



Three stills from
My Lovely Day, 1997
courtesy of Penny Siopis
and Stevenson Gallery

The hooks of history Three films

Penny Siopis

For some time now I have been making films using found 8mm footage, text and sound to shape stories about people caught up, often tragically, in larger social upheavals. These changes frequently involve extreme forms of physical and psychological displacement. All the stories have an elemental quality that speaks to larger narratives beyond their specific historical circumstances and that seek to capture a consciousness of displacement and movement shared by millions across the globe.

It was my mother's old 8mm cine films that first prompted me to work with found footage and sparked my interest in other people's home movies. I began collecting anonymous home movies from flea markets and charity shops in South Africa and on my travels abroad. I have no idea who made these films. I don't know the circumstances and people recorded in the sweep of the camera. I now have a huge archive of footage and mine this archive continually in making my films.

The found film footage operates, for me, like a kind of readymade. It is already inscribed with meaning, and this readymade meaning is part of my interest in the material. From this footage I create new films that bear no empirical relationship to their original context or content. They involve documents, but are not documentary. Old home movies are resonant with emotion and a degree of pathos. I am often entranced by scenes of people and places about which I know nothing. Invariably, I imagine and project my 'subjectivity' onto these celluloid actors and spaces, and this involves something of the double register with which I work in all the films.

The text I use in the final work is drafted from various sources uncovered in my historical research of particular events which strike me as vivid and resonant and speak beyond themselves. The text mimics the form but not the function of the subtitles we often find in foreign films. It does not actually translate foreign language; but the idea of translation itself interests me and relates to the doubleness I mentioned earlier. While the form of the text signifies 'foreignness' in the image, what is crucial for me is how the text translates into a voice in the head, the consciousness of the viewer. What allows me to hook contingency to fact is my selective use of this text in combination with film sequences snatched from my ever-expanding archive. I am always very aware of

the mode of address in the text and its power to implicate the spectator. I choose the first person whenever I can.

The soundtrack is part and parcel of the play with doubleness and foreignness, and is crucial for establishing a certain tension and energy. It paces the narrative and, most importantly, imbues the picture with feeling, not unlike how piano or percussion worked in the original silent movies. In my films the sound is usually music, a single song or a mix of tracks.

Stressing the materiality of the film is also vital to my work. This materiality includes 'artifacts' of the physical film (sprocket marks, dust spots, scratches, the literal burning of the celluloid during projection, water damage) and filming itself (the effects of amateurish camerawork, wrong exposure, camera shake, light flares and oddly angled points of view). The physicality of the film has a history that is often as compelling as the events pictured in the film, story or sound.

Because I don't shoot the film myself, my editing depends on footage I find by chance, and this chance aspect is a creatively decisive part of my working process. I buy the film sight-unseen and have it transferred to digital form. The moment of actually seeing what images hide in the celluloid is exacting and exciting. There is abundant serendipity and surprise at this first sight and in editing. The process often takes on the quality of a quest. Finding what I am looking for in my editing can be quite an uncanny, unnerving and marvelous experience.

***My Lovely Day* (1997)**

I made *My Lovely Day* for the second Johannesburg Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor. The overall theme was 'Trade Routes: History and Geography', and my work featured in the section titled 'Alternating Currents'. A few years before this event my mother had emigrated from South Africa to Australia, and left me a box of her home movies of our family life in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa.

In *My Lovely Day* I splice sequences of my mother's home movies with text that I construct from my grandmother's words as I remember them, and from postcards she exchanged with her relatives. The music is composed of a 78-rpm recording of my mother singing that was made in 1955 and a record of old Greek folk music. My mother's singing opens and closes the film: 'This is my lovely day, it is the day

I shall remember till the day I'm dying...' Her voice strains over the crackling of the scratched record, a damaged needle and the hum as it rotates on the turntable.

Through my grandmother's remembered words, the film tells an elemental family story, weaving together the lives of three generations of women. It compresses historical time into a single day with my grandmother reflecting: 'After all my travels, that I should land up in this god-forsaken place.'

