

# The impact of the counterculture on Australian cinema in the mid to late 20th century.

**Author:**

Hooton, Fiona

**Publication Date:**

2007

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/17632>

**License:**

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/41008> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-27

# **The impact of the counterculture on Australian cinema in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Art  
Administration (Hons) within the School of Art History and Art Education, College  
of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

**Fiona Hooton**

PLEASE TYPE

**THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES**  
**Thesis/Dissertation Sheet**

**Surname or Family name:** Hooton

**First name:** Fiona

**Other name/s:**

**Abbreviation for degree as given in the University calendar:**

**School:** School of Art History and Art Education      **Faculty:** COFA

**Title:**

The impact of the counterculture on Australian  
cinema in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century

This thesis discusses the impact of the counterculture on Australian cinema in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century through the work of the Sydney Underground Film group, Ubu. This group, active between 1965 -1970, was a significant part of an underground counter culture, to which many young Australians subscribed. As a group, Ubu was more than a rat bag assemblage of University students. It was an antipodean aspect of an ongoing artistic and political movement that began with the European avant-garde at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that radically transformed artistic conventions in theatre, painting, literature, photography and film.

Three purposes underpin this thesis: firstly to track the art historical links between a European avant-garde heritage and Ubu. Experimental film is a genre that is informed by cross art form interrelations between theatre, painting, literature, photography and film and the major modernist aesthetic philosophies of the last century. Ubu's revolutionary aesthetic approaches included political resistance and the involvement of audiences in the production of art. Their creative wellspring drew from: Alfred Jarry, Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, Fluxus, Conceptual and Pop art. This cross fertilization between the arts is critical to understanding not only the Australian experimental movement but the history of contemporary image making.

The second purpose is to fill a current void of research about early Australian Experimental film. This is a significant gap given it was a national movement with many international connections. The counterculture movement also contains many major figures in Australian art history. These individuals played their parts in the Sydney Push, *Oz magazine* and the activities of the *Yellow House* and have since become important multi arts practitioners and commentators.

Thirdly, the thesis attempts to evaluate Ubu's political and social agenda for the democratization of film appreciation through their objectives of: production, exhibition, distribution and debate of experimental film both nationally and internationally. Ultimately the group would succeed in these objectives and in winning the war on repressive censorship laws. Their influence has informed the practice of many of Australia's current film heavy weights.

Two key films have been selected for analysis, *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* (1963) and *Newsfront* (1978). The first looks forward to Ubu's contemporary practices and political agenda while the second demonstrates their longer term influences on mainstream cinema.

Declaration relating to disposition of project thesis/dissertation

I hereby grant to the University of New South Wales or its agents the right to archive and to make available my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in the University libraries in all forms of media, now or here after known, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. I retain all property rights, such as patent rights. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

I also authorise University Microfilms to use the 350 word abstract of my thesis in Dissertation Abstracts International (this is applicable to doctoral theses only).

.....  
Signature

.....  
Witness

.....  
Date

The University recognises that there may be exceptional circumstances requiring restrictions on copying or conditions on use. Requests for restriction for a period of up to 2 years must be made in writing. Requests for a longer period of restriction may be considered in exceptional circumstances and require the approval of the Dean of Graduate Research.

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Date of completion of requirements for Award:

**THIS SHEET IS TO BE GLUED TO THE INSIDE FRONT COVER OF THE THESIS**

**ORIGINALITY STATEMENT** 'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.'

Signed ..... Date .....

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the following people for their generous support of this project.

I was able to complete the thesis while working full time thanks to the commitment of my supervisor, Joanna Mendelssohn, Associate Professor College of Fine Arts University of NSW, who gave up a number of her own precious weekends to discuss its progress with me. Special thanks go to both my parents and mentors Joy and Viv Hooton for their unfailing support and encouragement. Thanks to my partner Catrina Vignando for her empathy, solidarity and love throughout. For moral encouragement thanks are due to old friends, confidants and fellow art lovers Sally Clarke and Brenda Factor. The following people are listed as having provided critical input at key moments: David Campbell NFSA, Michael Glasheen, Mike Jones, Richard Keys, Philippe Mora, David Perry, Sue Hardisty, David Atfeild, Garry Shead, Albie Thoms and Pauline Webber.

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
Table of Contents.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Chapter 1 Literature Review .....	9
Chapter 2 <i>It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain</i> .....	39
Chapter 3 Ubu and the Counterculture .....	87
Chapter 4 The Impact of Experimental Film on Mainstream Cinema.....	135
Chapter 5 Conclusions.....	202
Appendix A Timeline .....	207
Appendix B DVD 1, 2, 3 Viewing Menu .....	213
List of Illustrations.....	216
Bibliography .....	218

## **Introduction**

It is hoped that this thesis may assist to stimulate debate and further research on Australia's experimental film. Given that experimental film in this country is now more than forty years old and was a national movement in the late 1960s, with active practitioners in all state capitals it seems extraordinary that so little work has been done to analyse its important legacies.

The focus of this thesis is on the late 1960s period but in creating the context this paper includes the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-garde through to the 1970's Australian film renaissance. The scarcity of writing on the topic represents a significant gap in our critical understanding. The fact that the alternative history told by Australian avant-garde filmmakers has been largely ignored, has assisted in minimizing later awareness of the level of dissent that occurred in this period.

As a consequence of this vacuum of critical discussion there has been no teasing out of the impact of the '60s experimental movement on mainstream Australian film or visual art. Experimental film is framed both by its marginal status in reaction to the dominant cinema industry and its role as a laboratory of ideas for it. A review of the ideas that the movement provided the industry and the ideas that the industry ignored are therefore well overdue. The experimentation of Ubu and the counterculture period was a necessary precondition to the public success of the 1970s cinema renaissance.

Ubu's most important initiatives were the founding of the Sydney Film Cooperative and the handmade films and lightshows. Both were manifestations of a key Ubu principle —access to

filmmaking for all as a political and social right. Forty years on independent cinema and their exhibition houses have all but vanished from Australia's media landscape.

The terms *experimental* or *underground* effectively mean the same thing an opposition to the total dominance of conventional cinema. The need to seek out autonomous alternatives to mass culture, mass consumerism and the art industry is one of the defining principals of an avant-garde practice. Ubu was embedded in the alternative, libertarian and artistic counterculture network of the Sydney Push, *Oz* magazine, the Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) and the *Yellow House* and an international counter culture movement. A network that included academics, poets, artists and writers, its members questioned the interrelationship between art, politics, social oppression and aesthetics and in various anarchic ways contested the intellectual, moral, artistic and political boundaries of Australian life. As part of that underground network Ubu successfully agitated for the reform of oppressive censorship laws and government support for the arts. *Ubu NEWS* documented the censorship battles and was the voice for experimentation in film and music, championing alternatives to mainstream Hollywood cinema in its pages. *Ubu NEWS* became an effective communication tool to lobby for the beginning of arts funding and to agitate for an end to the Vietnam War.

Ubu and the Sydney Film Co-op they founded were a symbiotic relationship. One did not exist separately from the other. The Sydney Film Co-op provided essential skills and experience as an early training ground particularly for Phillip Noyce but also for others involved with *Newsfront*. The Co-ops provided grass roots support for the production and distribution of film that did not fit the commercial cinema exhibition models or its big budgets.



In order to analyse the impact of the counterculture on Australian cinema I have selected two key films for analysis, *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* (1963) and *Newsfront* (1978). The film *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* (1963) is a satirical take on the media as villain or anti hero and is an example of the counterculture's collaborative experimentation. *Newsfront* produced a decade later by a group of counterculture revolutionaries is a political and social document of the Menzies era and the struggle for an Australian cultural identity. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* looks forward to Ubu's contemporary practices and political agenda, while *Newsfront* demonstrates their longer term influences on mainstream cinema. These experimental films provide an essential anti history in contrast to traditional narrative films and historical narratives that saturate the mass media.

Ubu played an important role as experimental leaders in developing and promoting many experimental film forms. Their practice as experimental filmmakers is now becoming part of the wider gambit of the art world just as the historiography of the moving image is only now being acknowledged as a central part of the historiography of visual culture.

## Chapter 1

### Literature review

Whereas European modernism and American New Wave Cinema have been the subjects of extensive research, Australian experimental film has been largely ignored by academic researchers. Most available material is in the form of ephemera; newspaper articles and reviews widely dispersed in different film journals or collected essays. The bulk of Australian film literature relates to narrative feature film particularly produced during or post the 1970s. If Australian experimental film appears at all as critical writing in Australian film reference texts it is as a cursory mention. The preface of Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper's key text *Australian film, 1900-1977: a guide to feature film production*, for instance, states;

The intended scope of the book gradually shrank as the volume of production grew during the 1970s, and it became impossible to cover many areas of cinema that were of interest to us, especially documentary and experimental films. <sup>[1]</sup>

Perhaps the most precise analysis of Australian Experimental film development comes from Arthur and Corrine Cantrill in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*. They identify the beginning of Australian experimental film as commencing in the 1950s spurred on by the establishment of Sydney and Melbourne film festivals, the emergence of film societies, embassy film collections, the increased access to tertiary education and the important input of post war immigrant European artists. <sup>[2]</sup> The Cantrills produced the journal '*Cantrill's Filmnotes*' for just under thirty years. <sup>[3]</sup> It is the most comprehensive documentation of the work of Australian and international experimental

---

<sup>[1]</sup> Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film, 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press in association with the Australian Film Institute, 1981), p 173.

<sup>[2]</sup> Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer and Ina Bertrand, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>[3]</sup> Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, "Cantrill's Filmnotes," Melbourne, Vic: A. Cantrill, 1971

filmmakers. Future researchers in this field will no doubt be able to compile a comprehensive record of Australia's experimental film historiography from the Cantrill's journal alone. The journal began after the Ubu period in 1971 and so is not extensively covered by this thesis.

The Ubu group included: Albie Thoms, David Perry, John Clark and Aggy Reed and began in Sydney in 1965. As a collective they were Australia's first group to focus on four common goals: film production, exhibition, distribution and debate of experimental film. Their multi arts production included: lightshows, the publication of *Ubu News* an (underground newspaper), painting and performance. As part of an underground network they successfully agitated for the reform of oppressive censorship laws and government support for the arts.

Ubu members shared the Cantrills' passion and philosophical approach to film as an art form rather than a product of the commercial entertainment industry. Their practice as experimental filmmakers is only now becoming part of the wider gambit of the art world just as the historiography of the moving image is acknowledged as a central part of the historiography of visual culture. Several significant international exhibitions have placed experimental film at the centre of visual studies. Most recently an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou titled *The Movement of Images Art and Film* 5 April 2006-2009 January 2007 connects the history of static, kinetic and performance arts forms and film. The exhibition catalogue argues the contemporary relevance of a survey of experimental film works:

Nowdays, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, while we are witnessing a massive migration of images in motion from screening rooms to exhibition spaces, a

migration borne along by a digital revolution and prepared by a twofold phenomena of dematerialization of work plus a return to theatricality of the art scene, it becomes impossible not to say necessary, to redefine the cinema beyond experimental conditions which governed it in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century- that is to say, no longer from the limited viewpoint of film history, but, at the crossroads of live spectacle and visual art, from a viewpoint expanded to encompass a general history of representations. <sup>[4]</sup>

This exhibition follows on from the exhibition in Vienna at The Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wein (MUMOK) exhibition 15 July 2005 -14 May 2006 *From the Collection Nouveau Realisme Art and Reality in the 1960s*. This show represented works from Fluxus, the New Realism and Vienna Actionism artists who linked their art to agitprop and replaced the canvas with actions in physical space and expanded cinema. Ubu's members and associates had connection to contacts within these international avant-gardes through the London underground and the New York Film Co-operative.

