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Framing the Unions: The Changing Images of Unionists on Screen

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This paper outlines the history of one Australian union's visual representation of its members and activities, through film and video. Whilst the first trade union was formed in Australia in 1850, unions themselves did not engage in film production until the 1950s, when the union controlling labour on Australia's waterfronts was the only union in the world to fund a film unit. In five years, from 1953 to 1958, they made nineteen films on subjects that the government film unit, commercial filmmakers or newsreel producers would never tackle, like housing shortages, industry from the unionists' viewpoint, and issues concerning workers' rights. Recently, despite much lower union numbers and vastly changed industrial, economic, political and cultural landscapes, the same union has revived its film unit. This paper investigates this phenomenon, taking a historical overview of trade union filmmaking in Australia, and focusing on the output of these two film units. Why, after a period of nearly fifty years, was the film unit revived? What does it mean for Australian films about labour, and what does a comparison of the two units' outputs tell us about the relationships between media and citizenship?

1953 – 1958 The Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit

In the Cold War climate of the early fifties, the Australian mainstream media co-operated with the government in mounting a fierce and long-lasting campaign of anti-communism. One of the frequent targets of these attacks was the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF), a particularly militant union, with a strong leadership in Jim Healy, who was a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). The establishment of a film unit within the Sydney branch was made possible through the industrial strength and large membership of the Federation, and the opinion of Healy, alongside other executives, that film could be a useful tool of propaganda. Previous to the 1950s, unions supported cultural activities, in an extension of unionists' rights; however this was the first instance of trade union film production, not only in Australia, but worldwide.[1]

There were three members of the WWF Film Unit (WWFFU). Jock Levy and Keith Gow were both part-time wharfies, who also worked in the Sydney theatre world, and had previous filmmaking experience. Norma Disher was a theatre worker who had employment in another trade union. Soon after the production of a trailer for a Maritime Industries Theatre production, Tom Nelson asked the three filmmakers if they could make a short piece about the Federation's current campaign. So in 1953, *Pensions for Veterans* was made, as the founding film of the Unit. It was made to support the union's campaign to get pensions for the older wharfies; it hadn't been done before. Keith said that they had a much wider objective, which was to get a better deal for the workers overall - 'a radical social change was needed'[2] and this was their part in the fight for that change. The WWF executive enthusiastically supported the work of the Film Unit: 'I think our Union should be very proud of the fact that we have established such a working class film production unit'.[3] Using still photographs as well as film, they documented the lives of workers, their families,

and their communities and organisations. They were commissioned to make works for other groups, primarily unions, which likewise saw the value of film as an emerging political and educational tool alongside newspapers, journals and speeches.

After the film unit was given the blessing of the Federation executives and set up, Jock and Keith went on the payroll as filmmakers, and while they got less money than they had been taking home as wharfies, they were working for the Federation instead of the shipowners. Norma worked voluntarily for the unit, and later went onto the union's payroll as well. The three of them worked collaboratively, without taking on any clearly defined roles; however, it was often Keith who did the cinematography, and Jock who negotiated with the union executive, and who appeared before camera in a number of their works, whilst Norma took on many different jobs, from making costumes to editing to writing the narration. Sometimes other filmmakers from within the membership of the CPA and the left in Sydney collaborated on their films; and members of the New Theatre would contribute their acting or other skills. Jock said that 'the CPA gave the impetus and the discipline that made it possible for us to work so effectively as a unit'.[4]

They documented the lives of working-class people who lived in Sydney, and their families and communities. One film, *The Hungry Miles* (1955), the most impressive of the Unit's surviving work, chronicles the history of the Sydney waterfront, culminating in a plea for greater unity among waterside workers. The highlight is a reconstruction of the Depression years which used hundreds of wharfies to recreate scenes of mass unemployment and scuffles for job tickets, incidents which many of them had actually experienced. It is the most important of the Unit's work. Levy spoke about Healy's decision to commission the film:

We were workers on a job. We could see things that should be common knowledge to every member of the WWF. This should be common knowledge to everyone outside the Federation to get some understanding of what was going on. So I think the advantage was ... because we were working down on the waterfront, not some outside group, not something initiated from up top from an executive's point of view, but from our experience from underneath.[5]

