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## Commos & Ratbags: Left-Wing Images of Urban Australia

Lisa Milner

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The cultural construction of the past in Australia has a variety of sources. There are the authorised, official histories in print, in the form of books, newspapers, journals, biographies. There are memories of lived experiences, and the recalling of stories passed down to us. Some of the most potent sites of remembering our more recent history are, however, to be found in visual media. Films and video productions engender their own historical consciousness, and validate their own sites of memory.

In this paper I wish to open up a set of memories we have about life in Australia within a particular period, and move towards articulating one counter-memory. In remembering Australia in the 1950s, our visual sources come mostly from newsreels (through Cinesound or Movietone), or works from the government filmmaking body, the Australian National Film Board (ANFB).<sup>1</sup> These accounts have shaped our collective memory of that time in certain ways; generally, they act as agents for a hegemonic outlook. Not only do these works give us information about specific events, they give us an indication of the cultural and political context in which they were produced. And the construction of political subjects in these works was generally from a conservative point of view.

As an outcome of the dominant - and essentially conservative - images and narratives of the newsreels and government films in the past, our collective memory of life in Australia has been shaped in a particular way. The visual media are immensely strong in creating, sanctioning and naturalising their own versions of history, their own sites of memory. Within them, the filmmakers' ideas of the past shapes, and competes with, those of their audiences. As we watch films like The Back of Beyond (John Heyer/Shell Film Unit, 1954) or Jedda (Charles Chauvel, 1955), we are viewing the representation of a particular historical period, the middle of the century in Australia. And it reinforces Ross Gibson's idea that 'the land has become the structural centre of the nation's myths of belonging'<sup>2</sup>, as we've seen so often, even in recent films like The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert (Stephan Elliot, 1994).

In the visual sources of the 1950s, we are frequently invited to recall the Menzies era from a right-wing viewpoint. The great landscape tradition, successful post-war reconstruction, scenes of plenty, the revitalisation of industry, huge projects such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme, and political peace and quiet, are most often represented. However, the 1950s is also remembered by many as a period of intense activity and conflict, with incidents such as the Petrov affair, the Labor Party split, and the activities of the trade union and peace movements. Images of struggle, protest or opposition to the values of the Liberal government are scarce. If there are representations of

troubles within the cities, or dissenting voices, they are presented from a conservative attitude; the positive significance of the left is diminished. Life after World War Two was not all consumer culture and suburban bliss. Many Sydneysiders experienced severe housing and food shortages, whilst tuberculosis, polio, diphtheria, and influenza outbreaks continued to ravage the city populations. But our visual recollections seldom construct the period in this way: these histories are not told in the mainstream media.

For anyone who wishes to interrogate the nature of visual media's strengths in relation to history, such as the representation of urban life in the 1950s, it is useful to turn to Foucault, who has recognised the power of film in shaping our historical discourses:

Films whose avowed aim is to re-write history are not isolated occurrences. They are themselves part of history, a history in the making; they have... a context ... people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been.<sup>3</sup>

The work of Foucault highlights the openness, and the multiple existences, of history. Here, concepts of memory and identity, on both an individual and a class basis, play important constructing roles. In opening up ways of representing and understanding the past, Foucault builds up an overall picture of the period in question. He examines the relationships that occur between many discourses, finding 'what interplay of correlation and dominance exists between them'.<sup>4</sup> The notion of one official history, and its claim to a single, all-encompassing veracity, is undermined - or opened up - by a practice of counter-memory.

How would a Foucauldian analysis approach these representations of reality that are offered in the visuals of the newsreels and documentaries of Australian cities in the 1950s? Well, we can begin an investigation of the ideological formations that are at play here. We deconstruct the assumption that the newsreels and the government works 'spoke for' all of the community of the city. These productions are made to privilege, to naturalise the dominant ideology, one which attempts to silence opposition. We should examine works that existed outside the realm of the dominant, to see what else has been made during that period - we should look for marginalised representations of the city.

Although the written histories of Australian cinema have focussed on the feature film, and to a lesser extent the government film-making organisations, one area which has often been overlooked is these oppositional films - the independent, politically motivated films.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, I will present some data on oppositional films of the 1950s, in order to expand the ways that city life has been represented in Australian films.

I started looking a few years ago at smaller film production units in Sydney. What then emerged for me was the story of a film unit that had been excluded from many of the sanctioned histories of the 1950s. The films made by the unit

were documentary in nature.<sup>6</sup> Their topics concentrated on improvements to working and living conditions, or supporting a particular industrial action or political campaign. The filmmakers stood in opposition to many of the views expressed in the mainstream media, industrially, politically, and culturally; so I will call these *oppositional* films. In the fifties, when alternative representations (like trade union and communist newspapers, and foreign films) were often banned or censored, oppositional films did make a lively - if small - contribution to the national imaginary.

