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The Waterside Workers Federation Film
Unit: the forgotten frontier of the fifties

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The Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit: The Forgotten Frontier of the Fifties

Martha Ansara and Lisa Milner. Metro Magazine, no 119, 1999: 28-39.

This paper, written for the Fifth International Documentary Conference, Brisbane, 1997, offers a reappraisal of the historical status of Australian documentary, and, more generally, suggests the value of a revised view of Australian Cinema. In particular, Ansara and Milner look at the work of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit in the context of the rapid expansion of Australian film-making which took place in the 1950s. At the time, the 'wharfies' Film Unit opened a new frontier in documentary film-making in Australia, an endeavour which, in retrospect, provides a source of reflection upon our own documentary practices of today.

Australian Cinema in the 1950s

The fifties are remembered by many Australians as a barren, conservative period. It is an era which has most often been characterised by the sobriety of Robert Menzies, the Queen's Visit in pearls, England as Home, the Split in the Labor Party, the Petrov Affair, the Communist Referendum, the Korean War, migrants arriving and being shunted into camps, the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the nuclear family, the six o'clock swill for men, housewifery for women, and the advent of television. 'Sunday mornings in the suburbs', as Alan Ashbolt wrote about Australia at a slightly later point,

Sunday mornings in the suburbs when the high-decibel drone of the motor-mower is calling the faithful to worship. A block of land, a brick veneer; and a motor-mower beside him in the wilderness - what more does a man want to sustain him, except a Holden to polish, a beer with the boys, marital sex on Saturday nights, a few furtive adulteries, an occasional gamble on the horses or the lottery, the tribal rituals of football, the flickering shadows in his lounge room of cops and robbers, goodies and baddies, guys and dolls¹.

This is the prevailing view of the fifties, a society dominated by political conservatism and stifling, suburban values, a time when most serious theatre and literature were created elsewhere – the 1955 presentation of *Summer of the 17th Doll* was reported to

have been a unique and electrifying experience – and a time when, as we all know, the Hollywood octopus had very nearly squeezed the last gasp of breath out of our once sturdy little film industry. Indeed, the title of the chapter on this period in Graham Shirley and Brian Adams' book, *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, is entitled "Into the Void". And Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, in *Australian Film: 1900-1977*, write that 'in the Menzies era, public and governmental preoccupation with material well-being and political security made the absence of an Australian film culture a matter of little general concern; the past achievements of the industry were forgotten ... the film industry had reached an all-time low'.²

So it was with this view of the fifties firmly in mind that a couple of years ago Martha Ansara embarked on her oral history of Australian Cameramen, exploring film-making as expressed through labour, and Lisa Milner began delving into the work of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit, exploring the labour movement as expressed through film. Recently, both of us have been forced - quite independently of each other and on the basis of separate research - to significantly revise our understanding of the period. You can imagine our surprise when each confessed to the other, rather tentatively at first, that - actually - the fifties appear to have been a vigorous time in Australian political, social and cultural life, and a period of dynamic change and growth in Australian film production.

Conscious of the ways in which film-making, as an activity, expresses the society in which it is rooted, we place the upsurge in filmmaking of the fifties within a period that begins in the late forties with post-war reconstruction and its filmic preoccupation with nation-building, and continues through a time of low unemployment, intensified industrial and political conflict, a rising standard of living, the establishment of consumerism and its apotheosis in the family television set. It was a time which saw an accelerating transformation of Australian society and media, and, in the late sixties, resulted in the ascendancy of the forces which ushered in the Whitlam Labor government and the so-called Australian Film Renaissance, both at once.³ This periodisation heightens our awareness of the transformative social and political currents of the fifties against which conservatism was impelled to react, and also of the cultural dialectic of those times. While change can never really be said to have one specific beginning, it was, we feel, within the sharp contradictions of the fifties that the Australian cinema of the seventies

began to take form, both in consciousness and in concrete industrial structures.

We first came to this view of the fifties through oral histories. Both of us belong to the Film-makers Oral History Group, which collectively has interviewed many, many film-makers, including those who were active in the fifties. There are interesting differences in the responses of our informants about the fifties, given their varying work roles and social backgrounds, but one inescapable point has emerged: whatever the political orientation of the speaker, whatever their gender, their crew position, their cultural ideas, and their attitudes towards the society of the day, all film-workers of the fifties speak as if they were deeply engaged in their work and - for documentary makers and film technicians - as if there was plenty of it. Those who had come up through the thirties, and in some cases the silent era, found new opportunities in the fifties, with a number of technicians forming their own production companies or moving into producer roles within other expanding organisations. At the same time, a large number of young people entered into this new and rapidly developing production milieu. These included non-technician writers and directors. In many cases, the innovative ideas of this new film intelligentsia presented a considerable challenge to the core of hands-on, largely working-class technicians who had dominated Australia's previously small and limited production scene. Some of these newcomers saw film-making as an extension of other politically-driven cultural and creative involvements within the post-war climate of industrial activity and the peace and anti-nuclear movements. It is indicative of the expansion of film in this period that this medium of expression was now available to a much wider spectrum of producers and specialist audiences.