Some of the most potent sites of remembering our history are to be found in visual media. Cinema, television, and online sources are immensely strong in creating, sanctioning and naturalising their own versions of history, their own sites of memory. Within our screen history, filmmakers' ideas of the past shape, and compete with, those of their audiences. The wharfies films work to visualize the non-visual; that is describe – and perhaps redefine – in terms of vision that which is not in itself visual, such things as political and social agency, concepts of power embodied in the citizen, the worker and the nation. The power of the media means that, alongside other historical documents, these visualizations affect and alter the existing perceptions of community, state, and nation. Certainly they are sites for the enabling of visual citizenship, and they continue to be sites for the construction, discussion, and circulation of concepts of citizenship. Like all representations of culture, they circulate images, narrative structures, and systems of signification, places of belonging in their own processes of interpellation, and it is useful to review the relationship between discourses of Australian citizenship and the representation of unionised labour. I suggest that the image of the body of the unionist in these films drew upon the continuing evolution of a particular cinematographic language, allowing conflicting and intersecting forms of citizenship to coexist.

How has the body been represented in WWFFU films like *The Hungry Miles*? Close-ups of bodies and faces are to be found throughout the film. Facial and bodily expressions are very important here in the construction of the character of the waterside workers - fear, dejection, hunger, determination and anger are depicted. The work is not very mechanised - it is purely physical in most senses - the worker's body is the tool of the trade and very little else. We see their intense efforts to drag the load or shovel the cargo. Many of the men filmed had lived through the strikes, the disputes, the working conditions, and the depression days that are recreated in the middle section of the film. Their bodies are the sites of those political struggles, testaments to those experiences, as we see in the close-ups. These are scenes which present the body as bearing witness to the wharfies' history, a version of their history obviously constructed to meet specific needs. It is very much personalised - there are multiple shots of the same character throughout a scene, for instance, where viewers can glimpse the person that is the worker. There is a realisation of human agency in this film. It presents a certain type of worker - one who is activist, unionist, and not, as a *Daily Telegraph* editorial described, the 'lazy, drinking, incompetent, strike-prone watersider' that the film is campaigning against.[6] Safety and health conditions of work are emphasised, with the physical, visceral effects of the bodies of the men. We see the incredibly hard working conditions, and the effects they have. There are shots of an injured man, awaiting first-aid treatment; we see his pain.

There is also a strong sense of the force of the collective, of the participation of the citizen within the community. 'Ships make all men neighbours', the narration tells us, as we see recognisably different merchant seamen working together. There are many scenes with groups, small and large, of workers on the docks, by the thousands in stop-work meetings, and of unemployed men in the Depression recreation sequences, utilising both wide and close shots. There are many scenes of shared feelings and emotions, shared victories and defeats.

A valuable contribution the WWFFU made to the nature of Australian screen culture was the co-ordination of an alternative distribution system which was organised at a grassroots level, against high levels of resistance. This arrangement was as important as the production of the films. It was their approach of personal and practical methods of distribution and exhibition that distinguished them from commercial and government film-making units of the time, as well as the left-wing subject matter. This alternative distribution system was necessary due to the highly politicised times. Union members were given every chance to see the films. Prints were sent to all branches of the Federation, nation-wide, and were shown to many thousands of members, often at mass stop-work meetings or in the lunch-hour. Other trade unions bought and distributed their films throughout the country. As a great innovation, the unit bought a Kombi van, which they used as their production vehicle, and also used to screen films from. The Kombi regularly travelled around Sydney, as well as other cities and regions of Australia, to show films. By travelling around and taking the films to the audience, instead of the other way around, the unit found their works became very popular.

The films were also seen by non-union audiences. They were to be found on the catalogues of film society and festival screenings throughout Australia; they were also screened overseas: in Poland, Czechoslovakia, China, the Soviet Union and New Zealand. *The Hungry Miles* was awarded a gold medal at the 1957 Warsaw Youth Festival of Peace and Friendship, and was sold internationally. By directly and personally accessing these

alternative methods of distribution, outside the mainstream cinema circuit, they engaged the interest of people who might never have otherwise had access to their point of view.

Due to a general economic recession and other limitations on the activities of the Federation, the unit was disbanded in 1958. Although the screenings had not extended too much beyond a small exhibition circuit, and obviously would never get to the mainstream cinemas of the time due to the politics of the cinema chain owners, the productions were extremely well received and served the purpose for which they were made. As films that obviously cared passionately about their subjects, and as works of cinema, the Unit's projects show a consistency of vision that no other local documentary producers of the period were able to match.

