Commos and ratbags: the origins of trade union cinema in Australia

Lisa Milner
Southern Cross University

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How do we know of the past in Australia? There are the cultural constructions of 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. The strength of the ideas within them is often heightened with an appeal to a nostalgic feeling. *Nostalgia*, from the Greek *nostos*, refers to a ‘return home’. For many people, nostalgic feelings for those places which have never been their home is a common experience, attained through the strength and popularity of historical cinema and television. The reorientation of memory towards stability is often very successfully achieved through visual media.

The work of Foucault highlights the openness and the multiple existences of history.¹ He recognised the power of film in shaping our historical discourses when he wrote:

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.²

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, an overall picture of the epistemological domain should be constructed. Foucault examines the relationships that occur between many discourses, finding ‘what interplay of correlation and dominance exists between them’.³ 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.

I wish to open up a set of memories that exist about Australia, and move towards articulating one counter-memory. In remembering the 1950s, there are two main categories of cinema we use as our sources. First, there are the works that were made during the 1950s. The majority of films about Australia in that period were either newsreels (through Cinesound or Movietone), or works from the government filmmaking body, the Australian National Film Board (ANFB).⁴ 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.

Then there is a second category of source material. The landscape of the past is reassessed as the historical recreation takes the 1950s as its subject matter. As we
watch works like *Newsfront* (Phillip Noyce, 1978), *The True Believers* (Peter Fisk, 1987) or *Palace of Dreams* (Denny Lawrence *et al.*, 1985), we are viewing the re-presentation, the recreation of historical periods. Many of these works supplement their dramatic recreations with archival footage, combining the re-enactment and the original. They open up for viewers a wider historical consciousness, as the moving images that are present refer to events from the past. Noel Sanders writes of the popularity of the historical film: ‘processes of reading and viewing history are now increasingly mass media-oriented; and increasingly what we “know” of the past is reduced to what gets cycled and recycled in the media ... what is now “remembered” is what media words or images “remember” for us selectively’.³

In both types of visual sources we are frequently invited to recall the Menzies era from a conservative viewpoint. Successful postwar 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-Country government are scarce. If there are representations of dissenting voices, they are presented from a conservative perspective; the positive significance of the left is diminished. Life after the second world war 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 city populations. But our visual recollections seldom construct the period in this way: these histories are not told in the mainstream media.

How would a Foucauldian analysis perceive these representations of reality that are offered in the mainstream media of the 1950s? We can begin an investigation of the ideological formations that are at play, a deconstruction of an assumption that the newsreels and the government works ‘spoke for’ all of the community. These mainstream productions were often representations of the élite, made to privilege the dominant ideology, one which attempted to unnaturalise and silence opposition. To draw upon a more open history, we should examine works that existed outside the realm of the dominant, to see what else was made during that period — we should look for any marginalised visual representations. As in other sites of cultural studies, the marginal has increasingly been scrutinised in film history, in the ‘sub-histories’ of gender, sexuality, race and politics. This method augments the ways that written histories become publicly shared maps of interpreting culture. Certain maps have a social currency that naturalises them and makes them familiar. This familiarity also speaks of the power upon which it is based.

I first became involved in questioning ways of remembering the 1950s when I viewed *The True Believers*, a 1987 mini-series centering on political events during the period 1945-55.⁶ The production combined newly produced drama and archival material. I found that one clip, footage of protesting miners displaying ‘Nationalise the Mines’ banners during a protest march, did not originate from a commercial newsreel, Cinesound or Movietone, as I first thought — and as I suspect other audiences may presume, as it is inserted without comment amongst newsreel footage. It is an excerpt from a film — *Hewers of Coal* (1957) — that
had been made by a trade union. Here, then, was a clip which was *masquerading* as newsreel footage in a historical recreation.

The re-use of the clip in *The True Believers* focuses on the content of the footage and directs attention away from the social conditions and political impetus under which *Hewers of Coal* was produced. The original footage was in colour; the re-working included altering it to a monochrome reproduction. The makers of *The True Believers* overlaid a distancing voice-over to the clip — ‘victory after victory is won by these hard-faced fanatics’ — which entirely altered the original intention of the film. With that, they have erased the conditions within which the original film was produced, distributed and received. The original voice-over spoke of ‘another side to the story of coal, a not-so pretty one’ and presents the union members’ struggle for better conditions and the protest marches to nationalise the mines.

Here was a case where the original material has been retextualised; it has been so re-worked as to oppose its own ideology. The insertion of the union clip amongst the newsreel footage serves to conceal the original producers’ intent, as much as does the different voice-over. The existence of the two ‘versions’ of the same footage raises questions about the nature of history, and how we construct our past through cinema.