Further Research

Our first ideas about the fifties originated in the subjective and personal assumptions of our oral history informants about the milieu in which they had worked, but we both felt the need to evaluate such memories on the basis of other sources as well. Unfortunately, one of the most important sources - that is, the films of the fifties themselves - was available to us only in a sketchy and biased way. As Joan Long notes, 'over time ... many old films were simply thrown away, as there was very little interest in keeping them once their season had played'.⁴ Other factors contribute to the non-representative nature of our

film archives; most significantly, perhaps, the high value attached to feature films and art films, and the devaluation of other types of filmmaking, particularly those that came from an industrial or propaganda impetus. So, today, most of the films which made the fifties a boom period in production are not available for viewing. Nevertheless, while the majority of films made during this period were rarely commented upon in the press of the day, fortunately we do have two particularly useful published sources which give us some idea of the films being produced in Australia at this time.

One of these sources, *Australian Films: A Catalogue of Scientific, Educational and Cultural Films, 1940-1958*, was published in 1959 by the National Library of Australia in recognition of the importance of the body of films it documents, and was updated annually through the sixties.⁵ A look through the *Catalogue* corroborates what our informants tell us about the fifties: that film production in Australia was taking off, and to a degree the country had not previously experienced. The *Catalogue* omits feature films, short dramas, advertising films and commercial newsreels - an additional body of production - and is not entirely comprehensive. Nevertheless, it shows that the number of non-fiction films made in Australia began to grow steadily from the end of the War. Whereas nineteen films are listed for 1945, there are seventy-seven for 1948; by the early fifties, the annual output is generally well over one hundred and fifty.

These films of the post-war boom were films of construction, of prosperity and progress, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly expressing the nature of the new nation to be built. Every large company and every government instrumentality, and even some of the more militant trade unions, it seemed, felt the need to instruct, exhibit and celebrate, on film. Industrial and sponsored documentaries predominated: one of the leading production companies, Kingcroft, run by technician-directors Jack Kingsford-Smith and Jack Gardiner, made some two hundred documentaries in the 1950s.⁶ Typical Kingcroft titles were: *Artificial Insemination of Dairy Cattle*, *Camping for Education*, *Snowy Mountains Scheme*, *Coal*, and a medical film called *The Case of the Premature Baby*.

This dynamic growth in production is confirmed by our second source, *The Motion Picture Directory*, which was published annually by the trade journal *Film Weekly* from 1936 to 1971. Although aimed primarily at exhibitors and distributors, the *Directory*

attempted, in the words of the 1956-'57 edition, to be 'of service to the industry and to all those who seek reliable information, facts and figures, background material and assessment of trends relating to all facets of the business'.⁷ While the concentration is on feature films and their theatrical release, as well as on distribution companies and cinema circuits, there are also listings of industry associations, equipment houses (both importers and local manufacturers), laboratories, and - importantly for our purposes - local film production companies, although very few of these were making works for theatrical release.

What is immediately obvious from a perusal of these *Directories* is the dramatic postwar increase in the numbers of film producers. While listings of companies cannot be considered comprehensive, they do provide a rough comparison of the growth of the industry year by year. Before the War only half a dozen production companies are listed, and during the War eight to twelve, but by the 1947-'48 edition there were twenty-one companies mentioned and, by 1952, the number of listings had doubled again. This was before the introduction of television in 1956, which even more significantly increased the size and output of the industry.

Two important post-war additions to the *Directory* help us understand further some of the changes in the industry which influenced its development during this period. The first is a special section on sixteen millimetre production, distribution and developments which, along with ads for 16mm equipment, began to appear in the *Directory* at the end of the 1940s. This technical innovation at once expressed and made possible the growth of a new film movement. As a format, 16mm was more popularly accessible because it was smaller, lighter and - importantly - cheaper, safer, and more mobile than 35mm. Although 16mm had been used for educational purposes since the mid-1920s, it was in response to the changed social and cultural climate of post-war Australia that it was called upon to provide a widespread community means of access to film screenings outside the commercial circuits. It opened up production opportunities not available in the 35mm theatrical field, with its overseas domination both of markets and tastes.

