

Ten Canoes

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The feature film [Ten Canoes](#) (2006, dir. Rolf De Heer) takes as its starting point archival photographs taken by anthropologist-photographer Donald Thomson in the late 1930s in Arnhem Land. The construction of a feature film from still photographs raises important questions: Does its inspiration in archival photographs make the film more authoritative as a document of history or of scientific evidence? Does the feature film bring the photographs to life, or rather does it conflate important differences of visual image production and consumption between Thomson's time and now?

Authors writing at the intersection of photography and anthropology signal important differences between the media of film and photography. Anthropologist Christopher Pinney argues that film is more fixed, operating as a singular social fact containing meaning-making within its chains of syntactical elements (Pinney 1992:90; see also Griffiths 2002:119). Griffiths objects to Pinney's opposition between the finitude of film meaning-making and the infinite recodability of photographs (Elizabeth Edwards' phrase), suggesting that both media "contain emphatic narrative cues" (Griffiths 2002:119). Like Griffiths, Edwards is interested in a nuanced exploration of these visual

media's similarities and differences. For Edwards, it is a matter of stillness and flow: the stillness of photographs fractures time in a way that film does not, and because of this quality, photographs lend themselves to the weaving of stories around the visual object in ways that films do not. In this context, *Ten Canoes* is a product of just such storytelling, inspired by specific examples of Thomson photographs, not unlike the other stories being told about photos in the Museum Victoria collection right now—through edited volumes, academic symposia, museum exhibitions, and collaborative projects between the museum and source communities. But then, what happens to the photographs once they are resignified in this different medium?

Watching the film--in the theater and then later on DVD at home--does bring the Thomson photographs to life for me--as one node among many in the visual economy of meaning making inspired by the Thomson photographic collection. Like the photographs, the narrative and stylistic devices of the film raise important questions about the media's relationship to "reality," authenticity, and historical "truth": did/do the people of Ramingining really dress, travel, hunt, tell stories, resolve conflicts in the ways portrayed in the film? Like the photographs, the film is a construction of Aboriginal lives--one imagination that must be considered partial and always among many other imaginations.

A trailer for the film can be seen here:

www.tencanoes.com.au

In contrast, watching the DVD featurette entitled “Thomson Time Photo Gallery,” is more unsettling and feels far less open to interrogation or further imagination. After a few brief intertitles introducing Thomson and his photographs, a soundtrack fades up, including an Aboriginal man’s song cycle, natural sounds of water, wind, birds, and insects (presumably from the Arafura Swamp?), the percussion of clapsticks, and the haunting music of a didgeridoo. It is a soundscape that is recognizably Indigenous to Australian filmgoers, likely reinforces stereotypes of remote Aboriginality, and in the words of Griffiths above, is an “emphatic cue” directing viewers’ interpretations of the photographs appearing before them. A black and white Thomson photograph fades up and then fades into the analogous *Ten Canoes* color film still; after a brief fade to black, the two photographs then fade up alongside each other—as if to challenge the viewer to assess the authenticity of the snapshot of the film as a derivative of the original photograph. It is a strategy that also collapses the distance in time—as well as the differences of production circumstances—between the taking of the two sets of images. After five photographs are displayed in this manner, intertitles announce the title of each photograph; under each title is two columns, one naming the people pictured in the Thomson photograph, and the other naming those pictured in the *Ten Canoes* photograph. Though I appreciate the attempt to name all who are pictured in each image, this particular method of naming feels oddly displaced from the images each title and list describe. This technique also conflates important differences between Thomson’s informants—living in the 1930s and interacting with an anthropologist—and the *Ten Canoes* actors living in the early twenty-first century and responding to a film director. Finally, after acknowledgments and credits, an intertitle states: “for more information on the Donald Thomson Collection, contact Indigenous Collections, Museum Victoria” (and then provides a Melbourne phone number with which to do so). With this text, the featurette interpellates itself and the feature film as authoritative, educative resources, erasing the possibility of their consideration as popular entertainment (or any other kind of form!).

This featurette is a hybrid form, neither still photograph nor moving film. Yet there is so much visual, textual, and aural information streaming at the viewer—in ways that feel directive, rather than inspiring—in its brief three minutes, I feel very much enclosed in Chris Pinney’s chain of narrative signification (as cited in Griffiths 2002:119), with little or no space to make my own meanings of the Thomson photographs, *Ten Canoes* and its still images, or their relationships to each other. The featurette’s unstated but unsubtle construction of the film *Ten Canoes* as an authentic historical document of ethnographic data ignores the film’s status as one medium among many constructing Aboriginalities and rethinking histories in contemporary Australia through the visual economy in which the Thomson photographic collection currently circulates.

Bibliography

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