The clip is not an isolated example. Other excerpts of this trade union’s films have been re-used in documentary series such as *A Big Country*, *Four Corners*, *Hindsight* and *Lateline*. 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. Their topics concentrated on improvements to working and living conditions, or support for a particular industrial action or political campaign. The film makers stood in opposition to many of the views expressed in the mainstream media, industrially, politically and culturally; so I will call these oppositional films. 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.7

I want to read these oppositional films as feeding into a counter-memory of the visual remainders of the 1950s that supplement previously fixed ideas. Studying oppositional films like *Hewers of Coal* can be a useful exercise, not only to learn more about these ‘new perspectives about the past’ but to highlight previously overlooked methods of media production. The unearthing of more of these ‘hidden histories’ also opens up the official history of film in Australia.

In the cold war climate of the early 1950s, the mainstream media cooperated with the government in mounting a fierce and lengthy campaign of anti-communism. In these years, the Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF) was particularly militant, with a strong leadership in Jim Healy — who was a member of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) — and other executive members, including Tom Nelson. The establishment of a film unit within the Sydney branch was made 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.

The Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit (WWFFU) may well have been the only 1950s film production unit in Australia that was funded by a trade union. Soon after the production of a promotional film 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. The unit’s first film, *Pensions for Veterans*, was made in 1953.

The unit produced sixteen short films on subjects that other production units would never tackle, such as housing shortages, industrial disputes from the union members’ viewpoint, and issues concerning workers’ rights. Their most notable work is *The Hungry Miles* (1955). It 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 often short on funds but the low-budget productions were of high quality due to the professional standards upheld. All the films were shot on 16mm stock, the later works in Kodachrome.

The unit was commissioned to make films for other left wing unions that perceived the value of film as a political and educational tool. *Hewers of Coal* was made in 1957 for the Miners’ Federation. In the same year, *Think Twice*, which was about safety in the workplace, was made for the Boilermakers’ Union. The unit also made an episode of their own newsreel, for screening to union 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’.  

A valuable contribution the WWFFU made to the nature of cinema in Australia was the coordination of an alternative distribution system which was organised at a grass roots level. By accessing alternative methods of distribution to the mainstream cinema circuit, the WWFFU made sure that people who could not even afford to go and see a newsreel could watch their films. Despite the effective distribution there were opponents to union films. The films were not ‘shown in commercial cinemas’, wrote Jock Levy:

> 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.\(^8\)

Utilising the union network, prints of the films were sent to all branches of the federation and were shown often at mass stop-work meetings or in the lunch hour. Other trade unions bought and distributed the films. The unit was able to buy a Kombi van which was used as the production vehicle. On occasion, it doubled as a mini mobile cinema so that films would be screened during the day light. The Kombi
regularly travelled around the working-class suburbs of Woolloomooloo, Darlinghurst and Surry Hills. By travelling around and taking the films to the audience, instead of the other way around, the unit engaged the interest of people who might never have otherwise had access to the union's point of view.

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 fifteen-week lockout of miners. The unit 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.

While the unit relied on networks of workers and worker organisations, a number of films could be found on the catalogues of film society, there were screenings at festivals, and they were often sourced through Quality Films, an independent film distribution company. The Hungry Miles was awarded a gold medal at the 1957 Warsaw Youth Festival of Peace and Friendship and was sold internationally. Many titles were screened in Poland, Czechoslovakia, China, the Soviet Union and New Zealand. According to Norma Disher, it was a victory that such a film should be screened and 'official' recognition was a boost for all concerned.10

The WWFFU films were made primarily to challenge the mainstream media and to counteract ideologically dominant attitudes. But it is useful to move beyond this point towards an analysis of the films' motivation. Culturally and politically — and to an extent aesthetically — the wharfies' films comprised a marginalised film culture. A complex web of political and cultural networks existed. The artistic community of the left in post war Sydney was a great source of inspiration and collective energy for the oppositional filmmakers. This cultural work was encouraged by the CPA and by organisations such as the Studio of Realist Art and the New Theatre. Communist-led unions — such as the WWF — supported these avenues of education, creativity and expression. As an outcome, the WWF provided an extended series of plays, talks and films for members, their families and other workers. The concentration surrounding these groups of political commitment and creative drive was the most important factor in the impetus for production of the oppositional films.