The second important change chronicled in pages of the *Directory* was the advent of 'the documentary' as an artistic and cultural transformation of the old 'actuality film', and as a term which signaled a new understanding of the form and purpose of the non-fiction

film. In England, the social and ideological parameters of documentary were established in the Great Depression, discovering as its subjects the so-called 'common man', celebrating his work - and it was most often a 'him' in those times - and putting his problems on screen in the interests of social improvement. This was seen not only in the work of British government film units, most famously those headed by John Grierson, but also in the rise of a workers' film movement, which resulted in the production of hundreds of films and newsreels, screening throughout the country.⁸

During the 1930s, a small number of Australian film-makers had begun to read magazine articles analysing the development of the documentary abroad, but the new movement appears to have made little impact in Australia until the War.⁹ At that time, successive issues of the *Directory* began reporting extensively on the wartime formation of a National Film Board, and then the Department of Information (DOI) film unit, later known as the Commonwealth Film Unit - today's Film Australia. It was primarily through activities connected to the National Film Board that the Griersonian term 'documentary' first gained currency within Australia, initially with the visit of Grierson himself in 1940, and later through the importation of a number of Grierson's disciples to help launch new directions in Australian film.

Translated to Australia, the documentary of the fifties, as Albert Moran has described in writing about the DOI Film Unit, was predominantly a discourse of gradual progress, in which class difference was assumed to be an outmoded ideology, and the good life was to be created and sustained by the joint enterprise of government and business; as we shall see, however, other views also found expression.¹⁰ Formally, 'documentary' was distinguished from the old type of film by its more or less self-conscious artistic pretension. Its careful, often heroicised, compositions set Man against environment - natural and industrial - ranging from the outback desert of John Heyer's international prize-winning *Back of Beyond*, to the steel mills, country stations and cityscapes of the Film Unit productions, all creatively dramatising elements of actuality into new and exciting visions of a purposeful and productive society.

Documentary was not an uncontested innovation, however, nor was it readily accepted by the old guard of cameramen-directors who had dominated non-fiction production prior to the War. That its introduction became a class issue is attested to by no less a figure than the British documentarist Harry Watt, who worked in Australia for Ealing during the War and

gave advice, assistance and apprenticeships to our fledgling documentarists. Watt writes of his own early days with Grierson in language which betrays a sense of the divide between those film-makers who were 'documentary' and those considered by the documentarists to be mere technicians; he recalls:

I was allotted as my cameraman George Noble, one of the real characters of early documentary. He wasn't documentary at all, of course, being just a daily freelance professional; and he thought we were all nuts. But we represented a pretty steady three pounds a day. He was a short very fat Cockney ... George had no time for anything highbrow. He always said as we left the office, 'now, none of that arty-farty crap. Dead on and pin sharp, that's my motto'.¹¹

Hugh McInnes, a former Movietone technician who transferred to the DOI in the post-war period, remembers the arrival of the documentary in Australia from the other side of the divide:

We were all technicians and they were all documentary. None of us belonged to the bloody film movement - they were the Sydney Film Society ... (they) got films from overseas and ... locked themselves up and screened them a hundred bloody times. Then they went out and created.

Interviewer: Did you have a way of making films that was different?

Yeah, all of mine were different. Mine were working-class films.¹²

Or, as veteran cinematographer Bryce Higgins put it, about 'this documentary business': 'Film as art? ... we just used to make the films, and other people used to comment about the artiness of them. We used to just worry about getting a story in them'.¹³ Eventually, the term 'documentary' came to include also the more prosaic, utilitarian pasting together of images against narration which characterised many of the educational, promotional and travel films, sponsored by and quite directly expressing the requirements of industry and government, to encompass virtually any non-fiction film that was not a newsreel or an advertisement.