This is how she began her stories to us, her grandchildren, about her emotional and literal journeys between Western Europe, Greece, Turkey and South Africa in the early part of last century. The place from which she speaks is a small desert town in South Africa called Vryburg. In her mind it is a 'savage' place, not unlike her husband's home on a remote Greek island where she was exiled when he sailed to America to seek the fortune he had lost in Smyrna, Asia Minor in the 1920s.

The historical moment of her telling is apartheid South Africa, but her references to social turmoil and catastrophe are to those of earlier times; the 'exchange of populations' following the 1922 Greco-Turkish conflict, the massive migrations sparked by the two World Wars and the decolonisation of Africa.

That my grandmother was British was a source of great pride to her. But her words in the film, 'I wasn't foreign. I was British', seem pathetic as they cut into a scene of a baboon sitting where urban road and bushveld meet. As the baboon walks into the bushveld she says, 'But I was married to a Greek', as if to explain the alienation she felt in her home country during her family's sojourn in London when 'the English' disparagingly labelled her and her husband 'continentals' and 'colonials'. She mentions how my grandfather changed his name to feel less foreign in an 'anglicised' world. She ponders on the 'mixed blood' of her grandchildren; Greek, South African, Italian, British, Macedonian.

Much of the film has my grandmother musing on how we, her grandchildren, know nothing about the 'real world'. As privileged white children, we were protected by apartheid laws and economic independence. We travelled 'only for pleasure', she reflects. How could we know 'what it feels like to be marooned in a place, uproot or cut ties'? She utters these words over a scene of us children riding a donkey in the countryside. In another scene, her words, 'What do you know about massacre, disaster, catastrophe?' overlay a sequence

of white children doing gymnastics. In her laconic and dystopic way she murmurs and mutters on and on about the world from the vantage of our home's neo-colonial veranda. The catastrophe of apartheid lives actually lived must have constantly stared her in the face, standing under those eaves.

Time is out of joint in the film, and more so in those moments where my grandmother's words seem to be spoken from the grave. In one instance she ponders on how she kept her icons of St Nicholas and the Virgin 'until the day I died', which also resonates with my mother singing about remembering her 'lovely day' till the day 'I'm dying'. Film sequence and text are also dissonant. A text referring to refugees fleeing Asia Minor accompanies a scene of the rock face of Table Mountain in Cape Town. The Turks 'behaving like animals' shows holidaymakers celebrating on a Union Castle liner as it crosses the equator. The building seeming to be my grandfather's cinema in Umtata, Eastern Cape is actually the mission of the Moffat family in Kuruman, Northern Cape. And so it goes. Then there are other scenes that are so oblique as to work entirely by stretching association and metaphor, obscure mnemonics of disappearing worlds.

My grandmother's closing words take us back to her first, the 'godforsaken place' she ended up in. They ring true and echo beyond her particular experience. The scene embedding these words is of a huge hole in the earth, the Big Hole in Kimberley, a city not far from the desert town in which we lived. My grandmother says, as if looking into the future, 'This is a dangerous place – a place of ruin. Know it in my bones'.

The Big Hole marked the place where diamonds were first discovered in South Africa in 1871. This, along with the discovery of gold, changed foreign interest in the country and drastically altered the land, lives and history of its people.

My grandmother's rather jaundiced words also reflect something of her generation's fears and prejudices. But hers is a story of a bleak stoic, an eternally unsettled exiled soul. It is also, for me, a much larger allegory of the felt effects of what we might now call globalisation.

Pray (2007)

Pray was the first piece in which I used other people's home movies rather than my mother's. I found a batch of 8mm film in a charity shop in Johannesburg and could tell from the content of the celluloid that it came from one family. I knew nothing about this family, except the assumptions I could draw from the footage. They seemed very much like my own family – middle class white South Africans – people that had a cine camera and travelled with a yen to record the pleasures of being out and about. But unlike my family, who never visited game reserves, safaris seemed a regular pleasure for this clan. Their films are full of wildlife.