The representation, in film, of post-war life in Australian cities was relatively rare. However, it did occur, and the images presented in these films have often been in sharp contrast to the landscape films, glorious sites of rural Australia we have seen so often in the mainstream cinema of Chauvel, the newsreels, and the Department of Information works. Films on the uglier side of life in Australia were made, and these films were screened, often with a politically oppositional motive, in order to present a more rounded view of urban Australia.

These oppositional films contribute to the construction of a counter-memory of the 1950s. Wimal Dissanayake writes on these type of works, which look

to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revisions of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.<sup>7</sup>

I want to read these oppositional films as feeding into a counter-memory of the 1950s, that supplement previously fixed ideas. Studying oppositional film can be a strong tool, not only to learn more about these 'new perspectives about the past', but to examine how life in the cities of Australia has been represented more generally. The unearthing of more oppositional histories, such as this, will also open up the sanctioned history of film in Australia.

Who made these oppositional films?

In the Cold War climate of the early fifties, the mainstream media co-operated with the government in mounting a fierce and long-lasting campaign of anti-communism.<sup>8</sup> In these years, the Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) was particularly militant, with a strong leadership in Jim Healy, and other Executive members like Tom Nelson.<sup>9</sup> The establishment of the film unit within the Sydney Branch was possible through the industrial strength and the large membership of the Federation, and the opinion of its leaders that film could be a useful tool of propaganda. In the 1950s, the Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit (WWFFU) was the only film production unit in the world that was funded by a trade union.<sup>10</sup> Soon after the production of a trailer for a Maritime Industries Theatre production, Tom Nelson asked the three filmmakers, Jock Levy, Keith Gow and Norma Disher, if they could make a short piece about the Federation's current campaign. This was to achieve pensions for waterside

veterans, many of whom had worked on the wharves for all their lives. The wharfies had lived through a particularly savage history of extremely poor working conditions, and had met with much resistance to improve them. As a result the unit's first film Pensions for Veterans was made in 1953. This film worked to counter the mainstream media's poor image of waterside workers at the Sydney docks.

The unit produced nineteen short films on subjects that other production units would never tackle, like housing shortages, industrial disputes from the union members' viewpoint, and issues concerning workers' rights. They documented the lives of working-class people who lived in Sydney, and their families and communities. One film, The Hungry Miles (1955), is a history of the Sydney waterfront, a story of the wharfies' struggles for improved working conditions, with a strong emphasis on worker unity. The film unit members 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.

They were also commissioned to make films for other left-wing unions that perceived the value of film as a political and educational tool. Hewers of Coal, for example, was made in 1958 for the Miners' Federation. In the same year, Think Twice, on safety in the workplace, was produced for the Boilermakers' Union. The unit also made an episode of their own newsreel, for screening to Federation members throughout the country. The production of this newsreel was one direct outcome of the perceived need to 'challenge the monopoly control of the mass media'.<sup>11</sup>

The WWFFU produced a film for the ACTU that dealt with the housing shortage. This was Not Only the Need, also known as The Housing Problem and You (1957). Its theme was the right of everyone to adequate housing, which was a national problem in the 1950s. The film, a 'well-shot and intricately edited documentary about postwar housing conditions'<sup>12</sup>, shows the standard of living in suburbs of Sydney that no other filmmakers would depict in a realistic manner. It highlights the extremely poor housing standards in Sydney of the time, and urges its audiences to petition the government to release funds to help solve the housing problem, as the ACTU had advised. The film also uses animated sequences and dramatic re-constructions to explain how hard it is for the ordinary couple to afford decent housing. The film unit went out into the slum areas of Sydney and shot footage of the poor conditions of accommodation. Over these shots the voice-over tells us that '35,000 dwellings in Sydney have been officially condemned, yet people still live in them'.

The film reminds the viewer that 'the Commonwealth Government Housing Commission in 1944 stated that a dwelling of good standard and equipment is not only the need but the right of every citizen. Despite this, a lot of citizens find that their rights have not been granted'. A series of People's Housing Conferences were held during that time, with representatives from

manufacturing and building industries, pensioner and low-income groups, unions and the government, to identify the problems and realise the solutions. This film was made, in part, to assist the continued existence for these Conferences.

A valuable contribution the WWFFU made to the nature of cinema was the co-ordination of an alternative distribution system which was organised at a grassroots level, against high levels of resistance. By accessing alternative methods of distribution to the mainstream cinema circuit, the WWFFU made sure that people who could not afford even to go and see a newsreel could watch their films. It was this approach, these very 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. Theirs was a much more community-based view of using film, and it focussed very much on working-class living conditions in Australian cities.