Despite the rejection of the highbrow pretensions of 'documentary' by many technicians, during the fifties the social uses of documentary continued to inspire enthusiasm, both in film-makers and in audiences. And it was within this understanding of 'documentary' that groups

such as the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit and Realist Films implemented Lenin's ideal of 'art as a weapon'. Supported by the Communist Party of Australia (C.P.A.) and by trade unions, these groups made films which were exceptional in their content, but in other ways very much within the spirit of the times. Other interest groups were similarly using film as propaganda - most significantly big business with their industrial documentaries, but also the Christian churches, who likewise produced and screened films, most notably through a well-organised Religious Film Society. A new and more communal way of viewing films spread rapidly, as film societies flourished throughout the country, bringing documentaries, dramas, inspirational, instructional and scientific films - both imported and locally made - to their specialist audiences. In the early fifties, international film festivals were founded in both Melbourne and Sydney. By 1953, *The Motion Picture Directory* estimated the non-theatrical audience for films to be six million a year.¹⁴ This was a dramatic growth, up two million in two years, and the change was further expressed through the numbers of borrowing groups registered with the N.S.W. Film Council: in 1950 there were around six hundred and by 1955, over three thousand.¹⁵

Of course, to meet this new market, the importation of both fiction films and actualities rose markedly, and one of the most interesting aspects of the period is the considerable growth in the importation of films from countries other than the USA and the UK. Australian interest in foreign language, or so-called 'continental' films, reflected not only European migration, but the broader tastes of increasing numbers of English-speaking viewers, with screenings in commercial cinemas as well as through film societies.¹⁶ By the end of the decade, even the major distributors were offering continental films, with Italian stars like Anna Magnani becoming quite widely known.

Contending Forces - But Few Contending Histories

So with such compelling evidence of the existence of a widespread cultural phenomenon, the film boom of the fifties, we must ask why it has gone virtually un-remarked upon within Australian film history. Correlatively, we note also that the broader recollections and contemporary representations of the fifties are so predominantly those of repression, conservatism and cultural poverty, despite ample evidence that it was a time in which contending forces produced different viewpoints and a wide range of stories to draw upon. It

should be remembered for one obvious example, that, internationally, the Cold War was as much about anti-colonial liberation struggles as it was about super-power domination. Domestically, in cultural and social arenas, there was a wealth of new activities, ranging widely from writing and publishing groups to the formation of a community organisation to build the local swimming pool. It occurs to us that the significance of the new forces coming into being might, perhaps, be gauged by the degree of resistance from the old. A phrase in the book *For Love or Money*, a history of women and work in Australia, puts it nicely: 'The intensity of the 1950s pressure to restrict women's horizons to marriage, home and family had all the elements of response to a threat'.¹⁷

Why then, one must ask, does our general sense of this period accord such overwhelming power to the forces of conservatism - why do we frame this period in terms of a cultural 'lack'? Perhaps our view of the times depends on our vantage point - perhaps it's an ideological question. Certainly this appears to be so in terms of an Australian film history in which our cinematic heritage is narrated primarily from the vantage point of the dramatic feature film. As Stuart Cunningham has pointed out, constructing a national cinema out of feature production alone is a simplistic approach. Such film history, Cunningham writes, 'by focusing exclusively on feature production ... displaces from consideration the complex interrelationships amongst feature, documentary, newsreel production and adjacent practices such as theatre, vaudeville and television'.¹⁸ That was written in 1983, and in our opinion this challenge has not been adequately taken up since then. Nor is it mere accident, we think, that mainstream feature films continue to occupy such a privileged position within film history, a construction which tends to reinforce rather than challenge the dominant ideologies of our society, as do the great majority of the feature films out of which such history is constituted. It is, perhaps, understandable that in a dominant cinema such as Hollywood, where mainstream features have been such power-houses of profit, the machinery of industry should be hell-bent on naturalising this one type of film as representing the Cinema. But it is a form of ideological self-mutilation for such a historical model to be adopted by a cinema as dependent upon non-feature production as ours has been. Not only is it untrue; it is an infantile and derivative position - indicative of the long and rocky road that must yet be traversed towards authentic cultural independence.

So great is the Australian obsession with seeing ourselves as some sort of mini-

Hollywood that relatively little research has been done on any type of film production other than drama. Historian Graham Shirley, co-author of *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, said in a recent interview:

*with the '50s, there's still a lot more research to be done ...I was aware that I didn't know enough about documentary in the 1950s and '60s. I was particularly frustrated that I didn't know enough about sponsored film-making at that time, beyond what was being done by Film Australia.*¹⁹

There is, for example, no history of Australian animation, no history of advertising films, or newsreels, only a little history of the work encompassing early 'actualities', such as scenics and topical, and nothing on instructional and educational films.²⁰ Most surprisingly, and most importantly, there is no well-researched, comprehensive history of Australian documentary!