They experimented with these radical aesthetics, creating some of Australia's first performance art happenings and expanded cinema events. As Anne Marsh comments in her history of Australian Performance Art:

Activist performance in the 1970s and the happenings in the 1960s often claimed to be 'democratising' art by breaking down its hierarchical structure: making art outside the gallery system including the audience in the work, (participatory performance), and attempting to reach a broader public through different contexts. <sup>[5]</sup>

American experimental filmmakers enjoyed a major survey exhibition of their works at the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, California in 1996, titled *Hall of*

---

<sup>[4]</sup> Philippe - Alain Michaud, "The Movement of Images," The Movement of Images Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2006 p 16.

<sup>[5]</sup> Anne Marsh, Body and Self Performance Art in Australia 1969-96 (Melbourne: Artmoves Inc., 1996.p 9

*Mirrors: Art and Film since 1945*.<sup>[6]</sup> The catalogue includes an essay on 1960s experimental film titled The “Other Cinema”. It follows the practice of Brakhage, Warhol, Connors and Snow amongst others and outlines the development of notions of the auteur, expanded cinema and the work of structural filmmakers such as Paul Sharits.

I am not aware of any major historical survey exhibition of experimental film or video in Australia to date. This thesis therefore seeks to provide a case for the importance of collecting, preserving and interpreting the archival work of Ubu and other Australian experimenters. This is a key collection management issue for art administrators; as Adrian Martin acknowledges Australian experimental film remains the most undocumented art form in the country.<sup>[7]</sup> Given that it is now over forty years old and was a national movement in Australia in the late 1960s, the scarcity of writing on the topic represents a significant gap in our critical understanding. Experimental film is framed both by its marginal status in reaction to the dominant cinema industry and its role as a laboratory of ideas for it. A review of the ideas that the movement provided the industry is therefore well overdue. As a consequence of this vacuum of critical discussion there has been no teasing out of the impact of the experimental movement on mainstream Australian film or visual art.

---

<sup>[6]</sup> Russell Ferguson, "The 'Other Cinema' American Avant-Garde Film of the 1960s," *Hall of Mirrors : Art and Film since 1945*, eds. Kerry Brougher, Jonathan Crary and Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles Calif.) (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996).

<sup>[7]</sup> Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, *The Australian Screen* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1989.p 173.

Technological changes in film formats have created a critical knowledge management issue as the historical and cultural importance of these innovators and their relevance to contemporary art practice becomes increasingly inaccessible. As a result of research for this thesis recommendations were made to the National Film and Sound Archive preservation team and a number of experimental films were then prioritized as part of the Archives 16mm project for telecine. Prioritization of this kind is necessary on a larger scale to improve access and profile to experimental film within the national collection.

Ubu works were personal artistic expressions akin to other art forms such as painting or sculpture. Their films are political statements of the independence of the auteur in opposition to the piece work of the commercial film industry. François Truffaut published his auteur theory in the influential French film magazine 'Cahiers du Cinéma'. In *Understanding Movies* Louis Giannetti asserts that the '50s and '60s were dominated by the debate surrounding the French New Wave theory of the auteur.<sup>8</sup> Ubu's films were akin to the French New Wave films in that they reflected Australian everyday life, focused on the vision of the director and not on literary narrative. A key contradiction within the auteur theory is the concentration on the directorial role within the intensely collaborative nature of filmmaking. Ubu members were a resource for each others various film projects as crew and cast, although the pure personal expression supposedly remained with the cinema 'auteur'. Ubu enabled the counterculture to access new forms of film through access to the US new wave cinema even though it was a battle to achieve this under the restrictive censorship of the time.

---

<sup>8</sup> Louis D. Giannetti, *Understanding Movies* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p 415.

The experimental film *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is a case in point. Thoms experimented with a collision of both narrative film and formalism in structural films such as *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* or *David Perry*. As Patricia Mellencamp so succinctly asserts in 'An Empirical Avant-Garde: Laleen Jayamanne and Tracey Moffat', the 1960s and 1970s European, American and Australian avant-gardes were all about dealing with binaries:

.....still photography versus moving images, art versus mass culture, narrative versus formalism and silence versus sound. A Cold War logic of duality.<sup>9</sup>

This comment succinctly sums up the concerns of the era. It also proves *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* to be an exceptional film in that all of these binaries have been combined in the one film.

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* contested the codes that the censorship authorities attempted to defend over the next decade. David Bordwell notes in 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice':

On the one hand, art cinema defines itself as a realistic cinema. It will show us real locations (Neorealism, the New Wave) and real problems (contemporary "alienation," "lack of communication," etc). Part of this reality is sexual; the aesthetics and commerce of the art cinema often depends upon eroticism that violates the production codes of pre- 1950 Hollywood.<sup>10</sup>

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is, however, far more than a sex scandal or scatological production. It is possibly the earliest Australian example of a film in the international

---

<sup>9</sup>Patricia Mellencamp, 'An Empirical Avant-Garde' Laleen Jayamanne and Tracy Moffat, *Fugitive Images from Photography to Video*, *Theories of Contemporary Culture*, eds Patrice Petro, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995 p 173

<sup>10</sup> David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," *Film Criticism* Fall 4:1 1979 p57.



genre of left and revolutionary political cinema. Visual culture students are unlikely to uncover its impact as Australian experimental film is not a significant component of university study. The relevance of this work to contemporary political events, sedition laws or censorship has therefore been lost and forgotten.

By the 1970s Australian cinema had a renaissance due to the establishment of film funding as a consequence of the establishment of a Government controlled Arts industry. Thoms' documentation of this in *Polemics for a New Cinema* (1978) from the perspective of an experimental film maker, founder of the Sydney Film Cooperative and employee of both the ABC and AFC is significant in this critical period.<sup>11</sup> Thoms' own oral history held in the National Film and Sound Archive provides insight into the film industry's primary relationship to both television and theatre.<sup>12</sup>

In his chapter 'Underground Movies 1970' of *Polemics for a new cinema*, Thoms notes that the term *underground* replaced *avant-garde* as a definition once American new cinema began illegal activities that contravened marketing and obscenity restrictions. This term extended to include a plethora of publications produced using the new technology of offset printing utilized by *Oz magazine* and other independent newspapers.<sup>13</sup>

Thoms notes that the New York Film Cooperative founded in 1962 set the tone for an international co-operative movement that was democratic and anti commercial.<sup>[12]</sup> The

---

<sup>11</sup> Albie Thoms, *Polemics for a New Cinema* Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1978

<sup>12</sup> Thoms, Albie: Interviewed by Richard Keys, 2003 : Oral History, National Film and Sound Archive. title No 577319.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid p245

tool of trade was the 16mm Bolex camera that enabled in camera effects.<sup>[13]</sup> It brought a return to the everyday beginnings of film as a record of daily existence akin to the first home movies made by the Lumiere Brothers. Thoms links cinema history to Australian avant-garde cinema history but does not critique or analyse the impact of experimental film forms on later mainstream Australian cinema.

A re-visioning of the significance of international experimental film's alternative histories has been begun by Jeffrey Skoller's work *Making History in Avant-Garde Film: Shadows: Specters, Shards*. I have applied Skoller's theories about avant-garde film to Australian experimental film and Ubu's work. Skoller documents and highlights the significance of the multi-roles played by avant-garde filmmakers who like Ubu did not restrict themselves to one or two aspects of the production process, directing or editing, but controlled the entire film production process. More than an economic imperative for experimental filmmakers, it was a political and aesthetic statement about the processes of piece work and industrialization within film production.<sup>[14]</sup> Skoller's definition of avant-garde filmmakers certainly encompasses Ubu's philosophies. Like American avant-garde filmmakers they created their own collectives to achieve their objectives.

Peter Mudie's book *Sydney Underground Movies UBU FILMS 1965-1970* draws together much of the available ephemeral material concerning Ubu and its members and the extensive press coverage of their activities. Mudie uses an essential element of

---

<sup>[14]</sup> Jeffrey Skoller, *Making History in Avant-Garde Film Shadows, Specters, Shards* University Minnesota Press, 2005 pxxiii.

film itself, time, to order an extensively researched chronology of Ubu activities from 1965-1970 within the context of national and international events. His book remains the only published work on Ubu and one of very few works on Australian experimental film.

Mudie observes that Australian film culture has dismissed experimental film as marginal as a result of a singular notion that art and film were somehow separate entities. Ubu succeeded in disproving this by providing an accessible platform for independent filmmakers to screen their work. The terms *experimental* or *underground* equated to the same thing -- an opposition to the totalitarian rule of conventional cinema. Ubu was part of a creative arts community unrestricted by the confines of singular artistic disciplines that would later become the funding silos of arts bureaucracy. Mudie introduces Ubu members and associates but makes only brief references to their artistic debt to earlier avant-gardes. Even today Ubu's approach would be challenging to many art institutions as Anne Marsh comments in *Artlink* 'Art History in a post-medium age':

Not only academic art history but also art schools have tended to preserve a kind of silo mentality where disciplines are distinct. Any practising artist who is looking out in the world knows that this essentialist paradigm does not address what actually happens in arts practice. Some art historians are in a state of hysteria about this. <sup>[15]</sup>

Mudie introduces Ubu's four key objectives: to stimulate film production, exhibition and debate, each relying on the other for success. He identifies common characteristics

---

<sup>[15]</sup> Anne Marsh, "Art History in a Post-Medium Age," *Artlink Contemporary Art Quarterly* 26 no 1 (2006).p42

that typify the period including the reforming of antiquated censorship laws, government funding for the arts and the development of a critical arts press.<sup>[16]</sup>

As a chronology Mudie's work is significantly informative but does not critically address Ubu's body of work in relation to European or America experimental film. His chronological film strip runs out in 1970 before Ubu's influence on later mainstream Australian film could be assessed. As he notes a vibrant interactive arts community would then be separated out by a new arts bureaucracy with prescribed levels of support and set criteria for the grant of monetary funding.<sup>[17]</sup>

I have located only one other thesis on this topic, Brain Doherty's 1996 Sydney University Masters thesis *The Ubu Scene and the Emergence of Underground Film in Australia 1965-1970 Discourse, Practice, Heterogenesis*. Doherty correctly identifies Ubu's greatest legacy as the establishment of the Sydney Film Cooperative which continued until 1985.

His methodology is based on Foucault's theories in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Doherty argues that a scene or network is a social site where the mixing of people 'makes things happen'. The rise of 16mm film clubs created a nexus between private filmmaking and public exhibition. By setting up a distribution system Ubu controlled the supply of the product which is traditionally the center of power in the commercial industry.

---

<sup>[16]</sup> Peter Mudie, *Ubu Films : Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970* Sydney: UNSW Press, 1997 p 7.

<sup>[17]</sup> Ibid, p 17.

The context in which Ubu flourished he defined as a heterognosis, where knowledges that are normally separated are brought together challenged, contested and then transformed. This scene changed, he comments, when people became less willing to spend time on projects that had no monetary return. Film's ability he claims:

... to relocate 'realistic' representations of sounds and images in time and space provides a threat to forms of order and knowledge. <sup>[18]</sup>

The dominant social order of cinema as safe family entertainment in the 1960s was controlled by the censorship restrictions. <sup>[19]</sup> Doherty correctly notes that without censorship Ubu would never have had an underground space to inhabit. Doherty states that extensive media coverage of Ubu's activities built up understanding in Australia that film could be something beyond commercial feature film and positioned Ubu between both '*radicality and popularity*'. <sup>[20]</sup> The tension between these two positions attracted the attention of youth audiences at the time. Doherty's thesis does not proceed to an analysis of the impact of this experimental film movement on mainstream Australian cinema.