An earlier source of the inspiration lay in the exhortations of A A Zhdanov, a Communist leader and cultural critic of the 1930s, who urged writers, painters and other intellectuals to draw their subjects from the working class. Following Lenin's theory that films were the supreme art, Zhdanov believed that artists should become propagandists: 'Create works of high attainment, of high ideological and artistic content. Actively help to remould the mentality of people in the spirit of socialism. Be in the front ranks of those who are fighting for a classless socialist society'.11 The wharfies' film makers took this up; they were also viewing the growing number of Russian and other oppositional films being shown in Sydney.

The unit's films created strong divisions of opinion within the Sydney cinema culture:

People used to come down and see us from the [Sydney] University Film Society. We had good relationships with people associated with the Film Festival ... who
knew what we were doing, and were enthusiastic and supportive of what we were doing ... They were interested to see what we were doing. And they were always welcome at anything that we did. It was with their help, for example, that *The Hungry Miles* would have been screened at the Sydney Film Festival, because there were people on the Film Festival Committee who didn’t want it screened, and who did a lot to stop it from being screened. But with the support of the people who felt it was important to have [this type of film] — they won in the long run.¹²

Some films were made for the promotion of specific campaigns or points of view on a current political issue. *November Victory* (1955) was made to give a history of industrial action in Australia and to provide background information on a current issue (the proposed changes in 1951 to the Stevedoring Industry Act). This type of film was made in an attempt to counterpose the mainstream media at the time which was giving the ‘other side’ of the story. However, a group of short animated works, featuring indigenous legends and old bush ballads, was made partly in the hopes of continuing the unit when its demise was threatened. The stories told through the wharfies’ films — a strike, a particular political commentary on a government policy, a reflection of the state of the federation at a certain time — give the events a particular significance outside their representation in other media (such as mainstream newspapers or newsreels).

Although the screenings had not extended beyond a modest exhibition circuit, and obviously would never get to the mainstream cinema of the time, the productions were extremely successful in their own right. The unit was instrumental in producing an alternative reportage of events and issues of the time to the conservative, anti-communist frenzy that was taken up by the mainstream media producers. I believe it should be considered amongst the foundations of left-wing Australian cinema.

The more I have discovered about the work of this film unit, the more I believe that there needs to be a reappraisal of Australian cinema of the 1950s. In the processes of creating an Australian cinema history, the norm has been to marginalise the whole genre of oppositional film and there are very few works that have foregrounded class difference (which may provide for an alternative history). The particular ways of creating, political and aesthetic expression embodied in oppositional films have not yet been detailed; their function and impact as critiques of prevailing views (those of the government and the mainstream press) have been largely suppressed from film history, although the WWFFU has been mentioned in passing.¹³ Of course there are understandable grounds for this; feature filmmaking has most often been privileged as the site of meaning-making in any study of national cinema. There are, however, very good reasons for us to examine these oppositional works and to consider the ways in which our histories and memories have negotiated their existence, leading us to understand our own history more fully.

The WWFFU films are rare cinematic representations of working-class Australia during the cold war. They have given us the chance to see major social problems, such as lack of housing and a concerted repression of criticism of the government, and specific industrial issues, such as wharf labourers’ or miners’ strikes from the viewpoint of workers themselves. They have also shown us an alternative way that film makers have organised themselves. Producers such as these worked with little resources to create powerfully moving films.
Investigating these oppositional films will enable the popular culture of the 1950s, in terms of the visual media, to be re-aligned and to recognise that there was at least one alternative to the privileged representations of the newsreels. Here, with the wharfies’ films, we see an early instance of media audiences mustering their own power, not just to consume, but to create. The cultural resistance these filmmakers practised 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, in a way that would be accessible and relevant to the subjects of their films, the working class. And that public voice can be seen as a competing discourse to the mainstream one.

We need to scrutinise marginal forms of expression, such as the WWFFU films, to analyse their shaping power in the cultural construction of the 1950s. The point of application of this shaping power — the reception of these films by thousands of workers and their families throughout Australia — is where their discourse found its legitimacy. They were seen by thousands of people but this has not been widely acknowledged. The impact of the works did reach beyond the immediate goals of supporting a one-time campaign; this is evident in their re-circulation in the more recent works such as The True Believers. When we remember the 1950s through the images presented to us in 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.

Our culture is formed both by history and its representations. The two ‘versions’ of the 1950s offered to us in the archival footage used in The True Believers have given us examples of the dominant narrative and the counter-memory which can both mirror the past. This sort of close examination of previously privileged versions of history enables us to re-think the 1950s as a decade of opposition in terms of filmmaking. Increasingly, with the current interest in popular memory and oral history, we are re-examining the culture of the 1950s. With so many new stories coming to light out of Australia’s past through the studies of the marginalised, and through oral history, the story of the wharfies’ films adds to our complex web of cultural connections. It’s often suggested that films of independent producers of the 1970s, groups such as the Sydney Film-makers Co-operative, constituted the first politically motivated cinema of Australia. The wharfies’ films challenge that view.