Jock Levy describes the widespread opposition to the screening of the wharfies films:

They weren't shown in commercial cinemas ... as for showing films of an indigenous nature you had no chance in the world. The whole of the commercial cinema groups in the country was owned by America and England. They churned out what they wanted to churn out and showed what they wanted to show ... If you were branded in those times as a socialist or a communist you were finished in your particular profession.<sup>13</sup>

Union members were given every chance to see the films. Prints of the films 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. The unit was able to buy a Kombi van, which they used as their production vehicle, and also used to screen films from: they projected films from inside the van onto a screen on the door. In this way they could show films in daylight. The Kombi regularly travelled around the poorer suburbs of Woolloomooloo, Darlinghurst and Surry Hills to show their 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.

When the workers had time and energy to spare, they went further afield. This was a time of high levels of industrial action throughout the country, to which the film unit responded, travelling mainly to industrial areas such as Newcastle and Port Kembla. There was a trip in 1956, to the Bellbird area of the Hunter Valley after a 15-week lockout of miners; the unit members screened films around the district, and spoke with miners and their families. The WWFFU also travelled to Melbourne that year. There they shot footage of the strike campaign activities for their newsreel; and they screened their films at public meetings as well as Federation branches and on the wharves at Port Melbourne.

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, and they were often sourced through Quality Films, an independent film distribution company.<sup>14</sup> Their films managed to be screened overseas: The Hungry Miles was awarded a gold medal at the 1957 Warsaw Youth Festival of Peace and Friendship, and was sold internationally, and many works were screened in Poland, Czechoslovakia, China, the Soviet Union and New Zealand.<sup>15</sup> According to Norma Disher, this represented a victory that such a film should be screened then, and the 'official' success of the film gave the Unit much more respect from the Federation's Executive than had previously existed.<sup>16</sup>

After five years of production, the work of the unit ended in 1958, due, in part, to the falling level of funds - but that's another story.<sup>17</sup> Although the screenings of the wharfies had not extended too much beyond a small exhibition circuit, and obviously would never get to the mainstream cinema of the time due to the politics of the cinema chain owners, the productions were extremely successful in their own right, and they were useful for the dissemination of an alternative point of view to that of the other filmmakers of the time. As films which dealt with their topics so strongly, and as works of cinema, these are powerful and effective in their deliverance of their message. Their work was instrumental in presenting an alternative viewpoint to the conservative, anti-communist frenzy that was taken up by the mainstream media producers of the fifties, and moved towards the more realistic representation of urban life.

There are other issues that also need to be addressed, such as the very important discourse of politics of the union, and of their influences on the wharfies' production practices.<sup>18</sup> There are the ways that the wharfies films negotiate ideals of nationalism and citizenship in their approach, and how and where these negotiations differ from the mainstream media of the period. There's the surrounding issue of a counter-culture that existed in the 1950s, organisations around Sydney like the Realist Writers Group, the Workers Arts Clubs, and the New Theatre League. Many of these, like the wharfies film unit, emanated from the ideologies of the Communist Party of Australia.

Investigating these oppositional films enables us to rethink the representation of urban life in the 1950s, and to recognise that there was at least one alternative to the sanctioned representations of the newsreels. Here, with the wharfies films, we saw an early instance of media audiences mustering their own power, not just to consume, but to create, and they created their own representations of their city lives. The cultural resistance these filmmakers practiced was quite remarkable: they mobilised their skills, energies and aspirations, and organised themselves into production. They created their own site of dialogue, another way of expressing their views, of giving themselves a public voice. And that public voice can be seen as a competing discourse to the mainstream one, the one that showed another version of life in Sydney in the 1950s. The filmmakers

themselves were marginalised, underfunded and often under intense scrutiny, but they produced works which were made about working-class urban lives, and were seen by those communities.

We need to examine less dominant forms of cultural expression to analyse their shaping power in the construction of our knowledge of the 1950s. The point of application of this shaping power - the reception of the wharfies films by thousands of workers and their families throughout Australia - is where their discourse found its legitimacy. They were seen by thousands of people, yet have not widely been promoted as doing that. When we remember what Sydney was like in the 1950s through the images presented to us in features, newsreels, and government productions, we can see the way that officially and commercially authorised product tends to marginalise other forms of expression, such as the counter-culture of the wharfies films.

In representing urban life, these films have contributed to film culture in Australia, and, alongside that, to a broader representation of national identity. Within their marginalised exhibition sector, they existed as sites of conflict over existing methods of representation. It's often suggested that films of independent producers of the 1970s, groups such as the Sydney Film-makers Co-op, were the first politically motivated cinema of Australia.<sup>19</sup> The wharfies films challenge that view. Those protest films had a precursor, in the oppositional work that people like these filmmakers undertook, in bringing to the screen their own version of city life in Australia. With so many new stories coming to light out of Australia's past, the story of the wharfies films adds to our complex web of cultural connections.