Jennifer Stott's chapter, 'Independent Feminist Filmmaking and the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative' in *Don't Shoot Darling!* (1987) provides a feminist analysis of the impact of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative. Stott notes these later feminist filmmakers continued to be committed to the democratic film practices upon which Ubu had founded the Co-op. They shared the vision of a different low budget film

---

<sup>[18]</sup> Bryan Doherty, "The Ubu Scene and the Emergence of Underground Film in Australia 1965 -1970 Discourse, Practice, Heterogenesis," Long essay, University of Sydney, 1996.p 42

<sup>[19]</sup> Ibid p 15

<sup>[20]</sup> Ibid p 31.

industry committed to collectivity production and to radical aesthetics.<sup>[21]</sup> Stott like Doherty believes that the Co-op's work changed the way people viewed films and created an audience demand that previously did not exist by presenting an alternative to narrative mainstream cinema.<sup>[22]</sup> Barbara Creed is one of Australia's key film critics. Other than her editorial work on *Don't Shoot Darling!* she has not written specifically about Ubu or '60s Australian experimental film.

Later the AFC subsidised the Co-op until an escalating deficit led to its closure in 1985. Janet Merewether's chapter 'Fuck the Mainstream -Let's Make Art Women' in *Womenvision* (2003), highlights the work of the women who were involved with Ubu as filmmakers, administrative supporters, performers and members of film crews.<sup>[23]</sup>

Ubu's lightshows and film distribution were part of achieving an economic lifecycle that could sustain one of its overarching principles '*involvement without impediment*'.<sup>24</sup> This is one of the key concerns of avant-garde practice that Skoller identifies: the seeking out of autonomous alternatives to mass culture, mass consumerism and the art industry.

Skoller contends that avant-garde art practice and countercultures are synonymous with one another, driven by the search for utopian ideals and a passion for social, political and artistic change. This is a reasonable and fair position to take as it acknowledges the

---

<sup>[21]</sup> Barbara Creed, Annette Blonski and Freda Freiberg, Don't Shoot Darling!: Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia Richmond, Vic.: Greenhouse, 1987, p118.

<sup>[22]</sup> Ibid, p122.

<sup>[23]</sup> Lisa French, Womenvision : Women and the Moving Image in Australia Melbourne: Damned Publishing, 2003 p131.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Mudie, Ubu Films : Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970 (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1997), p.12.

ongoing emergence of counterculture avant-gardes such as the Punk movement. Avant-garde practice by its very existence throws up borderline questions that tear away at the relationships between art, aesthetics, politics and social oppression. The sheer existence of an alternative independent avant-garde film movement critically usurps the utopian metanarratives distributed by the mass entertainment industries.

Ubu was part of a free flowing cross arts network that included: the Push, *Oz Magazine* and the *Yellow House*. As an avant-garde counterculture it succeeded in creating change and in stretching the boundaries of academia, the visual arts and the film industry until they overlapped into cultural action. Skoller maintains that it is the refusal of avant-garde filmmaking to be contained by singular disciplines that is one of its great strengths and a key reason for its importance as a field of study. In that sense avant-garde film provides a gestalt of what is missing, in the overlaps between disciplines.

An exhibition by the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in 2003 titled *Larrikins in London An Australian Presence in 1960s London* provided a glimpse of 1960s counterculture and its common attitudes. The exhibition catalogue by Nick Waterlow provides a flip book documenting the milieu of the counterculture including Australian figureheads: Beresford and Neville, Greer and Mora. Albie Thoms went to London in this period following the controversy surrounding his experimental feature film *Marinetti*.

In considering what was and what was not Australian about Ubu's practice in the late 1960s Donald Horne's work *The Lucky Country: Australia in the sixties* provided the context to appreciate the force with which the counterculture shocked 1960s Australian

society.<sup>25</sup> As Horne demonstrates this youth-led counterculture was forced to emerge to challenge the conservative government as a result of the absence of a governing political left in the 1960s. Its focus of attack was censorship and the Vietnam War.

James and Sandra Hall in *Australian Censorship The XYZ of Love* describe Ubu as:

... for four years the Viet Cong of the anti-censorship movement. It has used the guerilla tactic –weaving in and out of the import and export prohibition laws governing films, and ideologically uncompromising in its campaign to show nipples, genitalia and pubic hair wherever they occur.<sup>[26]</sup>

By the 1970s the counterculture movement had gathered mass appeal and enabled feminism, gay and Aboriginal rights movements to assert themselves in Australian society.

Horne, a member of the Push, questioned issues about the formation of Australian identity, spirit and culture in *Time of Hope Australia 1966-72, 1980* and the *Lucky Country Re-visited*, 1984.<sup>[27]</sup> In *Time of Hope* he contends that the youth revolution might have seemed stridently new but in reality was merely a return to the eighteenth and nineteenth century romanticism of Rousseau and Thoreau. Their emphasis on personal freedom, returning to nature and abhorrence of industrialism was present in counter culture maxims such as ‘doing your own thing’, while the term ‘civil disobedience’ is taken from the title of one of Thoreau’s most influential essays.<sup>[28]</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country : Australia in the Sixties*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1966.

<sup>[26]</sup> James & Sandra Hall, *Australian Censorship : The Xyz of Love* (Sydney: Jack de Lissa, 1970), p125.

<sup>[27]</sup> Donald Horne, *Time of Hope Australia 1966-1972* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980.

<sup>[28]</sup> Ibid, p43



*Sex and Anarchy: The Life and Death of the Sydney Push* by Anne Coombs discusses this extremely influential Australian artistic fraternity and its role in shaping key figure's careers.<sup>[29]</sup> Skoller comments that the search for a political cinema that experiments with radical aesthetics was an integral part of both European and North American modernist cinema in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>[30]</sup> It continues to be a focus informing media cultures directions today. Today's media integration, post medium practice, media contribution via Web 2.0 and emphasis on media personalization can be seen as a return to essential aspects of Ubu's democratization of the arts.

The fact that the alternative history told by Australian avant-garde filmmakers has been largely ignored, has assisted in minimizing later awareness of the level of dissent that occurred in the 1960s. The focus of Australian film historiography has always been on feature film, usually beginning in the 1970s, a decade when largely nationalistic narrative film product was produced for the consumption of Australian audiences. Alternative or anti histories, however, constantly challenge singular points of view or the grand historical accounts that Jean-Francois Lyotard called metanarratives.<sup>[31]</sup> Skoller contends that experimental film's embrace of virtual outcomes brings to the narrating of history two antithetical processes, invention and historicism.<sup>[32]</sup> Thinking on history, of course, has changed radically as a result of Lyotard's and other post-structuralist theorists' challenge to the grand metanarratives ordering of history which conveniently escape the chaos of people and places within historical events. It is

---

<sup>[29]</sup> Anne Coombs, *Sex and Anarchy : The Life and Death of the Sydney Push* Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1996.

<sup>30</sup>Skoller, *op.cit* pxxiii.

<sup>[31]</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge," *Theory and history of literature ; v. 10* 1984.

<sup>[32]</sup> Skoller, *op.cit*, pxi.

maintained that these traditional historical narratives assist in maintaining social and civil order within cultures and countries.

Metanarratives ignore the multitude of views and conflicting actions in favor of documenting a homogenizing human experience and then presenting it as a commonly shared goal. Lyotard considered that political progress should encompass a multitude of divergent views within a local context rather than singular homogenous theories. He saw the modern questioning of the rules of narrative and image as precipitating through the generations from Cézanne, to Impressionism, Cubism, and thence to Duchamp. <sup>[33]</sup>

Lyotard defined postmodernism as suspicious and disbelieving of metanarratives, occurring as a consequence of advances in science but then in turn questioning science itself. Lyotard contends that the loss of belief in the legitimization of metanarrative has created a crisis of metaphysical philosophy for institutions such as universities which in the past were founded on such a concept. Narrative's loss of heroes and common goals has now been dispersed into micronarratives and intergenerational language games that give rise to locally determined institutions. There are no longer stable language forms so the scientific laws of systems theory are displaced by practical language particles. One example of Lyotard's theories is now occurring online in the common practice of social tagging whereby individuals can add tags to digital objects. These cloud tags then become integrated into the classification and retrieval, the practice even being applied to instructional collections. Inevitably this form of reasoning affects concepts of truth and its authenticity. As Lyotard states:

---

<sup>[33]</sup> Lyotard, op.cit, p 79.

Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy.<sup>[34]</sup>

Critics of Lyotard say his arguments are circular and that he also falls foul of dictating his own theories of metanarratives in questioning universal truths of right and wrong. How can you be sure that a metanarrative is being eroded if you question the legitimization of truth? Postmodernism therefore becomes only another theory that uses rational ordering to organize the irrational. Nevertheless, I have found Lyotard's theories useful as a means of analysis in my discussion of the impact of experimental film on mainstream Australian cinema.

In the 1960s the counterculture questioned a number of protectionist Australian metanarratives including: the metanarrative of Australia as a moral nation where control of both fertility and sexual expression were enforced to ensure the supposed common goal of a pure genetic race. That Australian defence is inextricably aligned to larger powers, British or American, was questioned in the context of Vietnam and conscription. The fierce censorship battles came to epitomize the movement's conflict with the authorities on a range of fronts.

In the back shadowing of today's history wars, *Newsfront* is an insightful comment on the manufacturing and construction of historical narrative, which remains far ahead of its time. In *The Last New Wave* (1980) David Stratton, who was the director of the Sydney Film Festival from 1966-1983, provides the most comprehensive provenance of *Newsfront's* extremely fraught development including information about the unwieldy

---

<sup>[34]</sup> Ibid pxxv.

script battles, conflicts with the NSW Film Corporation the film's financiers and the post release disputes over conceptual attribution.

Stratton establishes producer David Elflick's background in the counterculture context of surfing films and magazines. He comments that Elflick first became aware of Noyce's work when Noyce sent him a print of his documentary *Castor and Pollux* to screen at the Manly Silver Screen cinema that he operated.<sup>[35]</sup> Stratton makes no mention of the combination of narrative and structuralism that is critical to *Newsfront's* construction nor does he connect the film to experimental techniques used by an Australian experimental film movement. He does however rightly note the immense skill and care that is invested in reconstructing scenes to align perfectly with the archival footage. The Maitland flood scenes he states were assisted in their accuracy by input from Howard Rubie who had filmed the original Maitland flood as a boy.<sup>[36]</sup>

Stratton fails to deal with *Newsfront's* innovation as a montage film indebted to the ready-made as part of an international avant-garde heritage. The ready-made concept was transferred to the film medium by experimental filmmakers in the US and Australia in the 1960s. In his introduction to *The Last New Wave* Stratton does not mention Thoms' experimental film *Marinetti* but does mention Tim Burstall's narrative feature *2000 Weeks*. The only two Australian films made in 1969 were *Marinetti* and Tim Burstall's *2000 Weeks*. Both were not well received. Mudie notes that *Marinetti* premiered at the Sydney Wintergarden Theatre as an adjunct to the Sydney Film

---

<sup>[35]</sup> David Stratton, *The Last New Wave : The Australian Film Revival* Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980 p 206.

<sup>[36]</sup> Ibid, p 209.

Festival on June 17 1969 to a capacity audience of 2400 people. <sup>[37]</sup> The film was booed at the screening. *Marinetti* represented the culmination of all Thoms' earlier experiments and also the prophetic end for Ubu. Stratton was the Director of the Sydney Film Festival from 1966-1983.

Andrew Pike's Masters thesis *The History of an Australian Film Production Company Cinesound, 1932-1970*, documents the enormous successes of the Cinesound's hey days in the 1930s and its post war decline. In the process he looks at the issues that limited the development of an Australian industry. He analyses the company's marketing, production and team spirit that characterized the staffing at Cinesound. <sup>38</sup>

Pike credits Cinesounds's enormous success as being due in large part to the showmanship of Ken G Hall in pitching the films produced to the needs of audiences. Pike is a filmmaker and theatre owner and has managed Electric Shadows, an independent cinema in Canberra and a film distribution company, Ronin films, for twenty seven years. Pike was also a part of the ANU Film Group during the 1960s and his talk at the NFSA 21 September 2006 titled *Out of the Shadows a celebration and exploration of independent cinema and film distribution* marked the closing of Electric Shadows theatre in Canberra. On that occasion, Pike discussed the enormous influence Hall had on his own development in the cinema industry and queried why Hall's vast experience was ignored in the regeneration of Australian film in the late '60s and '70s.