Hence, those descriptions of the 1950s, despite the cinema boom we have just outlined, as a 'void', a 'long stagnation', and a time of 'bust'.²¹ Amongst academics, the drama obsession remains a virtual epidemic, and exceptions are few. Tom O' Regan is one scholar with a rare interest in drawing together features *and* some of these other areas of production, including the social documentary and the artistic short. He, along with Albert Moran, is one of the handful of writers who has dealt specifically with the fifties. But even he begins his 1987 article, "Australian Film in the 1950s", with a description of this period as 'more often than not important for what did not happen than for what did'.²² Despite noting the expansion of the Commonwealth Film Unit and the varied nature of the films and production practices of the period, O' Regan warns against substituting 'the image of a wellspring in the 1950s where previously there was a drought - the difficult production circumstances were just too severe'.²³

We believe that if we look beyond the area of feature production, the fifties *were* a wellspring of production where previously there was a drought. Certainly, the lack of a viable feature industry in Australia was a persistent and long-standing condition which became more acutely obvious in the fifties, and remained a burning issue in the development of our national cinema. Nevertheless, the boom in nonfiction work was an occurrence of tremendous social and industrial importance, given the previous paucity of every type of local film production. There are many arguments which could be raised

about the cultural merits of this varied production, but what is indisputable is that these films brought Australian images to Australian audiences and legitimised an Australian voice. Moreover, this production boom established a critical mass of technicians, directors and producers, as well as equipment and skills, which would have a considerable impact upon Australian film's later so-called Renaissance.²⁴ Many technicians remember the period as a time of never being out of work; Judy Adamson, ex-DOI, speaks of the 1950s and of a feeling that 'there was a certain element of having a go'; she is referring to the diversity of organisations, groups and individuals who began to think of and use film - albeit the new, creatively self-conscious documentary film.²⁵

As we are often reminded, history is shaped by factors of class, gender, race and so on - not only in its making but in its telling. This is nowhere more true than in the history of the Australian film industry. Once we start looking into the area of documentary production, we realise that Australian documentary film-makers have made films in ways that have responded to a wide range of specific local needs, yet, by and large, only the artistically conscious 'documentary' has received the stamp of cultural approval given by the intelligentsia to auteurist features and other art films. Little value has been placed upon other types of films which were not primarily conceived with a 'creative' intent. This is a continuing issue, as those who control documentary funding move with the times and tend - with some exceptions - towards uninterrogated and elitist approaches to questions of film content while focusing considerable attention on questions of form. At the Documentary Conference a few years ago, documentary maker Julian Russell felt impelled to speak up for the importance of 'the cultural independence of the film-makers who give voice to a whole host of people who'd otherwise be silent; who raise critical debates on a number of issues'.²⁶ In doing so, Russell was part of a tradition of importance in Australian cinema which can be traced back to the trade union-based film production of the fifties. The Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit, which emerged out of this culturally dynamic period, crossed the two intentions of 'art' and 'message' in a way which remains well worth study today. Its film-makers, harnessing the formal innovations of the new documentary, spoke for a group not otherwise represented in the mainstream media, engaging in cinema as a form of direct action mirroring the industrial and political campaigns which provided the content of some of their films. The operations of such a unit at this time give us another set of

stories with which to challenge the primacy of the feature, and the history of documentary film-making in Australia.

The Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit

In the 1950s, the Waterside Workers' Federation entered a particularly militant period, marked by direct action to protect and advance wages and conditions, while facing a protracted internal struggle amongst contending political forces within a number of Federation Branches. The establishment of the Film Unit within the Sydney Branch was made possible through its unity, industrial strength and large membership, along with the awareness of its officials that film could be a useful tool of propaganda. The wharfies' Film Unit had three waged members - Keith Gow, Norma Disher and Jock Levy - and all three were members of the Communist Party of Australia, which, at that time, placed a strong emphasis on cultural activities and was dominated by its trade union membership. Before the Unit's establishment, Levy and Gow had worked as wharfies. In 1953, their first film was made to support a Federation campaign to gain pensions for older members. Australian wharfies had lived through a particularly savage history of poor working conditions, and their efforts to better their situation provoked scathing attacks from the mainstream media, as well as from government and ship owners. Many of the Unit's films were developed to counter what the union saw as misinformation and anti-wharfie propaganda.

The Unit produced twenty-one films on a range of subjects that other production units would never tackle - or certainly not from a worker's viewpoint. These subjects included housing shortages, the health of wharfies, builders' labourers and miners, industrial disputes, and other issues concerning workers' rights. (Many of the films are still in distribution.) The members of the Unit worked collectively, not taking on strictly defined crew roles, and as often as possible involved wharfies in the actual production process as extras or helpers. Using still photographs as well as film, throughout their work they documented the lives of working-class people, their families and their communities. They were commissioned to make works for other organisations, primarily unions, which likewise saw the value of film as an emerging political and educational tool. They also released one issue of their own newsreel, for screening throughout the country. One film made by the Unit, *The Housing Problem and You*, holds a certain pride of place in being the first trade union film ever screened on Australian television.