Recent times - the new wharfies' film unit

Government control over labour unions was a high-profile feature of the Australia of the 1950s, as well as the introduction of divisive industrial laws, the curbing of civil liberties and a stifling of criticism or dissent, and it was this that drove the work of the WWFFU. There was a hiatus in film production for nearly fifty years from the demise of the Film Unit in 1958. With John Howard's rule fifty years later, many of these anti-worker features resurfaced. Howard's Coalition government had the restructuring of Australia's shipping sector on its agenda since at least 1996; during its first term, the waterfront was identified as a key sector for reform, which would flow on to other industries.[7]

This period saw another historical marker - the Australian waterfront dispute of 1998 (known as 'War on the Waterfront'), a major event in the country's recent industrial and political history that stands alongside the coal strikes of 1949 as one of Australia's biggest industrial showdowns. Much has been written about the representation of this dispute on Australian screens, both mainstream and alternative, in particular the success of the unionists' media campaign, which was supported by many other unions, workers' organisations and community groups in Australia and overseas.[8]

After the 1998 dispute, and then the publication of *Fighting Films*, my history of the WWFFU, in 2000, the MUA perceived a new interest in the production of union media: these convergent factors resulted in proactive activities on the part of the unions. After much discussion within the union, and with the advice and support of others including Disher, Zubrycki and myself, the MUA 2004 conference agreed to support the establishment of an MUA film unit bringing together progressive, professional freelance filmmakers and actors with rank and file workers.[9]

In order to recruit talent for the new unit, a film competition – 'Working Class Idol' – was held at the end of 2004, with the prizes including a trip to the US and Cuba to film labour events, and scholarships to study film-making. In the lead up to the competition it was noted that the work of filmmakers was definitely back in the spotlight for the union: MUA National Secretary Paddy Crumlin said that 'our union has a long history of supporting workers in developing their full potential in every aspect of their lives. Cultural issues are inseparable from industrial and economic issues and we must record and preserve what is ours, ensuring our national identity is not lost in this age of globalisation'.[10]

I was one of the judges for that first competition. Like their predecessors in the 1950s, the producer-wharfies who entered were also filmmakers or actors on the side, and they found the connection between making films for the wharfies union and their own interests as natural: 'People's work is their life," said Viron Papadopolous, the inaugural winner. 'That goes for wharfies especially. There is a culture that goes with being a waterside worker. It's iconically Australian. That is one of things that made me want to work on the waterfront. And it's what really made me want to be involved in the establishment of the union film unit'.[11] The winners went on to produce more films on their overseas trips and to continue filmmaking for the union.

Jamie McMechan, the winner of the second round of the competition in 2008, has gone on to become the mainstay of the MUA Film Unit. His prize included a scholarship to study filmmaking, when he went on to win documentary prizes.[12] Jamie continues in the footsteps of the old film unit – quite literally. 'I often stop by Norma's place for a cup of coffee and we discuss my latest project. I value her opinion and advice – she really has helped develop my skills as a filmmaker'.[13] The new film unit, Jamie and a small band of co-workers, make their films in their time around their waterfront work just like Keith, Norma and Jock. They edit the films in their own time and they are circulated to members through state branches, where they are shown at stop work meetings and other functions.

The productions of the new Film Unit, in many ways, carry on the traditions of its predecessor. Films are made to document working conditions, depict industrial disputes and labour gatherings, record the talks of union leaders and workers, and commemorate labour celebrations such as May Day. Safety issues, conferences, campaigns of other unions, protests and social justice events, are amongst the films' topics. As prominent older unionists die, their funerals and life celebrations are documented for posterity. Often, workers get to tell their own stories straight to camera. At other times, the film is a recording of an address or a picket line.

Many shots in the new films of union members on the docks of Sydney also mirror the older films physically. However these days, cranes and forklifts have taken the place of men lifting bales and sacks, and pulling old trolleys, and the greatly diminished workforce is evident in these films. But there are new developments in the output of the Unit. It was not until 1989, nearly a century after the establishment of the union, that the first woman joined the union as a full-time wharfie. Women, now a force within the Australian waterfront industries, have taken their place on screen, and their voices are heard in the new films. Women currently make up approximately 5.18% of the MUA's membership and that figure keeps growing.[14] The MUA Film Unit not only makes films on its women members, but on associated issues such as International Women's Day, White Ribbon Day[15], and breast cancer fund-raising ventures that all the wharfies support. And more generally, the breadth of topics covered in the new films has broadened considerably since the early films, with new productions that focus on the global battles of labour which the MUA supports – protests about issues in Ireland, Cuba, Mexico, Columbia, Indonesia – films are made that document these. The new unit's response to global issues has been prolific and very active.