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An excerpt of the film Not Only the Need (WWFFU, 1957) was screened with this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> 1950s feature films made by Australians about Australians were rare.

<sup>2</sup> Ross Gibson, 'Formative Landscapes', in Australian Cinema, ed. Scott Murray. Sydney: Allen and Unwin/AFI, 1994, 49.

<sup>3</sup> 'Film and Popular Memory: An Interview with Michel Foucault', John Tulloch (ed) Conflict and Control in the Cinema: A Reader in Film and Society. South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1977, 536 and 539.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, Michel. The Archaeology of Knowledge. trans A. Sheridan-Smith. London: Routledge, 1989, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Dean Williams has written extensively about oppositional cinema in Melbourne during the 1940s and 1950s: 'The history of left wing cultural production from this period has been virtually written out of Australian history, which relies on images from the official newsreels as well as the feature film productions of the time. We are constantly invited to see history in terms of the advancement of society, but these films from the forties are unfortunately still very appropriate today, with housing, alcohol abuse and the effects of

poverty on people still major issues' (Williams, Deane, 'Unholy Alliance: When Commos and Priests Made Movies', Filmnews, 23,9, December 1993: 11). What has not been documented fully is the 'oppositional film culture' in Sydney.

<sup>6</sup> On the close relationship of documentary film with the construction of notions of reality: 'Until the 1960s, the documentary film was an important part of cultural formation and social information. The roles of the documentary film-maker were multifarious and included author, informer, commentator, narrator, biographer, investigator and polemicist.' (Frankel, Michael, 'Own Your Own Doco: A Guide to Empower the Disenfranchised Film-maker'. The Big Picture: Documentary Film-making in Australia (Papers from the 2nd Australian Documentary Conference). Monash: National Centre for Australian Studies, 1993, 59).

<sup>7</sup> Dissanayake, Wimal, introduction, in Wimal Dissanayake (ed) Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, xxiv.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the effects of the Cold War on the creative forces within Australia, see Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds) Staining the Wattle: A Peoples' History of Australia Since 1788 (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988), Ann Curthoys and Merritt, John (eds) Australia's First Cold War 1945 - 1953. Volume 1: Society Communism and Culture (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1984) and Volume 2: Better Dead Than Red (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> See Victor Williams, The Years of Big Jim, (np: Lone Hand Press, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> The WWF supported the work of the Film Unit to a great extent. The following statement was made at a Federation meeting: ' ... I think our Union should be very proud of the fact that we have established such a working class film production unit. I have checked with the American Unions and the World Federation of Trade Unions, and it is disclosed that no where (sic) else in the history of the working class movement of the world has a trade union film production unit been established. It is true Unions in other countries have produced pictures, but have had made (sic) by commercial firms. In our case, all the work in connection with the film - with exception of developing and printing - is done by our own technicians' (State Library of NSW, Waterside Workers Federation of Australia Papers, MLMSS1049).

<sup>11</sup> Communist Party of Australia, Statement on the Media (State Library of NSW, Waterside Workers Federation of Australia Papers, MLMSS5021/58).

<sup>12</sup> Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years. Sydney: Currency Press 1989:196.

<sup>13</sup> Levy, in Filmwork, dir. John Hughes, 1981.

<sup>14</sup> The Sydney University Film Group described the WWFFU as 'one of the most active and successful film making groups in Australia today. It is only a small group, but its members are now working for the unit full time ... The progress of the unit has been fairly constant ... above all, their films bear the stamp of enthusiasm and conviction, all too rare among the films made in Australia today.' (Sydney University Film Group Bulletin, 2nd term 1958, np.)

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<sup>15</sup> Report from the WWFFU to the CPA Film Collective, 22 June 1956 (Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University. Waterside Workers Federation, E211/163, 'Report June 1956').

<sup>16</sup> Norma Disher. Personal interview. 22 August 1996.

<sup>17</sup> The film unit workers did try and continue their work, and suggested this to the ACTU. Jock Levy recalled that 'the ACTU could take over the unit (from the WWF) ... we put this idea to (Ted) Roach (of the ACTU) ... it would cost the average trade unionists one penny a year to maintain the unit ... We couldn't get to advise the ACTU - if we could've well ... it could've been a possibility. Unfortunately it just didn't happen'. (*Film-Work*, John Hughes, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> See Milner, Lisa, 'The Challenge to Conformity: Labour Films of the Cold War.' Honours Dissertation, University of Technology Sydney, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Other works, of David Bradbury, Tom Zubrycki and many of the films produced through the Womens Film Fund are also of a strongly oppositional nature, as are many productions from community television and video organisations.