy of digital photography—the instantaneous nature of its production and reception—also works to ‘deskill’ contemporary viewers in the very practices of looking at images that recognise and value the resolution, precision and detail long made available by analogue photographic technologies. My thanks to the anonymous CSR referee for suggestions on this point.

⁴⁸ Joanna C. Scherer, ‘The Photographic Document: Photographs as Primary Data in Anthropological Inquiry’, in Edwards (ed.), pp. 32–41, p. 33.

⁴⁹ MacDougall’s work forms part of what Grasseni describes as the ‘rehabilitation of vision’, (Grasseni, p. 13) that characterises new developments in the anthropology of the senses.

⁵⁰ MacDougall, p. 251.

⁵¹ The field notes that accompany the ten canoes image, for example, cited in Wiseman, read: ‘Djinba and Ganalbingu men pole their way through the Arafura swamp. April 1937. Some of these specially constructed bark canoes make two, even three, long trips into the swamps but many of them are good for one only and are then abandoned ... The canoes are always propelled by poles; paddles

are not carried or used. Balers are made of bark curled around in a semi-circle. My Kanalbingo canoe man spoke little English and not much Tjambarapoingo and our conversation consisted for four days chiefly of: 'Bulna, ngarra yai'jun'. 'Wait, I bail.' ... Ten canoes formed the fleet on his first quest. It was too early—about April 27th in this case, to judge from the eggs coming in then.' April 1937, Field notes (37: 545, 548), Wiseman, p. 50.

⁵² Allen, 'A Photographer of Brilliance', p. 46.

⁵³ Chase, p. 19. Examples of this personal connection can be seen in the beautiful image of Thomson's good friend, Wonggo, reproduced in *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, first edition, p. 56; or of a woman carrying a baby in the traditional way, reproduced in *Thomson Time*, p. 13.

⁵⁴ See Attwood for an account of this advocacy work. Bain Attwood, 'Anthropology, Aboriginality and Aboriginal Rights', in Rigsby and Peterson (eds), pp. 101–16.

⁵⁵ Allen, 'A Photographer of Brilliance', p. 46.

⁵⁶ For most of his life, Thomson ran against the prevailing trends in social anthropology, and against the anthropological establishment, at great personal cost. For accounts of this conflict, see Nicolas Peterson, 'Thomson's Place in Australian Anthropology', in Rigsby and Peterson (eds), pp. 29–44; and Geoffrey Grey, 'A Deep-Seated Aversion or Prudish Disapproval: Relations with Elkin', in Rigsby and Peterson (eds), pp. 83–100.

⁵⁷ This writing is, in tone, at times reminiscent of the work of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (which could well be an influence on any one of Thomson's generation):

'We landed on the outer fringe of a dense tangle of mangroves, muddy underneath, with high roots like stilts—and of an impenetrable blackness. We climbed on top of this tangle and groped our way through foetid ooze and a confusion of roots. When we reached the far side Joshua was done and his teeth were chattering violently. We walked across the open plain on the outer edge of the mangroves to the edge of a strip of scrub, made a fire, and lay down ... I cannot describe adequately that journey. We were both by this time in a desperate state; the pain of the sand on our now skinned and lacerated feet, and swollen legs, brought a feeling of numbness, and of intense cold. There was about us a vast space that seemed suddenly to have closed in, like a material, substantial thing, and it was as if at each step we had to force our way through a solid nothingness. So had the sense of unreality become fantastic,' Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, first edition, pp. 39–40.

Thomson's images may have been produced as documents, but his personal history reveals his deep personal attachment to his photographic work and the lengths he went to protect the work and to maintain his ownership of it, refusing to relinquish his negatives. Both of these personal contexts provide another frame of reference to think about the passionate nature of his aesthetic concerns.

⁵⁸ Allen, 'Donald Thomson', pp. 16–17. For an account of the impact of Aboriginal challenges to the processes of museum collection management of museum collections, see also 'Introduction' in Peterson, Allen, and Hamby (eds), *The Makers and the Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, p. 7. Rosemary Wrench emphasises that one of the unique things about the Donald

Thomson Collection is that obligation to, and acknowledgment of, the source communities have always been key principles in the way Museum Victoria has managed the collection. These principles and protocols were established explicitly in the initial long-term loan agreement with University of Melbourne.

⁵⁹ Allen, 'Donald Thomson', pp. 17, 24.

⁶⁰ Allen, 'Donald Thomson', p. 17.

⁶¹ Lindy Allen, personal conversation, February 2009.

⁶² John Von Sturmer, 'Aborigines, Representation, Necrophilia', *Art & Text*, no. 32, 1989, pp. 127–3, p. 127.

⁶³ Rigsby and Peterson, pp. 14–15. Thomson describes this as 'full-sized film', so assuming it was 35 mm, this would be over four hours of footage.

⁶⁴ For an account of this devastating loss, see Rigsby and Peterson (eds), p. 6.

⁶⁵ For an account of the production of the soundtrack of *Ten Canoes*, and its innovative use of sound technology, see Bruno Starrs, 'The Audience as Aurator: Sound and Rolf De Heer's *Ten Canoes*', *Metro Magazine*, 149, 2006.