---

<sup>[37]</sup> Mudie, op.cit.p 198.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Pike, "The History of an Australian Film Production Company: Cinesound 1932-1970," MA, ANU, 1972.

*Marinetti* screened in Canberra in July 1969 at the ANU film group and was presented by Cantrill and Pike.<sup>39</sup> There are obvious differing views on the nature and value of Hall's contribution to the Australian film and television industry as presented by Thoms in *Polemics for a New Cinema* and Pike's thesis.

On 12 April 1966 Ubu was putting together its first screening program in Sydney including *Blunderball*, plus the premier of Perry's *SwanSong in Birdland* and Brennan's *The Up Turned Face*. The venue was Sydney's Union cinema. The Union's 600 seat capacity was overwhelmed when over 1000 people turned up. A second Sunday night screening had to be made to meet the demand. Ubu were then asked to show the films in Canberra by the ANU Film Group and screenings took place on April 29-30 1966. As stated by Thoms in his chapter, '1972 The Australian Avant-garde', in *Australian Film Reader*<sup>40</sup>

Canberra played an important role in Australian avant-garde cinema promoting the appreciation of New Cinema through significant purchases made by the National Library. This in turn stimulated growth particularly in expanded cinema. Canberra became a centre for expanded cinema production when the Cantrills took up a residency at the ANU as a Creative Arts Fellows. Some of the Films, made at the ANU during their 1969-70 residency included the feature-length *Harry Hooton* (1970) , purchased by the National Library, *4000 Frames* (1970), *White Orange Green* (1969), *Bouddi* (1970) and *Video Selfportrait* (1971).

---

<sup>39</sup>Mudie, op.cit, p 205

<sup>40</sup> Albie Thoms, 'The Australian Avant-Garde', *Australian Film Reader*, eds, Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan Currency Press, Sydney, 1985 p267

Peter Wollen's key essay 'The Two Avant-Gardes' identifies two influential directions in avant-garde film practice. One is Brechtian cinema mostly associated with the work of Godard and other European Art cinema. This form encourages critical thought by linking social situations to the experience of being active spectators rather than separated from the illusion of cinema as in traditional cinema. Wollen's second category defines structuralist cinema as having emerged from visual art styles such as abstract expressionist painting and minimalist sculpture. In this form film is itself the object of interest rather than just being a representational carrier for objects beyond itself.<sup>41</sup>

Adrian Martin begins to fill the void of critical work in this field in his article 'Indefinite Objects: Independent Film and Video', in *Australian Screen* edited by Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan. This article provides one of the few Australian analytical approaches to the genre of experimental film and surveys the historical development of experimental film from the 1960s to the 1980s. Martin puts forward a schema of experimental forms, and notes that these many forms often overlap each other. This is an invaluable overview that traces the change-over of experimental forms from 16mm to Super 8. Martin correctly notes Ubu's important role as experimental leaders in developing and promoting many of these experimental film forms. I concur with Martin's definition of independent experimental avant-garde films provided in his article, 'Indefinite Objects; Independent Film and Video' as films made on low budgets

---

<sup>41</sup>Peter Wollen, 'the Two Avant-Gardes', Readings and Writing: Semiotics Counter-Strategies (London: Verso, 1984).

sometimes with a single person crew, destined not to be 'released' as a mass media product.<sup>42</sup>

Martin also traces the use and meaning of found footage in film in his chapter, 'Collage and Montage Contemporary Australian Experimental Film and Video and its Origins', in Arthur McIntyre's *Contemporary Australian Collage and its Origins*, (1990).<sup>43</sup>

Martin notes the common links in all conceptual forms of collage, photomontage and montage as all being dependant upon editing and colliding meanings. He comments that film unlike painting and photography is utterly dependant on this technique to construct meaning. He traces the use of these techniques in visual art and experimental film through Duchamp and Epstein to the French Situationists and their political use of detournement as a tool to subvert intended meanings. Strangely *Newsfront* escapes mention as the first mainstream Australian film to use these techniques.

In connecting cinema history and modernism Malcolm Le Grice's *Abstract Film and Beyond* tracks the key historical innovations and concepts in painting, performance and film from Cezanne, Cubism, Futurism and Dada to Duchamp's ready-mades. Le Grice himself is an experimental filmmaker whose practice started in the 1960s.<sup>44</sup> He was Chair of the London Film-makers' Co-op 1970 –73 and advocate for British experimental film as Chair of the Arts Council's Artists' Film and Video Committee 1986-90. He remains an important figure in the British experimental film scene.

---

<sup>42</sup> Adrian Martin, "Indefinite Objects: Independent Film and Video," *Australian Screen*, ed. Tom Regan Albert Moran (1989) p 174.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur McIntyre, ed., *Contemporary Australian Collage and Its Origins* Craftsman House, Roseville, NSW 1990 p.49.

<sup>44</sup> Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, 1st U.S. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977.



The material qualities of film – movement, time and light — were key areas of experimentation for Ubu. Some theorists have been particularly useful. Giles Deleuze's work *Time Machine* focuses on the importance of sub conscious perception and irregularities for European cinema and art; dreaming, insanity, hypnosis, were all passions for Surrealism, Dadaism, Futurism and Constructivism. Ubu sought to continue the experimentation of these earlier avant-gardes.

David Rodowick's book *Giles Deleuze's Time Machine* explores Deleuze's theory that the time image fluctuates between the actual and virtual, that it records or deals with memory, confuses mental and physical time actual and virtual, and is sometimes marked by incommensurable spatial and temporal links between shots.<sup>45</sup> *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* and *Newsfront* are good examples of films that share these characteristics.

The use of still photography to introduce the chapters within *Newsfront* has incidental associations with Barthes's theories articulated in *Camera Lucida* of photography as driven by a culture of death and the need to capture the rush of time.

Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Rodowick, David , Giles Deleuze's Time Machine, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1997, p79-118

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography / Roland Barthes trans. Richard Howard (New York : Hill and Wang, 1981, 1982), p32.

In providing an understanding of the mood of the era, Richard Neville's classic 1960s autobiographies *Hippie, Hippie, Shake: The Dreams, the Trips, the Trials, the Love-Ins, the Screw Ups -- the Sixties* and *Play Power* were useful first hand accounts of key characters within the counter cultures and their use in *Oz magazine* of similar political tools to the Situationists.<sup>47</sup>

On censorship Peter Coleman's *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Sedition* is limited to literary censorship tracking its rise from the 1880s in Australia until 1961. Coleman had unprecedented access to the Customs Department Archives then stored at the National Library and now at the National Archives. He was a prominent Liberal party politician, leader of the Opposition in the late 1970s and an editor of the *Bulletin*. He is Peter Costello's father in law.

Nicole Moore's recent book *Secrets of the Censors: Obscenity in the Archives* similarly researched the Archival records tracking the decisions and number of books banned by the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board from 1933-1967.<sup>48</sup> Moore's book records Australia's dubious credentials as one of the fiercest censoring nations of the western world during this period.

James and Sandra Hall's *Australian Censorship The XYZ of Love* records Ubu's and *Oz magazine's* underground credentials and their personal war on censorship much of which is also mentioned in *Ubu News*. *The XYZ of Love* also notes the enormous support mounted for the Oz Defence Appeal when students and staff of the Australian

---

<sup>47</sup> Richard Neville, *Play Power* London: Paladin, 1971.

<sup>48</sup> Dr Nicole Moore, *Secrets of the Censors: Obscenity in the Archives*, 1 November 2005 - 7 January 2006, Available: [http://www.naa.gov.au/about\\_us/\\_nicolemoore.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/about_us/_nicolemoore.html).

National University in Canberra marched on the Law Courts and other demonstrations took place outside law courts in Sydney and Melbourne.<sup>49</sup>

As well as an authority on censorship, Coleman was a key figure as a bureaucrat in the Gorton administration at the beginning of a government funded film industry. He was on the Film Committee 1969 and then Chair of the Interim Council for Australian Film & Television Radio School AFTRS in 1971 and 1972. Andrew Urban interviewed him for his history of AFTRS *Edge of the known world: the Australian Film, Television & Radio School: impressions of the first 25 years*. In the interview Coleman credits Gorton with a genuine interest in film and a belief that it was important for the development of Australia. Coleman produced policy for Gorton to trigger a re-start of an Australian film industry with three recommendations: a film bank, a film fund for experimental films and a film school. These recommendations became part of the 1969 election campaign the first time that arts policy had informed an electoral push.<sup>50</sup>

Richard Paterson (Knowledge Manager) at the British Film Institute gave a staff lecture at the National Film & Sound Archive in Australia in 2004 in which he mentioned that the Wilson Government in the U.K tripled the experimental film fund in 1964 in a bid to win votes from an expanding arts constituency.

David Williamson's play *Don's Party* dramatises this era, the characters wrongly anticipating the fall of the conservative government that was later narrowly returned to power. The film of *Don's Party* was later directed by Bruce Beresford in 1976 and is

---

<sup>49</sup> Hall, James and Sandra, op.cit p 78.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew L Urban, Quinn, Meredith, Edge of the Known World : The Australian Film, Television & Radio School : Impressions of the First 25 Years (North Ryde, NSW: Australian Film Television & Radio School, 1998.

closely based on the play. In it John Gorton has a bit part as himself.<sup>51</sup> In 1969 Gorton announced the slow phasing out of Australian troops involvement in Vietnam, in response to the political pressure of the anti war movement.

Coleman has also written a biography of Beresford, *Bruce Beresford: Instinct of the Heart* that provided useful information in regard to Beresford's early avant-garde beginnings and his initial success with *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, the first film funded by the newly established film industry.<sup>52</sup>

Ubu members and associates Phillip Noyce and Jan Chapman became students and staff at AFTRS. Noyce was a member of the schools' council between '87-88. In *The Edge of the Known World* Urban interviewed Phillip Noyce who at age 21 was one of the first students through the interim film school. In it Noyce outlines a very different arts education where he was actually paid to attend. He notes the important input of European artist-immigrants such as Professor Toeplitz, who was brought in to run AFTRS from the Polish Lodz Film School. The visionary educational approach of Toeplitz included supplying Noyce with money for overseas travel at the end of the course to deepen his knowledge of the world without which he stated he would be unable to make meaningful films. It apparently bore fruit as five years later Noyce would direct *Newsfront* and fellow student Gillian Armstrong *My Brilliant Career*.

---

<sup>51</sup> Stratton David, op.cit, p48

<sup>52</sup> Peter Coleman, *Bruce Beresford: Instincts of the Heart*, Imprint Lives, Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1992

Toeplitz also supported Noyce's use of inexperienced actors to provide a lack of formality and a genuineness that has remained a key feature of his work.<sup>53</sup>

David Curtis's *Experimental Cinema a fifty year evolution* provides an overview of the work of post-war American filmmakers and the film cooperative movement. Curtis in his chapter on the co-operative movement describes Jonas Mekas's important role as founder of the New York Film-makers Co-operative in 1962 and editor of *Film Culture*, the unofficial voice of the U.S movement.<sup>54</sup> Ubu were influenced by Mekas in setting up the Co-op and screened many US filmmakers' works in Australia during 1966-67. The broader Australian public did not appreciate Ubu's work until the New York Museum of Modern Art brought an exhibition titled *Two Decades of American Painting* to the Art Gallery of New South Wales when people quickly saw the similarity between what Ubu was doing and these films. The exhibition included abstract expressionist works, pop and film. Ubu suddenly had a context and people began to understand.<sup>55</sup>

P. Adams, Sitney Professor of the Council of the Humanities and Visual Arts at Princeton University, wrote the first historical study of the post war American avant-garde cinema, *Visionary Film*. Sitney identifies several dominant forms of avant-garde film within the 1960s including the meditation or trance film, the mythopoetic film the rogue wanderer and structural film.<sup>[54]</sup> Structural films Sitney states have four characteristics but rarely do films include them all: a fixed camera position, the flicker

---

<sup>53</sup> Urban, Op.cit. p 4

<sup>54</sup> David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema a Fifty Year Evolution*, Studio Vista, London, 1971.

