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Doon School Images

David MacDougall

These pictures were made at a boarding school in northern India between 1997 and 2000[1]. They come from a research project in which I used video extensively to record the students' activities and their experience of living in a particular social and sensory environment. Doon School is the most famous boys' boarding school in India and was the first school to be established for Indian students on the model of the British «public school». It aims to promote equality, leadership, a scientific outlook, and a concept of masculinity partly derived from India's colonial past. The school is also a place of contradictions, where egalitarian ideals coexist with hierarchy and privilege. The school has been influential in the creation of the new Indian elites, and epitomizes many aspects of Indian postcoloniality.

Every boarding school is unique, yet all boarding schools are the same. All must provide for the essentials of life: food, sleep, shelter, basic hygiene. Educational needs dictate other features: classrooms, sports fields, and places of assembly. Each school works out variations on these general themes, creating a distinctive complex of sights, sounds, colours, and textures that is immediately recognizable to present and past students. It is an environment made up of both natural and cultural elements, and includes not only the physical setting but also specific patterns of interpersonal and community behaviour. This constitutes the particular social aesthetic of the school. A distinctive and highly-controlled environment is characteristic of many small, closed institutions such as schools, prisons, asylums, and military and religious organizations. It was the purpose of my project to examine this and to ask whether any of the principles observed could be extended to human societies more generally.

A social environment involves all the senses, but vision is one of the most important for purposes of recognition (at least for human beings) because it involves a large number of possible combinations of light, form, movement, colour and texture. To an outsider, a handful of images may convey a complex reality to only a very limited extent, but to the insider they can evoke an entire social and material universe. Pictures are primarily about seeing, but they also have the power to touch the other senses and retrieve memories of sounds, smells, heat and cold; to remind one of friends and enemies; to reawaken emotions of fear, joy, boredom and despair.