A significant aspect of the group's work was the low-cost, highly innovative and very direct methods they used to get their films seen by as many people as possible.²⁷ In the 1950s, they were able to make personal contact with a wealth of clubs, community organisations and other non-mainstream sites of film exhibition. Along with presentations at existing film societies, there were 'cottage screenings' in private homes, and special screenings organised by various political and activist groups, like the Union of Australian Women, peace movement affiliates, trade unions and universities. There were also film groups in large workplaces such as Shell, CSIRO, ABC, IBM, ICI, and National Mutual, where progressive members were willing to organise screenings.²⁸

For the wharfies' Film Unit, a 'grassroots' distribution and exhibition arrangement was quite as important as the production of the films. Within the Federation itself, members were given every chance to see their work; prints were sent to all Federation branches, and were shown to many thousands of members through mass stop-work meetings or in the lunch-hour. The Unit was able to buy a Kombi van, which doubled as a production vehicle and screening platform. If necessary, films could be projected from inside the van onto a screen on the door, so they could be shown in daylight. By travelling around and taking the films to the audience, instead of the other way around, the unit was able to have direct contact with a surprisingly large number of people. The unit, with their Kombi, screened films in the traditional waterside communities of Woolloomooloo, Darlinghurst and Surry Hills. They went further afield, to Melbourne, and to the Newcastle, Hunter Valley and Wollongong dockside and mining areas. The films were bought by other unions, community groups, libraries and government departments, won prizes locally and overseas, and were to be found on the programs of film society and festival screenings throughout Australia. By directly and personally accessing these alternative methods of distribution, outside the mainstream cinema circuit, the wharfies' Film Unit engaged the interest of people who might never have otherwise had access to their point of view.

The productions of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit are rare film representations of working-class Australia during the 1950s. They present major social problems such as housing shortages, and specific industrial issues such as strikes on the waterfront or in the mines, from the viewpoint of workers themselves - a viewpoint which even today is rarely presented through mainstream media. As one of the film-

makers said of these films, 'yes, they're biased - but biased from a working-class point of view ... but of course any film is propaganda of one sort or another'.²⁹ In these films we see an early instance of a segment of society mustering its own power, as an audience, not just to consume, but, through their collective organisations, to create. The cultural resistance they practised in doing so was quite remarkable: they mobilised their skills, energies and aspirations, and organised themselves into production. They constructed their own site of dialogue, their own means of expressing their views, of giving themselves a public voice, in a way that would be relevant to the working-class subjects of their films. The film-makers themselves worked on the margins of the mainstream industry.³⁰ They were under-funded and often under intense government surveillance, but they produced films about working-class lives, which were seen by working-class communities.³¹ Some of these films are still used today for the instruction of apprentices and to tell the history of the Federation to new union members.

The film-makers of the wharfies' Unit were inspired by a number of factors. They appropriated the Griersonian documentary style, changing it from a tool for social control to a tool for social change. They adapted the popular newsreel style of the period, along with 'realist' aspects of Soviet and new European cinema. They drew on the commitment of the communists and the talents of progressive writers and theatre workers, and applied all these tools to their film-making and film-screening practices. In ways that were similar to those of later oppositional film-makers, for instance those of the Sydney Film-makers' Co-operative, they opened up a representational space from which challenges to the dominant class structures in Australia could be mounted.

Both in terms of Australian film history and of an activist cultural history, a study of the films of the wharfies' Film Unit raises further questions about the prevailing view of Australia in the 1950s. Australian cinema history has relatively little to say about alternative film, in general, and contains little analysis of class difference in our cinema. In this context, an analysis of the creative, political and aesthetic approaches embodied in the work of the wharfies' Film Unit would be revealing. Further research would also provide insights into the function and impact of the films as an industrial product and as a form of social expression critical of the views of government and mainstream press.

The importance of turning our attention to films like these is suggested by Walter Benjamin, who reminds us that, 'every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably'.³² Similarly, the industrial actions, the working and living conditions that films like these depict, may also be in danger of being forgotten in our written histories.³³ As Roger Bromley notes, 'forgetting is as important as remembering ... what is "forgotten" may represent more threatening aspects of popular "memory" that have been carefully and consciously ... omitted from the narrative economy of remembering'.³⁴ We argue, then, that it is no mere accident that the work of documentary film-makers has largely been 'forgotten' from the recorded development of Australian cinema. We believe that by neglecting to write about such films, historians have failed to interrogate the hegemony of those interests who promulgate the fiction of Australia as a mini-Hollywood and as a classless society.