<sup>55</sup> P.Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film the American Avant-Garde*, New York Oxford Univeristy Press, 1974, p 430.

[

effect, loop printing and rephotographing off screen. Ubu's films include the techniques Sitney identifies as particular to structural films.<sup>56</sup> Thoms' film *Marinetti* is an example of the rogue wanderer, *Bluto* is a trance film, *Spurt of Blood* is mythopoetic and *Poem* 25 is structural. Sitney sees Warhol's works as the ultimate structural films exploding the myths of compressed time and demystifying filmmaking. Albie Thoms' application of the auteur theory to his films similarly reveals a key concern for exploding the myths of compressed time in film and stripping bare the process of filmmaking.

The 1960s period was a surge of creative energy in Australian art cinema comparable in significance to the 1940s *Angry Penguins* period in Australian art history. The first exhibitions established by the Contemporary Art Societies were not curated and like Ubu they democratically exhibited all works that were put forward. The experimentation of Ubu and the counterculture period was a necessary precondition to the public success of the Australian cinema renaissance in the 1970s. Unlike the *Angry Penguins* these early 1960s experimental filmmakers have been ignored or dismissed by historians, art historians and film critics alike, yet they present a far more authentic history of Australian life than the grand narrative of mainstream 1970s Australian cinema that superseded it, proving that, creative moments arise not from academies but as part of a collective consciousness.

Ubu represents a window onto Australia's creative life prior to the control and regulation of the arts by government yet it was also an important advocate for arts

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid p 407

funding. It reveals that there once was a time when the arts worked naturally together and where creative industries thrived. This independence was ultimately squashed in the establishment of a commercial industry. Yet Ubu attracted large audiences of young people, something that current Australian mainstream cinema is unable to do. The current trends suggest a move away from mass media consumption to more personally driven media choices that enable active contribution, a model Ubu was presenting forty years ago.

The current open source, online community is proving that utopian ideals and passion for social, political and artistic change is continuing on the internet. Like all counter cultures it is challenging the status quo and attempting to free up culture for access, distribution and debate. The advent of the Creative Commons license is a subset of this movement and is again asking borderline questions about what are our rights to be able to engage, play and utilize our own culture as a readymade?

This thesis goes some way to filling in the incomplete picture of the impact of Australian experimental film on mainstream film and theatre, encouraging a retrospective analysis of its impact on contemporary Australian culture. It is hoped that this might lead to a reassessment of the importance of experimental film to archival film collection management stimulating further research and exhibition in this field. The texts mentioned above have all provided major direction in my research, many others not mentioned have been of lesser or minor significance in underpinning the development of related concepts.

## Chapter 2

### *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> **DVD 1**

1. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* (16mm film) 1963 Dir: Albie Thoms and Bruce Beresford



*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*, produced in 1963, is an extremely important but long forgotten experimental film, carrying powerful resonances still relevant to Australian art today. The 1960s decade is a pinnacle in Australian cinema that is as important an era as the Angry Penguins or the Heidelberg school was to Australian art history. This film marks the beginning of a significant body of experimental work that remains largely ignored. It is important art historically because it is the first example in Australia of experimental structuralist cinema combining with abstract Brechtian experimental theatre. It referenced earlier European avant-garde countercultures, re-interpreting them in the context of a 1960s counterculture movement; it was made and performed by key Australian arts identities all of whom were at that time part of an extensive and highly influential cross arts community. This counterculture network included alternative, libertarian and artistic groups like Ubu, the Sydney Push, *Oz* magazine and the *Yellow House*.

Rejecting the conservatism of Menzies's Australia, libertarians sought autonomy and flocked together as a loose circle in inner city Sydney pubs from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. The Push was a lively and dynamic cross arts community playfully experimenting collectively on a wide range of artistic and political projects without any preciousness about the end product. A network that included Ubu members, Sydney University Dramatic Society SUDS members, academics, poets, artists and writers, its members questioned the interrelationship between art, politics, social oppression and aesthetics and in various anarchic ways contested the intellectual, moral and political boundaries of Australian life. It was the perfect environment to give birth to an avant-garde movement. Many Push members would later in the 1970s become involved in the film industry as academics, reviewers, directors and producers.

At the time the film provoked extraordinarily extreme reactions from the authorities who immediately tried to ban it. This confrontation with censors would set the tone for what became an entrenched battle across the arts. The battle would be played out in public life over the following decade and spread to include most independently produced Australian media, eventually culminating in the most famous censorship courtroom dramas of *OZ* magazine and *Tharunka* the University of New South Wales student newspaper.

The authorities' consistent attempts to ban the film and arrest the playwright demonstrate the extent to which artistic, sexual and political freedoms of expression were curtailed in Australian society in the 1960s. Books such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that were freely available in Paris, London or New York were banned here in Australia. Phillip Adams's satirical film on censorship and Australian sexual customs *The Naked Bunyip* (1970) provides a record of the extent that censors went to. The film was cut up by the censors and as a protest it was screened with blank footage inserted so the public could witness the censor's actions.<sup>2</sup> Liberalising changes to sexual freedom began with the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961 but access to oral contraceptive for unmarried women was still difficult to obtain and there were still many unwanted pregnancies.

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* was jointly directed by Albie Thoms and Bruce Beresford. As an experimental film it was made for a specific Australian independent film audience consisting predominately of young people. At that time independent cinemas existed in Sydney and serviced the needs for a critical and independent cinema by supporting alternative film screenings. This audience was open to works that critically questioned the social, moral, intellectual and political status quo in Australia

---

<sup>2</sup> Horne, Donald, Time of Hope Australia 1966-72, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1980, p15

at that time. It was also an audience that was hungry for new experiences including new artistic experiences and ways of seeing.

It is the connection to youth audience that is perhaps the starkest difference between Australian film today and the experimental movement of the 1960s. In a recent article in the *Weekend Australian*, Tait Brady, a former head of Palace Films and now part of the Film Finance Corporation's new evaluation executive, observed that today 'no one under 25 is going to Australian films.'<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to check on the veracity of Tait Brady's comment as the AFC statistics are about cinema attendance generally by age, education, city or gender, not whether people choose to see Australian films when they get to the cinema. The AFC's *Get the Picture What Australians are Watching*<sup>4</sup> does chart the number one film at the Australian box office since 1972. Fourteen years expired between Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) Australian number one box office film and George Miller's *Happy Feet* (2006). So it seems Tait Brady might have a point.

The reasons for the neglect, amounting to loss, of such an important film as *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* are probably multiple. Independent films like *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* were not produced for mass distribution and were not part of a commercial film industry. The Australian film industry at this time was dead. Ubu challenged the belief that Australian film was finished and seeded a renaissance in the industry that arrived a decade later.

A newly established film industry in the 1970s would dismiss the work of these independent filmmakers as untrained and discredited amateurs. Alternative media have since been largely ignored in Australia.

---

<sup>3</sup> Lawrie Zion, "The Picture," *Weekend Australian* July 2-3 2005: p34. p. R5.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Film Commission, Top Films, *Get the Picture What Australians Are Watching*, January 2002, Australian Government Available: <http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/index.html>, 14 May 2006.

The Australian film industry's emphasis on commerce has isolated it from broader art research, one of the major strengths of the 1960s avant-garde, the Push and the whole counter culture period.

The fact that these independent films existed at all posits the case that alternative forms of film viewing were possible and viable. In the 1960s independent film was a cultural and economic threat to the birth and later dominance of a commercially driven film industry. Forty years on independent cinema and their exhibition houses have all but vanished from Australia's media landscape.

Adrian Martin in 'Indefinite Objects; Independent Film and Video' defines independent in the experimental avant-garde definition as –

Films made on low budgets sometimes with a single person crew, destined not to be 'released' as a mass media product. The scarcity of writing and documentation on this form of filmmaking, now more than forty years old suggests the ephemeral nature of independent film practice. . . . Independent film is the most under preserved and undocumented film form in Australia, its individualistic nature dictating the precarious balance it holds for both the filmmakers who struggle to produce it and its conflicting role as art cinema.<sup>5</sup>

Given that experimental filmmaking in Australia in the 1960s was a national movement with active practitioners in all state capitals it seems extraordinary that so little work has been done to analyse its important legacies.

Technological change has also made access to independent film produced in this period more difficult. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* was produced on black and white, 16mm film. This film format was the 1960s equivalent to video as a relatively accessible medium for independent and home movie production. Even so as Albie Thoms comments in his oral history made for the

---

<sup>5</sup>Martin, Adrian. "Indefinite Objects: Independent Film and Video." Australian Screen. Penguin. Ed. Tom Regan Albert Moran, 1989. p173

National Film and Sound Archive, Ubu members worked all week to pay for film stock and processing. Costs dictated that their films be kept short.<sup>6</sup>

Produced in the USA in 1923, 16 mm was an amateur home movie gauge; it was not popular until after the post war boom, where it became the preferred medium for the emergence of an alternative film culture. Eventually 8mm film dominated the home movie market and 16mm film was used for fine art, documentary, experimental and expanded cinema. As 16mm projectors were cheaper and more accessible than 35mm projectors it was the preferred format for the many film societies including the Sydney Film Co-operative. This fact gave the medium something of a cult status. Today 16mm film is obsolete and independent films like *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* are very rarely screened.

To today's sophisticated media audiences this film looks dated in black and white and with limited editing effects or special effects. It must not be forgotten that at the time this was standard even for commercially produced film and television. Television news was still at this time often shot live on 16mm film although video tape was in use by 1960. Albie Thoms directed some episodes for Lee Robinson. It was not until 1975 that colour television would arrive in Australian lounge rooms. Television stations convert to full-time colour transmission in March 1975.<sup>6</sup>

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is important politically as it documents the impact of a Cold War stalemate that very nearly resulted in global holocaust. An artistic response to the politicking of the

---

<sup>6</sup> Thoms, Albie : Interviewed by Richard Keys, 2003 : Oral History, National Film and Sound Archive.

<sup>6</sup> Network 10, The History of Australian Television, 14 February 2000, Available: <http://televisionau.siv.net.au/seventies.htm#1975>.

Cuban Missile Crisis, the film was being made in late 1962. The film is a comic parody of the combined politicized impact of the media and religion at work in world events. It portrays these issues as they were chilled by the Cold War, coalescing as a powerful cocktail for mass consumption. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* represents an alternate history of what nearly did happen. The flood of excreta is a metaphor for the fall out resulting from a nuclear war.

The narrative space of the film is set in a civilized middle class suburban house where a respectable hostess welcomes her guests to a formal cocktail party. Male guests are dressed in dinner suits and the women in cocktail dresses. As the guests enter they deposit their belongings on a man who waits by the door (presumably the husband). He is strangely catatonic and functions as a coat stand for guests to indifferently deposit their belongings.

Here we have a sense of the world as a safe and predictable place for a set of social etiquettes and rituals, although these are enacted in a surreal, unthinking automatic way. There are no dominating characters that move the story along. As viewers we are but a fly on the wall observing the social anthropology of the party. That is until one guest enters carrying newspapers. These newspapers provide the film with its conflict as carriers of strange and bewildering news.

The Cuban missile crisis is the closest that the world has so far come to a full scale nuclear war. It began when American intelligence gained photographs of secret Cuban military bases complete with Russian missiles. The Cuban President, Fidel Castro, had accepted the Soviet Union's offer of protection for Cuba. Castro feared another attempt by America to overthrow his government after

their failed Bay of Pigs offensive in 1961. The Russians in turn were concerned about the threat to their borders from US missiles positioned in Turkey.