One of the new Unit's recent productions which represents this renewed invigoration (as well as traces of influences from the older film unit) is *Dublin Dockers Dispute* (2009). It was shot in September 2009 when an MUA delegation joined other dockworkers from around the world in supporting their Irish comrades in a long-running dispute against their employer Marine Terminals Limited (a company which is 49% owned by Deutsche Bank).

McMechan quickly posted the film online, on 21 October.[16] The film combines footage shot at the picket line at the docks of Dublin with to-camera sequences of MUA members. In the five-minute piece, we see Irish workers, MUA executives and members, and overseas maritime union leaders including Bob McEllrath, President of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, who speak in support of the striking workers, and explain the background to the industrial action. Many of the interviews have been shot in front of vibrant and expressive Dublin protest banners. McMechan has smoothly edited the short film, with professional title and credit sequences, and intertitles identifying the speakers. Short analyses of the roles played by Deutsche Bank and the International Transport Workers' Federation in the dispute are included, in a message of international solidarity. The film's soundtrack ends with an excerpt of the song 'Solidarity', which was written and performed by the Self-Righteous Brothers (Casswell/Fox/Djarnel) and became an unofficial anthem of the 1998 waterfront dispute.[17] One of the final scenes of the film urges viewers to visit the website of the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union, the Irish union which covers dock workers.

Wharfies films into the future

The way that *Dublin Dockers Dispute* works as a film of protest is not unique: since the mid-1990s, the new media movement of the internet has generated a lot of activity in terms of mobilising the media of protest and activism. The state of contemporary participatory media, according to Cordell and de Silva, has its roots in 'the democratic philosophy that anybody has the right to tell their own story, and aims to encourage media diversity by breaking down the information stronghold held by a small number of large and powerful media corporations'.[18] We now have a new tool for unions to re-invent themselves, and many Australian unions have taken advantage of the opportunities of Web 2.0 to improve political networking opportunities, find new ways of organising and representing themselves, and attract members and supporters. New technology tools have been able to move forward on internationalising the trade union movement, and to democratise unions in new ways. They encourage participation in union activities and increase awareness of labour activities. As Simon Cottle notes, the internet 'exhibits a synergy that is particularly well suited to the new wave of transnational protests and global activism'[19] and Australian unions have been quick in adopting the new tools of the media.

Union websites provide a site to present their philosophies along with their video productions to members and non-members alike, as a method to strengthen membership ties and to provide public access to the union's side of various issues, thus engaging with non-union communities, and hopefully broadening their relevance and appeal. In the same way that the WWFFU used film, it is another way to distribute counter-hegemonic information on current and past events affecting working people, not just in Australia, but all over the world. And as well as websites of unions, there are outlets on YouTube, Facebook, Flickr and Vimeo.

Jamie McMechan of the new wharfies film unit posts all his films on to the MUA's YouTube site, which was established in 2007, and this has helped to re-invent the image of the union. YouTube as a new political and film distribution opportunity for the visual depiction of active citizenship means that this could be considered as the 'public screen'[20] rather than the previous conceptions of the public sphere, further extending the work of the unit.

Jamie recognises the potential of the new outlet of the internet:
The internet has had a profound impact on reducing production costs and distribution costs. Within minutes you can reach an international audience and receive feedback on your efforts ... For the first time in history a person with a camera or even a mobile phone can have a profound impact on millions of people from around the world. And in some ways can actually compete with the right-wing mainstream views of multi-national media moguls such as the Rupert Murdochs of this world.[21]

Conclusion

We know that media systems and processes are central to political communication in the modern world: politics is now framed by the media, by its structure, its logic, its organisation, its flow.[22] Indeed, Martin Albrow contents that modernist politics has ceased to be primarily about the fight for dominance of ideals, and is more about the 'opportunity to participate in cultural production and conflicts and tensions over identity'.[23] Even though these days the internet provides the most widespread site of independent voices, I believe that the production of videos by unions for themselves is important, for the same reasons the WWFFU made their films fifty years ago. There is always a need to have alternative and independent voices representing such divisive issues as union disputes.