In the past, mainstream media coverage of industrial action on Australia's waterfront and in our mines has generally failed to grasp the unionists' points of view.³⁵ Today, as, in the 1950s, trade unions, working conditions - and indeed, living conditions - are under attack from corporations and their conservative government. The need to give people an alternative point of view to that of the mainstream media seems as important as ever, and it's inspirational to look back on past forms of resistance, when works like the wharfies' films gave a voice to opposition.

At the 1993 National Documentary Conference, a communiqué was drawn up stressing 'the central place of documentary in Australian production, [and] its value to Australian society in both cultural and economic terms'.³⁶ One way in which this call can be realised is to reappraise our film history in terms of documentary. In doing so, we challenge the prevailing, and continuing, cultural fixation on feature films, a fixation which must delight the distribution and exhibition chains, but which too often glorifies and recreates ideologies of competition, winning, individualism, consumerism, and much more. As long as we continue to look at Australian Cinema primarily in terms of its feature films and in isolation from other types of production, it is impossible to understand the actual conditions, products and audiences of Australian film-making. The mystique of the feature, with all its emphasis on stars, auteurs and instant, meteoric success, is so mesmerising, the pleasures of its grand narratives so enticing, that the exception - that is,

the feature film - becomes the rule by which all else is measured. We fail to see that the majority of film work in Australia has always been and still is non-drama production, and that it is the existence of a society inflected by class which has long been at the frontier of documentary film-making.

It is our hope that by looking more clearly at the fifties, and dispelling some of the monolithic myths that are used to characterise this period, we can get a bit of practice in seeing the present more realistically. Today, issues of race and gender may be more in the limelight than those of class, but the gap between rich and poor is growing and keeps on growing at an alarming rate. We believe that while this situation exists, there is still a need to link working and living conditions with cultural and political struggles, and, as in the 1950s, to meet the challenges that such a situation presents.

This article was refereed.

¹ Alan Ashbolt, *Meanjin Quarterly*, December, 1966, quoted in Humphrey McQueen, *Social Sketches of Australia, 1888-1975*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1978, p.208.

² Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film: 1900-1977*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980, p.264.

³ Interesting statistics on living standards in this period are to be found in Peter Groenewegen, "Consumer Capitalism" in John Playford and Douglas Kirsner (eds), *Australian Capitalism: Towards a Socialist Critique*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1972, pp.84-107.

⁴ Joan Long, "As We Were", *Salute to Australian Film: Australian Feature Film Retrospective 1911-1971*, Sydney, 22nd Sydney Film Festival, 1975, p.3. Joan adds: What historians are only beginning to realise, and too few of them at that, is the social and historical importance of this visual material. Films have a lot to tell us about the social values of the audiences of the day, as well as about the values of the film-makers and of the production companies ... Film is such a comparatively new art, such a new product, that the period it covers so far - from the end of the last century - is still within the living memory of somebody, somewhere. As this living memory disappears, generation by generation, the visual records, these moments frozen in time, become more and more precious.

⁵ *Australian Films: A Catalogue of Scientific, Educational, and Cultural Films, 1940-1958*, Commonwealth National Library, Canberra, 1959, preface.

⁶ Anthony Buckley, "1950s Australia" in Ross Lansell and Peter Beilby (eds), *The Documentary Film in Australia*, Cinema Papers/Film Victoria, North Melbourne, 1982, p.41.

⁷ *The Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory 1956-'57*, Sydney, 1956.

⁸ See Bert Hogenkamp, "The Workers' Film Movement in Britain, 1929-'39" in Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring (eds), *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-'45*, Macmillan, London, 1982, pp.144-156.

⁹ Interviews suggest that John Heyer and Damien Parer were amongst those who read these overseas articles in the '30s, an activity which veteran Australian cameraman Arthur Higgins, without any ill-humour, is reported to have regarded as a waste of time.

¹⁰ Albert Moran, *Projecting Australia: Government Film Since 1945*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1991, p.60.

¹¹ Harry Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera*, Paul Elek, London, 1974, p.42. Emphasis added.

¹² Hugh McInnes, interviewed by Martha Ansara, 31st October, 1990.

¹³ Bryce Higgins, interviewed by Martha Ansara and Lisa Milner, 23rd October, 1997.

¹⁴ "The 16mm Field", *The Film Weekly Motion Picture Directory 1952-'53*, Sydney, 1952. p.115.