By 1962 Russian missiles in Cuba were a mere 90 mile strike range from Florida. What followed were seven extraordinarily tense days of global uncertainty as a political chess game played out between President John F Kennedy and Russia's Premier Khrushchev. After considering the usual options, of air strikes or invasion, Kennedy settled on a naval blockade of Cuba. American ships circled and began to turn away Russian ships from Cuba's shores. Guantanamo Bay military base was evacuated of all US service people in October 1962, as the crisis deepened. Finally as the world was posed for destruction, Khrushchev conceded to American demands to remove the Cuban missiles. A nuclear holocaust was averted. To this day a US trade embargo of Cuba continues. There are no diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba and Guantanamo Bay remains a US military base.

As the film has no dialogue, a series of sixteen silent film style intertitles break the film into tableaux that form the three act play. The intertitles read as extracts from the newspaper. In capital letters they shout out the threat and foreshadow a biblical style punishment.

*'EXTRODINARY STORMS ALL OVER THE WORLD!'*, *'CLOUD PECULIAR FORMATIONS!'*,  
*'DILUVIAN AND FOUL SMELLING SHOWERS'*, *'THEY'RE FILLED WITH EXCRETA'*,  
*'THEY'RE COMING THIS WAY'*, *IT SMELLS LIKE THE END OF THE WORLD'*.

The actors' body language mimics the melodrama of silent film with its emphasis on expansive gesture and excessive facial expression.

Close up reaction shots reveal the guests' emotional response to the shocking news, ranging from disbelief, to fear, to panic. Quickly the news headlines dominate the party conversation and everyone is holding a newspaper. The typography of the newspaper headline intertitles has a dynamic concrete poetry style as letters slip their lines, change scale and assemble new shapes and emphasis. This typography reflects the mood of the film playfully suggesting mischievous new meanings through its unorthodox layout.

The tension of world events described in the newspaper unsettles the guests and with it the comfortable suburban party. The music that begins as decorous piano tinkering gathers speed and becomes cacophany as news of the flood arrives and the film's climax builds. The camera cuts to ominous brooding cloud shots evoking, in Hitchcockian style, a looming punishment from on high.

Another intertitle announces the story time of the film '*THREE WEEKS LATER – IT IS STILL FALLING*'. A second cocktail party begins. The passage of time and its effects is conveyed as the guests arrive this time with soiled overcoats and deposit them yet again onto the man standing in the doorway. The film at this point is clearly a satirical parody of stereotypical middle class Australia, a society that is respectable, conservative, and often outwardly religious but one that has substituted external forms for any genuine core beliefs.

In the third and final tableau the intertitle reads 'PRAYING FOR THE ASSUAGEMENT OF THE FLOOD' and the film shifts location from inside to outside as the guests now dressed as nuns and priests form a medieval style passion parade. As they march they step over the bodies of members of their party that have fallen, cross themselves and walk on. By now the whole party in an attempt



to escape the looming catastrophe has converted to Catholicism, everyone except for one couple left behind.

What is typical of this party as of all parties is that they function as pick up places. A heterosexual mating ritual is enacted throughout the film by one couple. The woman passively receives her partner's advances. The petting begins with vigorous hand kissing in the first party scene, by the second scene it has advanced to neck and breast kissing. As the end of the world approaches the petting has become passionate and full bodied. This overt sexual display is perversely unacknowledged through out by the other party guests. The film is thus making a comment on the denial of sex by polite civilized society.

The next intertitles boldly assert Sydney as the capital for a new experimental avant-garde counterculture, as 'THE SMELL OF WHAT FALLS IN FOREIGN FIELDS IS NOWHERE NEAR AS FOUL AS OURS'. This is followed by the statement that 'THE ONLY GENUINE ORIGINAL SHIT FALLS IN SYDNEY'.

The rain begins and the shift in mood is signaled by extreme camera angles. An up shot captures the guests as they listen to the rain descending.



1 Mudie, Peter, *Ubu Film*, p27.

The first actor to place his hand outside the window and bring into the room the proof of the excreta flood is Terence McMullen. McMullen was an amateur actor and university psychology tutor, who would later play the lead in another Ubu film titled *Blunderball*.<sup>7</sup> This shot is followed by another extreme angle this time a down shot as the guests peer down upon the shit and into the camera. The camera closes up on the second actor to thrust his hand outside the window. The camera is now outside the window. The hand slowly enters the frame of the film from the top. The tense hand then waits suspended in close up until the excreta shockingly bounces into the outstretched palm.



2 Mudie, *Ubu Films op.cit*, p27.

<sup>7</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films : Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970*, p.12.

This is a parody of a shot from the famous surrealist film *Andalusian Dog (Un Chien Andalou)* by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali in 1929. *Andalusian Dog* is probably the most celebrated of avant-garde films. It is a collection of frighteningly taboo images and sexual groping assembled into an illogical dream of the unconscious. It is filled with deeply iconic and psychologically shocking images such as the almost unbearable image of a women's eyeball being slit with a razor. Another shocking and famous image is of a hand with a wounded palm from which live ants crawl.



3 Vogel, Amos, *Andalusian Dog, Film as Subversive Art* p 63

Amos Vogel's describes this image in his book *Film as Subversive Art*:

The cramped position of the fingers, the vile scurrying about of the insects, and the impermissible combination of the two, trigger submerged atavistic fears. Strong verticals, shadows and the cut off effect of the doorframe add to the feeling of dread.<sup>8</sup>

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* and *Andalusian Dog (Un Chien Andalou)* are intentionally shocking. Both films use Surrealism to explode their epoch's social values, and question their general perceptions of reason and morality. Characteristics of this form are the active linking of social situations to the experience of spectatorship, rather than the passive separation of life from the

---

<sup>8</sup> Amos Vogel, *Film as a Subversive Art*, rev ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005), p.63.

illusion of cinema as in traditional cinema. The emphasis of this form is on encouraging critical thought.

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is perhaps the earliest Australian example of a film in the international genre of left and revolutionary political cinema. It shares the characteristics of this genre in its aim to change the viewer's perceptions, by exposing the tension between art and society and reaching beyond the acceptable boundaries of its time to become subversive art.

The title of the film comes from the play *The Merchant of Venice* and Portia's speech to Shylock:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,  
It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain from heaven,  
upon the place beneath.  
It is twice blest,  
it blesseth him that gives, and him that takes<sup>9</sup>

Thoms has subverted this line from Shakespeare and turned the life giving and renewing rain into a malevolent force, not of nature but of the mass media. It is as out of control as an act of God and just as destructive.

The need to seek out autonomous alternatives to mass culture, mass consumerism and the art industry is one of the defining principals of an avant-garde practice. Like the Dada films of the First World War, *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* exposes the absurdity of war and mass culture's role in our passive acceptance of it. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* dared to question that fundamental metanarrative in Australian life, which is still unchallenged forty years on, that is, that Australia is utterly dependant on larger powers for protection.

---

<sup>9</sup> G.B Harrison, ed., The Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1937).

The term metanarrative was probably first used by Jean –Francois Lyotard in his 1984 work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*<sup>10</sup>, to discuss the postmodernist questioning of historical construction in relation to key western cultural values i.e.: the primacy of the individual, that science will progress humankind and the categorization and hierarchy of knowledge and rational thought.

A recent book *Shadow, Specters, Shards Making History in Avant-garde Film* by Jeffrey Skoller uses post-structuralists theorists like Lyotard, Barthes and Foucault to convincingly argue the historical importance of experimental film.<sup>11</sup> His work significantly fills some of the vacuum of critical writing in the field. Skoller maintains that experimental films provide an essential anti history in contrast to traditional narrative films and historical narratives that saturate the mass media.

These traditional grand narratives assist in maintaining social and civil order within cultures and countries. Their narrative ordering of history conveniently escapes the everyday chaos of people, places and real historical events. Metanarratives ignore the multitude of views and conflicting actions to document a homogenizing human experience and present it as a commonly shared goal. Dissent is minimized as everyone consumes the same historical product. Alternative or anti histories however, constantly challenge singular points of view and their construction as grand historical accounts.

---

<sup>10</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard, "The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge," Theory and history of literature ; v. 10 (1984): p 34.

<sup>11</sup> Skoller J. Shadows, Specters, Shards Making History in Avant-garde Film, Minnesota, University Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 22

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is an excellent Australian example of Skoller's thesis. The film is a very literal essay on world pollution and its fallout. The metaphorical pollutant in this instance is the media itself. The film is a satirical take on the media as villain or anti hero. The voice in the film is the voice of the media itself. It speaks to us, the masses, through the newspaper headlines, displayed as intertitles, saturating the environment of the film with foreboding messages of fear. The characters in this everyday domestic drama are unwittingly embroiled in global catastrophe; there is no escape from the pervading flood of propaganda. The only resolution can be global destruction.

### **Structuralism versus narrative**

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* combines two usually binary genres of experimental filmmaking –a fine art and a political anti-cinema approach. Peter Wollen's pivotal essay *The Two Avant-Gardes* identifies two influential directions in avant-garde film practice.<sup>12</sup> One is Brechtian cinema mostly associated with the work of Goddard and other European Art cinema. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* challenges in the Brechtian manner the social ramifications of actions, the falsehood of advertising and consumer society and the distorted relations between men and women. It demonstrates the self awareness needed to act on core values in its dramatization of hollow superficial relations and passive acceptance of the political status quo.

The second category that Wollen defines is structuralist cinema that emerged from the visual art styles of abstract expressionist painting and minimalist sculpture. In this form film itself is the object of interest rather than its ability to be a carrier of representation and meaning for objects beyond itself.

---

<sup>12</sup> Wollen, 'the Two Avant-Gardes', *Readings and Writing: Semiotics Counter-Strategies* ( London: Verso, 1984

Structural materialist films are anti illusional and explore central elements of film including light, movement, time and their projection. Since the 1970s Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice have been pivotal exponents of this form of filmmaking. They have advocated a non illusion based cinema that exposes the material processes of filmmaking. Gidal took the theory into dogma by asserting that representation beyond abstract images was using illusion and therefore supporting capitalist film production modes. The result was a spartan, silent, abstract film devoid of represented images. It left filmmakers with little content or engagement with film as a political force and it alienated spectators who tired of the abstract.

Since the 1980s avant-garde filmmakers have tackled the broader issue of the role of representation in demystifying film. An awareness of the provenance of materialist film remains and a combining of Wollen's two forms have brought renewed vigor. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is a very early example of Wollen's two avant-gardes in use.

The film utilises Neo-Brechtian representation questioning social states and critiquing their interpretation as political and historical events. It also uses materialist approaches including mark making on the film to create special effects. The use of silent film style inter titles playfully reveals the formal process of the film's construction.

Just as structuralist / materialist filmmakers concentrated on the essential aspects of cinema such as light, time and motion, postmodern art has also concentrated on the essential aspects of mediums. Structuralism was part of the attempts to validate experimental film as art with its own pure language by reducing it to its central elements.

As Patricia Mellencamp succinctly asserts in her chapter titled 'An Empirical Avant-Garde: Laleen Jayamanne and Tracey Moffatt' the 1960s and 1970s European, American and Australian avant-gardes were all about dealing with binaries:

.....still photography versus moving images, art versus mass culture, narrative versus formalism and silence versus sound. A Cold War logic of duality.<sup>13</sup>

This comment succinctly sums up the concerns of the era. It also proves *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* to be an exceptional film in that all of these binaries have been combined in the one film. The structuralist aspect of film draws the viewer's attention to the medium of film itself and its illusion. Scratches on the emulsion with steel wool, create the effect of rain falling. Another example is the last shot in the film where the light of the screen is expunged from the film frame. In Chapter 2 I discuss in greater depth Ubu's later experiment with structuralist and handmade film techniques.