Endnotes on pages 215.
Notes to pp 171–173

30 Giant Battle, no 6, p 22.
31 ibid., p 23.

This War Has Made Writers of Us All
John Harms

1 Bill Gammage, The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War, Ringwood, 1975.

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2 ‘Film and popular memory: An interview with Michel Foucault’, in J Tulloch (ed), Conflict and Control in the Cinema: A Reader in Film and Society, South Melbourne, 1977, pp 536, 539.
4 1950s feature films made by Australians about Australians were extremely rare. See Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Production, Melbourne, 1980.
6 The True Believers was a 1987 ABC/Roadshow Coote and Carroll co-production, directed by Peter Fisk. The series won an AFI/Logie award for best mini-series of 1988.
9 Jock Levy, in Filmwork, a documentary film by John Hughes, 1981.
10 Norma Disher, personal interview, 22 August 1996.
12 Disher, op. cit.
13 One such example is the work of Phillip Adams in I Bertrand (ed), Cinema in Australia: A Documentary History, Kensington, 1989, pp 179-83. Mention must be made of the extensive research and production of John Hughes, who directed the award-winning Filmwork, and which also uses newly shot and archival footage.

Art and the Ideal Community
Jen Webb

1 I am referring in this paper to government in the Foucauldian sense — that is, to the use of various technologies in the management of the national capital, rather than a particular ruling party or system of parliamentary organisation. However, I use the concept as a springboard to point to aspects of the Australian polity.
3 ibid., p 2.
5 Department of Communication and the Arts, Policies for a Coalition Government: For Art’s Sake — A Fair Go for All of Us, Canberra, 1996, p 9.
Bruce Johnson is associate professor in the School of English, University of New South Wales, where his teaching and research areas range from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, with a focus on popular culture and music. He is also active in areas of arts administration and policy development, as an award winning broadcaster, record producer, and as a jazz musician with experience in all performance contexts from pub to opera house, festivals and recording. He has recently established the Australian Jazz Archive in conjunction with the National film and Sound Archive.

Emilie Kolb has a Masters of Arts from the University of Vienna, is a tutor in German in the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Sydney, and is currently undertaking a PhD on ‘Language Politics, Communication and Culture in the Age of Hypertext’. She is working with John F Williams as research, language and photography assistant in a project (supported by the Australian War Memorial) investigating the experiences of Austrian-Australians and German-Australians in the Australian armed forces during the two world wars.

Michele Langfield is a senior lecturer in History and Australian Studies, in the School of Australian and International Studies, Faculty of Arts, Deakin University, Burwood Campus. She is the author of Espresso Bar to EMC: A Thirty-Year History of the Ecumenical Migration Centre, Monash Publications in History, 1996 and More People Imperative, Immigration to Australia, 1901-1939, Guide Number 7, National Archives of Australia, 1999. Ongoing research focuses on comparative international migration and refugee policies and practices, especially the gender implications of entry provisions, and the peopling of the Northern Territory.

Ross Laurie has worked in a wide range of tertiary institutions in southeast Queensland and currently lectures in the bachelor of Contemporary Studies at the University of Queensland’s new Ipswich campus. he has published in the areas of race relations and popular culture.

Georgia Loney was born in 1977 and is currently finishing her undergraduate degree in history at UWA. Georgia’s article ‘The Mabo Myth: Conservative Reaction to Mabo in Perth 1994’ is published in the 1998 edition of Studies in Western Australian History.

Lisa Milner is a doctoral candidate within the Communications and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Wollongong. Her thesis is a history of the Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit, and her research covers the areas of Australian film history of the 1950s and left-wing Australian cinema.

Liz Reed is senior lecturer in Australian Indigenous Studies at the Monash Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies, and is currently engaged in researching on ‘The Politics of Aboriginal Rock Music’. Publications have included the British Counter-Culture and Underground Press of the 1960s; gendered representations of war and national identity in Australia; and representations of indigenous Australians and Papua New Guineans in commemorations of Australia in world war.

Susanne Scheech is director of the Centre for Development Studies and senior lecturer in the School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management, at Flinders University. As well as publishing several articles on the social construction of whiteness and the book Culture and Development: Critical Perspectives, with Jane Haggis, she has published articles on gender and Australian Aid policies. She is currently working on the project Information Technology and its use by NGOs.