¹⁵ The theatrical box office at this time was also growing, but not as fast, fluctuating between 130 and 140 million prior to television, the introduction of which was so devastating that the *Directory* actually stopped listing the figures.

¹⁶ In terms of 35mm features for theatrical release in 1952, a record twenty-eight films, or 7.2% of the three hundred and ninety features certified by the Censors, were noted in the 'Other' category. By the end of the decade the figure was 28% of the total, or one hundred and twenty-nine 35mm features. There was a corresponding growth also in listings of Distributors dealing primarily in 'continental' films. Among nineteen distributors listed in the 1950-'51 *Motion Picture Directory*, the Hollywood majors dominate, but there are already three smaller distributors offering foreign films. By 1952-'53, the *Directory* is impelled to note the favourable public reaction to these offerings and by the next year we see a full-page ad of Silvana Mangano in bathing suit: 'Stormy, sultry, sensational'. The 1954-'55 *Directory* reports a rise in the popularity of foreign films, now distributed by twelve specialist companies out of the twenty-nine distributors listed.

¹⁷ Megan McMurchy, Margot Oliver and Jeni Thornley, *For Love or Money: A Pictorial History of Women and Work in Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1983, p.129.

¹⁸ Stuart Cunningham, "Australian Film History and Historiography", *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, no.1, May, 1983, p.123.

¹⁹ Graham Shirley, interviewed by Lisa Milner, 9th September, 1997.

²⁰ Hugh McInnes, interviewed by Martha Ansara, 31st October, 1990

²¹ Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, "Chapter 8: Into the Void, 1951-'64", *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, Angus & Robertson and Currency Press, Sydney, 1983; Sylvia Lawson, "Towards Decolonization: Film History in Australia" in Susan Dermody, John Docker & Drusilla Modjeska (eds), *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends: Essays in Australian Cultural History*, Kibble Books, Malmesbury, 1982; and Andrew Pike, "The Past: Boom and Bust" in Scott Murray (ed.), *The New Australian Cinema*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1980.

²² Tom O'Regan, "Australian Film of the 1950s", *Continuum*, void, no.1, 1987, p.3.

²³ *ibid.* p.2.

²⁴ I have deliberately not mentioned writers as, although writers did establish themselves at this time, it is not yet clear to me to what degree they participated in these films prior to television.

²⁵ Judy Adamson, interviewed by Lisa Milner, 10th May, 1996.

²⁶ Tina Kaufman, "Asia and the Pacific Meet in Sydney: Report on the 1993 National Documentary Conference", *Filmnews*, March, 1994, p.5.

²⁷ John Heyer says of his work at Shell: 'We had our own distribution at Shell. We had projectors and vans in each State, and libraries. *Back of Beyond* was seen by a million people in a year and a half'. See Gordon Glenn and Ian Stocks, "John Heyer: Documentary Film-maker", *Cinema Papers*, no.10, September - October, 1976, p.121.

²⁸ Now, of course, the home television and video culture holds court in the place of these venues, replacing communal/community screenings with individual ones.

²⁹ Jock Levy in *Filmwork* (John Hughes, 1981).

³⁰ Other film-makers and artists from within the membership of the Communist Party of Australia and the left in Sydney collaborated on work for the unit. The workers of the DOI, or of the small feature film-making industry, did not really associate with members of the Unit, who had more connections with other creative workers on the left than with the rest of the film industry. The achievements of the Unit were virtually ignored by the mainstream press. (Norma Disher, interviewed by Lisa Milner, 12th August, 1996.)

³¹ See the ASIO surveillance reports on the activities of the Film Unit, Australian Archives: ASIO CRS A6122/XR1 no. 335; ASIO CRS A6122/39 nos 1430, 1431 & 1432; ASIO CRS A6122/44 nos 1556 & 1558.

³² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, (trans) Harry Zohn, Fontana/Collins, Suffolk, 1982, p.257.

³³ See "Film and Popular Memory: An Interview with Michel Foucault" in John Tulloch (ed.), *Conflict and Control in the Cinema: A Reader in Film and Society*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1977, pp. 536-550.

³⁴ Roger Bromley, *Lost Narratives: Popular Fictions, Politics and Recent History*, Routledge, London, 1988, p.12.

³⁵ Unions in Australia are still using film. Rod Freedman, of Summer Hill Films - which produces many union films - has commented on the CFMEU's (Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union) activity in promoting the use of videos as a training tool, partly because of high literacy problems in his area. (Rod Freedman, interviewed by Lisa Milner, 1st October, 1997).

³⁶ Kaufman, op. cit. p.5.