The next intertitle in the film draws even further upon a European avant-garde reaching back to its origins, 'BUT NOBODY MENTIONS PERE UBU WHOSE SHITE PREDICTED IT ALL'. Pere Ubu invented by Alfred Jarry, the epitome of the perverse and repulsive political dictator, became a crucial character to all subsequent avant-gardes.

Interestingly Jarry's work emerged the year after the Lumiere's first film screening of the cinematograph in Paris in 1895. The impact of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* was immense; it shocked the polite middle class Parisian audiences of the day who saw theatre merely as a form of entertainment.

---

<sup>13</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, "An Empirical Avant-Garde' Laleen Jayamanne and Tracey Moffatt, Fugitive Images from Photography to Video," *Theories of Contemporary Culture*, Petro, Patrice ed., vol. v. 16 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).



The play premiered at the Theatre de L'Oeuvre on December 10, 1896 and was designed to shock. Like the Punch and Judy puppet shows it held a mirror up to the audience and they and the critics both hated the reflection. Jarry's play gave the stage its first great anti hero character of *Ubu Roi* or (*King Ubu*). The play is a farce of Macbeth. It contains school boy humour and vulgarity starting with the first word spoken 'Merdre' and its many repetitions throughout the play. It also reinvented theatre, changing the use of very elaborate and complex sets and replacing them with minimal sets and actors used as props. Audiences did not warm to the grotesque figure of Pere Ubu. A critical study of Alfred Jarry comments on the satirical significance of Ubu:

For Ubu is not just the embodiment of gluttony, brutality and treachery; he is also, a fact which critics sometimes tend to forget, the embodiment of unutterable stupidity – a stupidity so colossal that we cannot but laugh at it and at him. It is true that that laughter may be tinged with a certain apprehension before the devastating effects of that stupidity, to say nothing of the Ubu's cruelty and sadism. But it is laughter nonetheless, and in the figure of Ubu Jarry is inviting us to laugh at the grotesque stupidity of Mankind as well as deploring its moral ugliness.<sup>14</sup>



4 Alfred Jarry', *newdrama*, 16 / 1 2005, <http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc2.htm>

---

<sup>14</sup> Keith Beaumont, *Alfred Jarry a Critical and Biographical Study* (Leicester University Press, 1984), p116.

*Ubu Roi* became an avant-garde mascot, an absurd personification and symbol of mankind's stupidity and crudeness. Jarry was also the discoverer of 'Pataphysics', the science of imaginary solutions, in which all things are equal. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Jarry's work had become the inspiration for the Symbolists, Surrealists, Futurist and Dada avant-garde counterculture movements. What defines both countercultures and avant-garde movements is that they engage across the arts, they share utopian aspirations to challenge rigid political powers and aim to achieve social and artistic transformation.

Henry Bauer, one of the hostile critics of Jarry's play is quoted in Beaumont's book as recognizing its symbolism for violent transformative change:

From this huge, strangely suggestive, figure of Ubu there blows a wind of destruction, the inspiration of today's youth, which destroys everything once respected and centuries –old prejudices.<sup>15</sup>

The play was a crucial step in modern theatre as it revolutionised the imaginations of designers and directors, broke traditional rules of staging conventions and introduced unscripted and anarchic approaches to theatre and audience relationships. *Ubu Roi* and *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* both offended people with their scatological content, vulgarity and farcical humour and both were released into societies of 'high seriousness'. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* plays a 'hoax' on its audience like Jarry's. Similarly both dramas were constructed with minimal props and sets. Jarry's spoof on the Punch and Judy marionette puppets is replaced by Thoms with the mass media pulling the strings.

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p103.

Besides a prolific literary career, Jarry was also an image-maker. He designed the advertising posters for the first performance of *Ubu Roi* by the Theatre de L'Oeuvre in 1896. The first edition of this play includes this woodcut of Ubu.



5 Ubu Roi, Dover Publications, 16/1/2005, *Ubu* print by Alfred Jarry  
<http://store.doverpublications.com/0486426874.html>

All the following countercultures and avant-gardes have followed in Jarry's wake. The Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich is one such movement that continued to shock. During the First World War Zurich became a haven for refugee artists across Europe. Poets, painters, pacifists and performers combined their ideas and creative forces. On 5 Feb 1916, Hugo Ball (German stage director) and partner Emmy Hennings (vocalist and German poet) created a venue that was a mixture of club, pub, performance space and art gallery.

In true Ubu esque style the Zurich DADA group eventually folded in 1919 after the outraged audience attacked the stage. By now, though, the European borders had opened up again and a Dada Diaspora began. The spirit of Dada including its absurdity, cynicism, anti art, and socio-political

challenges would flow on to the next counterculture, influencing in turn the international art styles of POP Art, Fluxus and the Situationists movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Jarry's play also inspired Antonin Artaud (1896 – 1948), providing him with the creative motivation to develop his own 'theatre of cruelty'. In Australia, Albie Thoms was retracing the steps of this avant-garde heritage when in 1963, he decided to produce a stage anthology titled *The Revue of the Absurd*. This revue initiated collaborative work over five years for Ubu members. The SUDS *Revue of the Absurd* broke the box office records at the Union theatre. <sup>16</sup>

Thoms decided on film as the best medium to stage Pervert's ballet and asked his friend Bruce Beresford to help him make it. Thoms' experiments in theatre and Beresford's experiments in film now collided in the seminal film *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*.

Thoms was also interested in Artaud's use of non literary elements to convey ideas. Artaud was greatly influenced by Jarry's ideology and led the second wave of the European avant-garde. He became a model for the Fluxus movement, prefiguring the happenings of performance art with his unscripted and highly gestured stage plays.

6 Poster image Artaud  
Mudie, *Ubu Films* op.cit, p.23.



---

<sup>16</sup> Thoms, Albie : Interviewed by Richard Keys, 2003 : Oral History.

Ubu aimed to expand the experience of film, not necessarily just as storytelling but as visual / audio experience. Their use of film components within performance art and expanded cinema is discussed at length in Chapter 2.

Australian 1960s youth took up the symbol of Ubu to challenge the intense stupidity of wars that threatened their very lives and which were made more likely by absurd censorship laws. The Cuban missile crisis seems very distant today but in 1963 *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* attempted to alert Australian society to the colossal stupidity and brutality of a world that could hold its own destruction in the balance. Because of this distance some of the bite in the wit of the film is lost on today's audiences. Mudie points out that the film description reads *the bourgeoisie ignores the perils of its fall out*.<sup>17</sup>

*Ubu's* outrageous persona was thus born again to create controversy and offer a new and exciting form of film. In acknowledgement of this revolutionary heritage, Ubu took as its trademark the *Ubu Roi* spiral, animating it and placing it at the opening credits of all their films. The Australian avant-garde begins with *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*. Even though Ubu as a group would not form until later, this film was the philosophical start of Australia's experimental film movement.

All the actors in the film were drawn from either the Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) or from the Sydney Push or both. The film's two directors, Albie Thoms and Bruce Beresford were then students at Sydney University, and both used the University as a location for experimentation, Thoms in theatre and Beresford in film. Thus, in terms of an 'other' cinema, Beresford with Albie Thoms had already begun the dialogue in 1963 at Sydney University, with the production of *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*.

---

<sup>17</sup> Mudie, Ubu Films : Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970, p 274.

## **The Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) in the 1960s**

It was theatre and not film, and knowledge of the European avant-garde which at first fuelled Albie Thoms' interest. His study of the Dada, Surrealist and Futurist movements led to his particular concern with stagecraft, how playwrights conceive the theatrical elements in their work. By 1962, he had become President of the Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) and had already completed two SUDS productions: *Ubu Roi* (by Alfred Jarry) and *The Dumb Waiter* (by Pinter). Thoms took over the artistic directorship from Pamela Trethowan, who introduced SUDS and Australia in the late 1950s to the theatrical works of Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter. SUDS proclaimed itself according to the *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, 'as a champion of the avant-garde'.<sup>18</sup> In the '60s prior to NIDA and in the '70s after NIDA's establishment SUDS provided a fertile training ground for some of Australia's foremost actors and dramatists including: John Bell, Bob Ellis, Richard Wherrett, Nick Enright and Leo Schofield. SUDS is the oldest theatrical group in Australia originally established as an amateur dramatic society in 1889.

### **Ubu's Origins**

Ubu's most intense period of creative synergy began in 1965 around the catalyst of SUDS. Here the four key members of Ubu converged, sharing a common interest in film, art and theatre. The inner circle included Albie Thoms, David Perry, Aggy Read and John Clark with Garry Shead often acknowledged as a fifth figure. Shead is now better known today as a painter and printmaker. Thoms' house in Paddington provided the hub as screening venue, workshop and home for most Ubu members at various times.

---

<sup>18</sup> Philip Parsons and Victoria Chance, *Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Sydney: Currency Press in association with Cambridge University Press, 1995), p 574.

Perry and Thoms met through the Sydney Push, discussing film and ideas at the Push's watering hole, the *Royal George Hotel*. They both shared an interest in surrealism. Perry, a photographer and painter, made *SwanSong in Birdland*, an animated film that impressed Thoms. Perry had begun making films using an 8mm box camera in 1952. Later they would work together at the ABC TV station in Gore Hill, Perry in the engineering area and Thoms in drama. Aggy Read had assisted with a number of SUDS stage productions and had helped to distribute *OZ* magazine in Sydney, while Clark had an active interest in theatre and film gained at school. Shead and Sharp had previously worked together on another magazine titled *The Arty Wild Oat* when they were both art students at East Sydney Technical College.



7 Ubu founding members, Mudie, op.cit., p.267

Through SUDS Albie Thoms was retracing the steps of a European avant-garde heritage when in 1963 he decided to produce the stage anthology *The Revue of the Absurd*, including a play based on Jacques Pervert's *Surrealist Ballet*, a ballet about the end of the world. Part of Thoms' experiment with staging included screening film. This was the motivation to produce *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*. The *Revue*, which broke the box office records at the Union theatre, included works by almost all the major absurd playwrights including Beckett, Pinter, Ionesco, Albie, N.F Simpson as well as

Jarry's *Song of the Disembraining*, all of which were largely unknown to sixties Australia.<sup>19</sup>

Thoms' production of *Revue of the Absurd*, led to his experiment in screening film along with staging. This in turn led to his production of *It Droppeth* and would later include experiments with expanded cinema as discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Sydney Push in the 1960s**

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*'s successful synthesis of both theatre and film medium fuelled further work for Thoms. Utilising resources at hand, the cast and crew were drawn from the *Royal George Hotel*. Germaine Greer at the time was both a member of the Push and SUDS. In their collaboration on the film, Beresford provided the access to film equipment while Thoms had just enough money to purchase the film stock. The six minute film was shot in a day and a half. Thoms directed and Beresford did the filming and editing.

Push notables included: Germaine Greer, Eva Cox, Robert Hughes, Liz Fell, Frank Moorhouse, Jim Staples and later Wendy Bacon. Push pastimes consisted of drinking, parties, unprotected sex and nonconformist talk. Scorn for the Menzies government and family values was a core position.

Many Push members including Donald Horne were influenced by John Anderson, one of Australia's most publicly influential philosophers of the last century, and Professor of Philosophy at the Sydney University from 1927 to 1958. A controversial figure in Australian intellectual life, Anderson

---

<sup>19</sup>Thoms op.cit.Oral History.



criticized social institutions such as Christianity, communism and social welfare as unquestioning dogmas.