In their critiques of modernism, sociologists Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman accord media a central role in the maintenance of public culture. The ways in which politics becomes visualised are the ways in which politics becomes a part of our lives. Of course it's the visual symbols in the union films that primarily tell the stories that the producers want us to believe, which are intended to act as alternative views to that of the mainstream media. These images are a part of public space – they are shared representations, making up our collective memory of Australian workers – to twist Benedict Anderson's idea, they make up an imagined community of the working nation. Certain images and symbols convey potent messages around work, progress, political activism and leadership, and these are the ones that recur in the films over their history. I suggest that the image of the body of the unionist in these films draws upon the continuing evolution of a particular cinematographic language, allowing conflicting and intersecting forms of citizenship to coexist. Wharfies are active in the union, at work, active participants in their nation and their world, according to the filmmakers. The ways the workers are represented in the films work to challenge the view of the pliable and unquestioning worker that many mainstream images promote.

The first wharfies film unit originated because of a desire to oppose or supplement the existing media, in both its content and its politics. It was based on the idea of empowerment, of giving the working class a space to articulate its own ideas. Like the popularisation of sixteen millimetre film in the 1950s, the more recent proliferation of inexpensive digital cameras, online editing and the distribution channels afforded by Web 2.0 provoked an adoption of these tools for independent self-representation. And once more, this is empowering for small-scale producers in a number of ways: it has become relatively cheap to produce, it requires only a small production crew, and, importantly, within its grassroots collectivist working methods, and can respond quickly to fast-changing issues. The WWFFU and the MUA films also share the circumstances of relatively small financial bases, little mainstream support from outside their own communities, and the need for the individual energies of people whose motives are not purely financial and who can work within a communal model. Appraisals of such under-researched formations expand the province of Australian cinema history, and provide a greater understanding of contemporary

culture. In the 1950s, activists like the WWFFU members fought for the rights of people who were overlooked within a society of relative prosperity. Australian society has patently changed a great deal since then, but these struggles persist, and are represented within the reinvigorated output of the MUA Film Unit.

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[1] For a fuller history of this film unit, see Lisa Milner, *Fighting Films: a History of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit*, Pluto Press, North Melbourne, 2003.
[2] From John Hughes, *Filmwork*, 1981.
[3] WWF, *WWF Report*, State Library of NSW.
[4] Jock Levy, *Personal interview*, 1998.
[5] From John Hughes. and Margot Nash, *Interview with Jock Levy, Norma Disher and Keith Gow*. 1979.
[6] 'Navy, Army can keep Ports Going', editorial, *Daily Telegraph* 4 November 1954, p. 1.
[7] See Shipping Grants Legislation Bill 1996, available online at http://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2004B00128
[8] See Lisa Milner, and Rebecca Coyle, 'Bastardising the waterfront dispute: production and critical reception of the *Bastard Boys* mini-series' *Communication, Politics and Culture*, 43 (1): 2010, pp. 143-164.
[9] MUA, *March 2004 Resolutions*. 2005.
[10] Cited in Zoe Reynolds, 'MUA Idol Winners head for LA', *MWJ The Maritime Workers Journal*, 31 March 2005.
[11] ibid.
[12] ibid.
[13] Zoe Reynolds, 'MUA Idol a Winner', *MWJ The Maritime Workers Journal*, Autumn 2009, p. 32.
[14] MUA, 'Women's Report', *Maritime Workers Journal*, Summer 2010.
[15] The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, November 25.
[16] http://www.youtube.com/maritimeUnion#p/search/0/MGaiiSljODg
[17] http://bradenfoxmusic.com/solidarity.htm
[18] Marni Cordell and Sam de Silva, 'New Mediations', *Media International Australia*, no. 103, 2002, pp. 88-93.
[19] Simon Cottle, 'Reporting demonstrations: the changing media politics of dissent', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 30, no. 6, 2008, p. 859.
[20] Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples, 'From public sphere to public screen: Democracy, activism, and the "violence" of Seattle', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2002, p. 125.
[21] Cited in Enrico Aditjondro, 'Featured Filmmaker: Jamie McMechan'. Interview. 2011; Available from: http://www.engagemedia.org/Members/ricoloco/news/featured-filmmaker-jamie-mcmechan/view
[22] See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2000.
[23] Martin Albrow, *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity*. Polity, Cambridge, 1996, p. v.