Pray combines sequences of this found footage with found sound. The words are passages from a short story, titled *The Ultimate Safari*, written by Nadine Gordimer in 1991. The story is narrated by a young girl who tells of the experience of a group of refugees walking across the expanses of the Kruger Park game reserve in a bid to reach South Africa. The Kruger Park marks South Africa's borders with parts of Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The refugees are Mozambicans for whom South Africa offered both asylum and opportunity – a promise of freedom despite apartheid's strictures. The refugees have been forced to flee their country by 'bandits', assumed in this story to be Renamo rebels who, with the support of the apartheid state, worked to destabilise Mozambique through civil war. The passages of the story I focus on tell of these refugees' very real fear of predatory lions roaming the veld through which they are forced to walk – lions that might attack and eat them before they reach their destination.

I heard Gordimer read *The Ultimate Safari* in 1992, and was deeply moved by the experience. The context was a cultural festival in Grahamstown, a region known for the frontier wars waged between white settlers and Xhosa-speaking people between 1779 and 1879. The battles were over land, and the Xhosa ended up the worse off. It is still a politically fraught, damaged place. Gordimer's story resonated with associations of frontiers and fences, borders and boundaries in a way that spoke of both past and present. The group of Mozambicans could be the Zimbabwean migrants of today. But this situation could be almost anywhere, and the lions could mutate into any number of threats to life and limb.

Not long after I heard Gordimer read her story, I came across a press report about a lion that had been killed in the Kruger Park. In its stomach was a little leather purse. The purse was empty.

The film sequences show typical safari scenes of animals feeding and drinking in the wild. South Africa has a reputation for its wildlife and the extensive game reserves that protect and conserve that life. There are ongoing political tensions between the sometimes-contesting claims of conservation and the actual communities living in or around the reserves. These tensions lie at the edges of Gordimer's harrowing story. The place of play and pleasure for paying visitors looking at 'the wild' from a safe distance, is also, in the young narrator's words, 'a kind of whole country of animals' which prey on those compelled to move through it.

The soundtrack accentuates the temper, tone and tempo of the work, not least the rhythm of walking. It is a lament belonging to a strange and distant Greek folk genre called Rembetika. Rembetika is said to have originated with the Greek refugees expelled from their homes in Asia Minor to a Greece entirely foreign to them, as part of 'the exchange of populations' following the 1922 Greco-Turkish conflict. They brought with them a mix of Greek and Anatolian musical traditions and instruments, and lyrics that expressed their estrangement in what should have been their home country. To make matters worse these exchanged populations were resettled in a way that forced them to the margins of society. Rembetika was revived again during the violent civil war in Greece in the 1940s, a time of alienation, displacement and distress.

In *Pray*, the music is instrumental for the early part of the narrative. A man's voice then enters, wailing against the beat of a drum. The words are a mix of barely audible Greek and Turkish merging into a powerful mournful and yearning cry. In the film the cry comes at that moment in Gordimer's narrative when one night, the young girl senses that the lions are near, pacing and panting. 'I don't know,' she says, 'which night it was – because we were walking, walking, any time, all the time – we heard the lions very near. Not groaning loudly the way they did far off. Panting, like we do when we run, but it's a different kind of panting: you can hear they're not running, they're waiting, somewhere near. We all rolled closer



Three stills from
Pray, 2007
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together, on top of each other, the ones on the edge fighting to get to the middle... I prayed to God to make the lions take someone on the edge and go.'

The film sequences are often bleached out so that it is difficult to discern what might hide in the bushveld. Sometimes film and sound run parallel, and sometimes they converge and touch. There is a doubling here, a dual register, which speaks to the foreign and the familiar in experiences of estrangement and dislocation. As for the sound itself, the drumbeat is like a heartbeat that quickens as it leads to the man's lament, echoing, for me, the plight of the refugees and their fears; of being consumed by lions, the dark, by history. Or simply vanishing without trace.