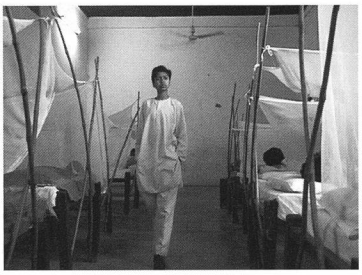
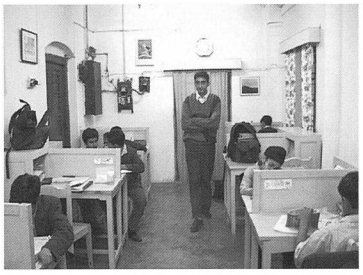
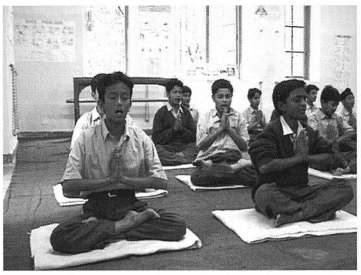
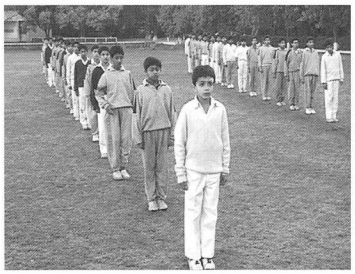
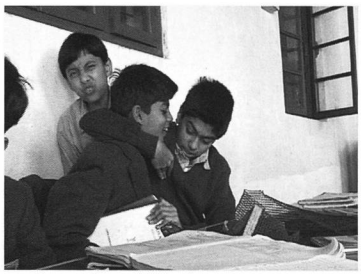
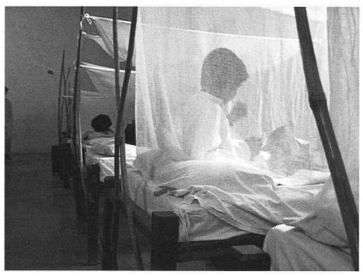
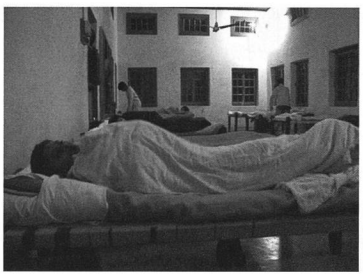
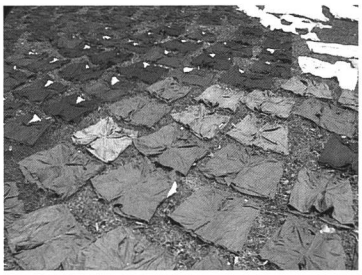
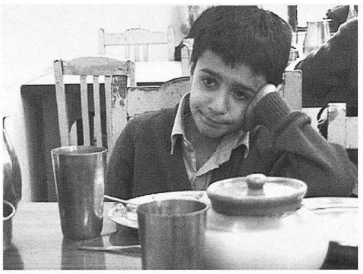
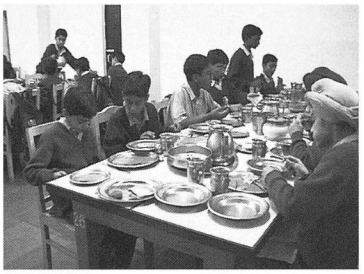
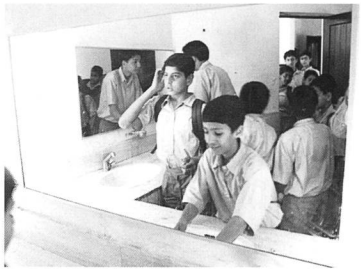
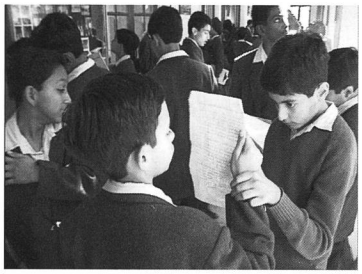
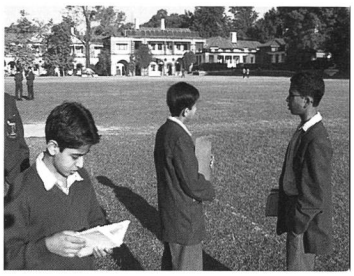
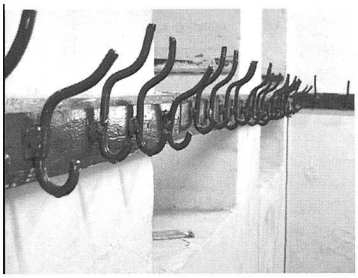
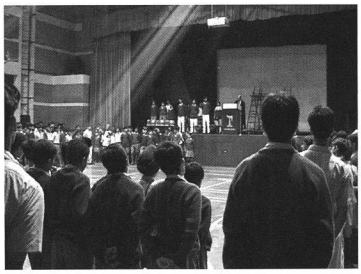
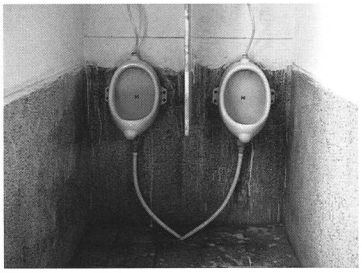
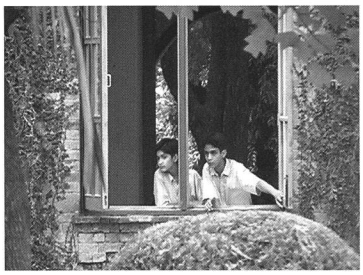
Although the Doon School video project explores many aspects of the students' emotional lives and personal relationships, the images reproduced here primarily concern the social spaces of the school and some of the material objects with which the students are in daily contact. If one may speak of the expressive forms of an institution as one would of those of a creative work, then clothing, sports, meals, the daily timetable, and the arrangement of human bodies and public spaces are among those most highly elaborated at the school. The pictures shown here focus on some of these elements of school life.

Most of these images have the peculiarity of having been made not as still photographs but by having been extracted from video footage. Thus they have not been captured directly from the flow of experience but from experience already captured in another form in another medium. The life that surrounded these frozen moments can still be viewed if one looks at the video footage, but in many ways these images are shorn of far more than their original movement and colour, as you see them printed here. They lack

the accidental qualities and vibrancy that surrounds all events as they actually take place, when the future remains unknown. Nevertheless, still images achieve something that moving images cannot achieve. Video is evanescent, constantly tracing images that just as quickly disappear from the screen. Still images, on the other hand, give us moments when the future is just about to unfold. They carry the weight of that unknown future within them and become larger statements about history and memory. The boys you see here still exist, but they are no longer the same. They have outgrown their images along with their school uniforms.

Author

David MacDougall is an ethnographic filmmaker, scholar, and writer on cinema, the social sciences, and education. His prize-winning films (many made jointly with his wife, Judith MacDougall) include *The Wedding Camels*, *Lorang's Way*, *To Live with Herds*, *A Wife among Wives*, *Takeover*, *Photo Wallahs*, and *Tempus de Baristas*. A book of his essays, *Transcultural Cinema*, was published by Princeton University Press in 1998.

He is currently an Australian Research Council Professorial Fellow at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University.

[1] The Doon School Project has produced five films: *Doon School Chronicles*, *With Morning Hearts*, *Karam in Jaipur*, *The New Boys*, and *The Age of Reason*. They are available from the Royal Anthropological Institute Video Sales: www.therai.org.uk/film/video_sales.html (film@therai.org.uk).