***Obscure White Messenger* (2010)**

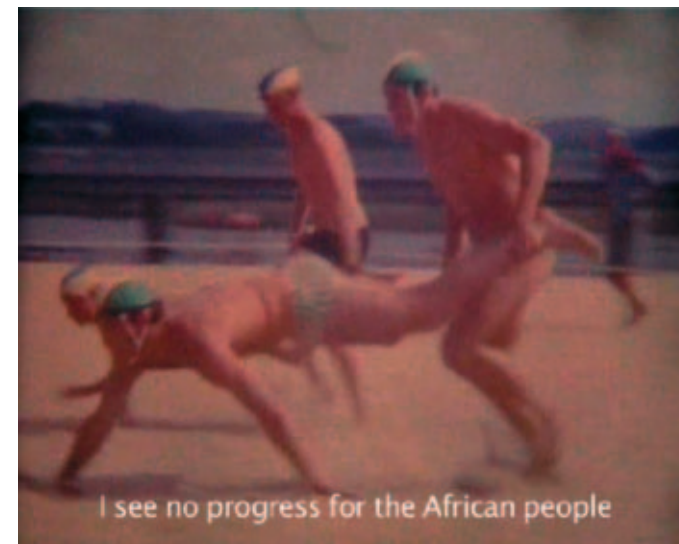
In *Obscure White Messenger* I take the story of one Demitrios Tsafendas to explore a state of statelessness in a world where citizenship and belonging all too often establish and legitimate what it means to be fully human.

In 1966 Tsafendas assassinated the South African Prime Minister and architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, in the House of Assembly. As a parliamentary messenger, he walked up to Verwoerd ostensibly to give him a message, but instead stabbed him to death with a large kitchen knife.

In *Obscure White Messenger* Tsafendas's words reflect his statelessness, indeed his homelessness, in the myriad ways we might think of this 'condition'. Throughout the film there is the question of who he is and where he belongs.

Tsafendas was 'illegitimate' from the start. His Greek father, who lived in Lourenço Marques¹, employed a local Mozambican woman, Amelia Williams, for domestic work. Amelia became his lover and Demitrios was born in 1918, the product of their union. Soon after his birth, Amelia left the homestead forever. His father then married a Greek woman, and Demitrios became an obstacle for the new relationship. The boy was dispatched to his grandmother in Alexandria (Egypt) and later to boarding school in Middelburg (South Africa). His few years at this school made him directly aware of the horrors of racism for the first time.

As an adult, Tsafendas spent most of his life at sea, literally and metaphorically. He sojourned in different countries in Africa, Europe, North America and the Middle East, spending



Three stills from *Obscure White Messenger*, 2010
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¹
Today's Maputo, capital
of Mozambique.

time on ships, in mental asylums, in prisons, teaching English and doing odd jobs. He was an oddball, a misfit, an eternal outsider, a reluctant nomad. His leftist political views did not help his cause. No country would give him citizenship. Not even the country of his birth.

As a blacklisted person, an alien, a sometime communist, Tsafendas should never have been able to set foot in South Africa. As someone of mixed race and stateless, he should never have been made a parliamentary messenger, a position at that time reserved for white South African citizens. Tsafendas's last entry to South Africa was a bureaucratic blunder. The great, intricate machinery of Grand Apartheid had allegedly misspelled his name, allowing him to slip through and get within striking distance of the prime minister. His entry into the country and journey to parliament owed everything to an extraordinary set of mistakes.

The summary court case that followed the assassination declared that it was madness, not politics that drove Tsafendas to commit the deed. The presiding judge declared Tsafendas 'a meaningless creature'. The commission of enquiry into the circumstances of the death of Verwoerd seemed motivated by wider concerns. How could the borders of the country be so porous as to allow a listed person like Tsafendas to enter? Was Tsafendas 'used' by conspirators beyond the borders? Who was behind him?²

When news of Verwoerd's murder reached Nelson Mandela on Robben Island he showed no interest in Tsafendas, referring to him only as that 'obscure white parliamentary messenger'; he was more concerned to make it clear that the ANC did not condone assassinations.

All this and more fuelled my filmic reimagining of this history-altering event. I culled and combined bits of different anonymous found home movies and mixed these sequences with sound and words. Some of the films were shot in South Africa, others in Greece and Portugal and still others in unidentifiable places. The sound is 'traditional' Turkish music. For the narrative, I adopted a question-and-answer format reflecting one psychiatrist's interview with Tsafendas just after the murder. I also used news, medical reports, legal documents, and Henk van Woerden's extraordinary book on Tsafendas's life and other material³. Tsafendas's words feature in all this material and speak volumes about his state of mind and his state of placelessness, his deep homelessness.

In the film the deck of a ship becomes his forced habitat, a kind of floating isolation, thwarting his restless search for a community, a solid place where he could anchor his life. There are many scenes of ships and seas. In one scene, Tsafendas's words tell of being on the vessel *Eugene Livanos* in 1945 and writing to President Roosevelt asking for citizenship of the United States. 'But he refused,' says Tsafendas. In another scene of a cabin with an empty bed and desk, he says, 'I am a man without a country'. This follows his words about him writing to the South African authorities pleading to become a citizen. When he finally enters South Africa via Cape Town – and the scene in the film is of the old cable car veering towards Table Mountain – he reflects, 'When I got here I got an inferiority complex.' The scene shifts to white clouds moving over the mountain; 'I wanted to be blond with blue eyes and all that.'

That Tsafendas was mad was, of course, not the whole story. He was quite capable of rational thought, as the commission of enquiry noted. Madness in the film is a recurring theme or question. The psychiatrist asks Tsafendas if God speaks to him, and Tsafendas replies, 'Not personally'.

Tsafendas's madness apparently stemmed from his anxiety about a giant tapeworm that had afflicted him as a young boy. The ghost of the worm never seemed to leave him. The media made more of the worm than of any political will. The idea that madness and political motive might be mixed up in his drive to kill the prime minister was resisted by the apartheid state and the white public generally.

With madness in mind, I used a sequence of a pale-coloured octopus to suggest the madness of the whole situation. Writhing in its aquarium tank, the octopus evokes the sinister, segmented worm that parasitised Tsafendas's bowels and his mind, its tentacles sucking onto surfaces, touching on the spectre that haunted Tsafendas and the responses to his epoch-changing act. The creature's tentacular grasping, unfolding, reaching out and drawing in shows that it traps and is trapped itself. It seems peculiarly vulnerable, a victim.

For me this speaks to the monstrosity of apartheid. South African citizens routinely acted out the minutely regulated and separatist social demands of a deadly racist ideology, where most white people were part of a regressive almost paramilitary social formation. Against the sequence of white lifesavers drilling on the beach in the film, Tsafendas says, 'I see no progress for the African people'.

² See *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Circumstances of the Death of the late Dr. The Honourable Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd* (1966).

³ See van Woerden (2000), Key (1998), government reports (1966), and newspapers of that time, such as the *Cape Times*, *The Star*, *The Cape Argus*.

Tsafendas was incarcerated in Pretoria Central prison at the pleasure of the state president for over a quarter of a century. For much of this time he was on death row, his cell adjacent to where people were hanged, sometimes seven at a time. If he wasn't mad when he assassinated Verwoerd, this experience – and the regular abuse he suffered at the hands of prison warders – would have made him so. In 1994 – the year of South Africa's first democratic election – Mandela released Tsafendas, who was then transferred to a mental asylum in Sterkfontein, near Johannesburg's 'Cradle of Humankind'. He died in relative obscurity in 1999.

Films

My Lovely Day (1997), Video (8mm film transferred to DVD for projection), 21'

Pray (2007), Video, (8mm film transferred to DVD for projection), 2'48"

Obscure White Messenger (2010), Video (8mm film transferred to DVD for projection), 15'6"

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