Anne Coombs in her book *Sex and Anarchy: The Life and Death of the Sydney Push* suggests that the Push never presented any real political threat to the Australian capitalist system:

It was a long way from the austerity of a Communist Party cell. It was a long way, too, from the life of old-style intellectuals and pseudo-bohemians who had a quiet drink at the Newcastle Hotel before going home to their families. This was anarchy-talked about, argued about and lived. Sacred cows were shattered, the unspeakable was spoken. They had fun and were good-humoured, but for all the noise and talk they were still 'futilitarian'. And they were futilitarian because they had thrown away the illusions that gave comfort to humankind and they had nothing with which to replace them. They would not be tempted to invent new solutions. They had dug deep and it was pretty bleak down there, so they drank and were merry and didn't think too much about tomorrow.<sup>20</sup>

The Push was anti-authoritarian and therefore anti-censorship. Under Anderson's influence Push members challenged conservative beliefs and ostensibly moral agenda on the basis that they disguised other undisclosed, destructive agenda.

Anderson encouraged freethinking by enquiring minds and freedom in love as essential conditions for all other freedoms. The culture of the Push with its openness to sexuality, new ideas, questioning of the truth and eccentric lifestyle encouraged experimentation and the exploration of new ideas.

The 'shit film' as it was widely referred to epitomized the ideals of the Push.

The passage of the Push from viewing to making film was crossed by Push members Michael Thornhill and Frank Moorhouse when Thornhill began making a series of films from Moorhouse's

---

<sup>20</sup> Anne Coombs, *Sex and Anarchy : The Life and Death of the Sydney Push* (Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1996), p 105.

stories. These films were open-ended, anarchic in Godard style and uncompromising in their lack of comfort to mainstream Australian audiences. For the first time, the Push itself became the subject of a film in Thornhill's, *The American Poet's Visit*. Adapted from a Frank Moorhouse short story, bought for a bottle of champagne, it traces a Push party thrown on behalf of visiting US Poet, Rex Roth. Moorhouse and Thornhill continued to make films together right into the 1980s.<sup>21</sup>

The Push was certainly a key part of the bohemian milieu of mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Sydney but there were many converging traditions and networks converging to which Ubu contributed. Albie Thoms appearing as himself in this film delivers a memorable one-line, reply to the poet's enquiry "is his latest film a success"? He says "Yeh man, It's been banned". The film underscores one of Ubu's key functions to disrupt and push the social parameters of respectability by openly baiting censors. Ubu was an important part of a struggle for societal change in Australia sustained by a belief in the necessity for intellectual and other freedoms. The group would continue to have well-publicised legal battles with the censors throughout its brief but active life span.

## **Censorship**

The official response to the 'shit' film was swift and decisive. Albie Thoms remembers how the film came to the attention of the police in an oral history done for The National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and recorded by Richard Keys.

When a print of the film was being made, a woman grading the film was so shocked by its scatological content she told her boss, who called the police. It is hard to imagine but in the sixties even using the word 'shit' was offensive.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p 195

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Today it is difficult to find a scene from any film that does not include the word shit, highlighting the many changes in film censorship and social attitudes that have taken place in the intervening period. Some interpreted *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* as blasphemous, as if God was shitting on the world. The ‘shit’, of course was actually mud, convincing because of the fact that the film is shot in Black and White. The censors banned it anyway.

In the 1960s censorship only applied to foreign films and was managed by the Department of Customs. Thoms’ oral history in the NFSA records how the film was dealt with by the authorities who became unwitting participants in its premiere.<sup>23</sup> The offending film was handed on to the NSW Chief Secretary (Gus Kelly) responsible for the licensing of theatres. He had total power to ban anything within theatre venues. Kelly banned the film, without even seeing it.<sup>24</sup>

On the night of the premiere Thoms received an injunction restraining him from projecting the film. He would have proceeded anyway but the theatre owner feared his license would be revoked. So Thoms returned to his theatre of the absurd approach and sent up the situation, by reading out Kelly’s long-winded legal injunction.

In pursuance of the powers vested in me by Section 27 of the Theatres and Public Halls Act, as amended, I, Christopher Augustus Kelly .....do hereby.....[direct that this identified film] which was included in a rehearsal .....at which two police officers were present, which film dealt with excreta falling from the sky .....be not included in ....such entertainment.<sup>25</sup>

The audience responded with uproarious laughter. The police tried to arrest Alfred Jarry for the obscenity of Ubu’s *Song of the Disembraining* but were informed he had died in 1907. For this antic

---

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Coleman Peter, *Bruce Beresford: Instincts of the Heart*, Imprint Lives, Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1992, p39.

Thoms was charged under the Vagrancy Act for commissioning an obscene song in a public place. He later successfully defended the charge in front of a magistrate.<sup>26</sup>

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* was then shown in University lecture theatres. It was taken to Melbourne and screened as part of a Revue of the Absurd there. As a result it was required to be submitted to the Commonwealth Film Censors, a branch of the Customs Department responsible for importing films, a requirement under Victorian law. It was subsequently banned in Victoria. So it then circulated privately, screening on the walls of private homes, surreptitiously evading the moral protectors and earning authentic underground status.<sup>27</sup>

As I have earlier commented *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* preceded all the other infamous censorship battles of the 1960s. Censorship in Australian Arts history as Dr Nicole Moore asserts in her article *Secrets of the censors: obscenity in the Archives*, began in 1930 with the banning of Norman Lindsay's book *Redheap*.<sup>28</sup> Thirty years on *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* prepared the ground for the 1960s counterculture to declare war on censorship. Tactics included open taunting and provoking of the censors which took on something akin to a sport. It exposed the absolute absurdity of the extreme application of censorship laws at that time, Dr Nicole Moore describes just how great their task was:

Australia was arguably one of the worst censors in the Western World through most of the century, comparable to Ireland and South Africa. Australian censors were proud to ban what was acceptable in London, Paris and New York, while the rest of the British Empire was

---

<sup>26</sup> Thoms *Oral History*, op.cit.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid..

<sup>28</sup> Dr Nicole Moore, *Secrets of the Censors: Obscenity in the Archives*, 1 November 2005 - 7 January 2006, Available: [http://www.naa.gov.au/about us/\\_nicolemoore.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/about_us/_nicolemoore.html).

apparently degenerating; they described their role as a 'bulwark for Anglo –Saxon standards'.<sup>29</sup>

The counterculture's bull baiting of censorship decisions was one of the movement's greatest successes in terms of social and artistic transformation. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to maintain that these fierce censorship battles epitomized the questioning subversive spirit of the movement. In particular, they exposed the national preoccupation with 'morality' as more a matter of controlling both fertility and sexual expression to support the supposed common goal of a pure genetic race as well as imposing a 1950s notion of normal family life on the general public.

In the context of Vietnam and conscription the counterculture questioned other metanarratives in relation to Australian defence i.e; the belief that our defence is inextricably aligned to larger powers such as Britain or America.

Joanna Mendelssohn comments on the sport of censorship baiting in 'Borderlining and Sedition':

The late, great Jessica Mitford used to call this kind of provocative pressing at the barriers of those who would constrain us, 'borderlining.' The reality is that the government holds its power only by the consent of the governed. If enough people refuse to comply with an unjust law, or hold the lawmakers up to ridicule and contempt, then that law fails. Every time real pressure is applied the border shifts towards liberation. Likewise, every time people acquiesce to official intimidation, the border becomes stronger.<sup>30</sup>

Ubu members and friends, SUDs, and the Push all produced protagonists that went on to make 'borderlining' a performance art form that was played out in public life.

## Tharunka

---

<sup>29</sup>Ibid p.2

<sup>30</sup> Joanna Mendelssohn, *Borderlining and Sedition*, Wednesday 14 December, 2005, Available: <http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetail.asp?ArticleID=1221>. 10 Jan 2006

As Donald Horne notes in *Time of Hope*, another compelling courtroom drama started in 1969 and continued to haunt authorities into the 1970s. The drama's main protagonist was Wendy Bacon who persistently produced a series of obscene magazines by the successive names of *Thor-out*, *Tharunka*, *Thorunka* and *Thor*. Having given the court a commitment to cease publication of *Thor-out*, Bacon then produced *Tharunka* and so the drama rolled on. In 1972 *Tharunka* was involved in another obscenity case. The defendants were both Sydney Push members, Wendy Bacon and John Cox. Cox and Bacon were found guilty on all charges and received jail sentences of one week. Later all charges were dropped. Outside the courtroom obscene publications sold well and other arrests were openly provoked. The power of the censors and even the court system itself seemed increasingly impotent in the face of such a resistant and theatrical assault on its authority.<sup>31</sup>

Australian media and particularly newspaper coverage of these countercultural activities was very extensive, since it made for thrilling headlines. Ubu was regularly referred to in all the national newspapers and many state newspapers between 1966-1970. This free coverage would have greatly assisted in building Ubu's large following with youth audiences.

### ***OZ Magazine***

*Oz* was founded by three Sydney University students Richard Neville, Richard Walsh and Martin Sharp. Its playful spirit was epitomized by its launch date on the 1 April 1963. The goal of the editors was to provide an alternative monthly magazine that gave readers something beyond the hypocrisy and banality of the media of the period. *Oz*'s popularity is in itself a biting comment on

---

<sup>31</sup> Donald Horne, *Time of Hope Australia 1966-1972* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980).

the quality of mainstream news of the period. As Barry York comments in *Looking Back at Oz magazine* circulation at its peak it would reach 40,000.<sup>32</sup>

One of the techniques used consistently by *OZ* editors was satire. The daily tabloid headlines were a regular and easy target. The *Sydney Mirror's* headlines would be rearranged and collaged into a mash up of sex and violence, Richard Neville provides an example in his history of the era *Hippie Hippie Shake*:

PROWLER STRIPS WOMAN NAKED! OBSCENE BROADCASTER/ANNOUNCER  
QUITS! BANNED SEX BOOKS/FREE FOR SOME! LASH FOR 3 RAPISTS! NUDE TOP  
IN BUS/SYDNEY SHOCK! GIRL 13 RAPED/100YARDS FROM HOME! TENNIS STAR  
SHOCKS PRIEST! WHY MY SON IS A KILLER! WHIPPING FOR HUSBAND/WIFE'S  
RAGE!<sup>33</sup>

Not everyone though got the joke or if they did they were not amused. Officials found that what was allowable for the tabloids of the Murdoch Press was definitely not appropriate for an alternative newspaper purchased and read by impressionable young people. Neville's chapter 'A Dirty Little Rag with Filth' in his book *Hippie, Hippie Shake* – suggests that Detective Sergeant Green laid a charge of obscenity against its editors in 1964 for *Oz magazine* (No 6) for two items of offence.

One of the items that drew his attention was the response by Neville and others to a newly opened public artwork by Tom Bass on the P&O shipping building in Sydney, the obscenity being that they had pretended to urinate into the wall relief. The second was a satirical piece by Sharp about a sub

---

<sup>32</sup>Barry York, "Looking Back at Oz Magazine," *National Library of Australia News* 11.May (2001): p10.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Neville, *Hippie, Hippie, Shake : The Dreams, the Trips, the Trials, the Love-Ins, the Screw Ups -- the Sixties* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1995), p 43.

group of Sydney youth culture titled “The World flashed Around the Arms”.<sup>34</sup> The editors were to appear in front of a real bulwark of censorship, Stipendiary Magistrate Locke.

The courtroom drama that played out over the next six months became a comic theatre of war between the libertarians and officialdom. Over seventeen witnesses were called to give evidence on *Oz*’s behalf from literary experts such as Harry Heseltine, to established artists like John Olsen. As the case wore on, the magistrate Gerald Locke’s temper wore thin and he began ejecting people from the courtroom who could not contain their hilarity or who were he thought inappropriately dressed.<sup>35</sup>

The editors continued to bait Locke in further issues of *Oz*. In ‘A Dirty Little Rag with Filth in it’, Neville notes that Sharp produced a cartoon of Locke dressed as a clown and crying out ‘This is a court of law, not a circus’. As the case continued the Push swung into action busily setting up funds and reproducing and distributing the offending *Oz* sections.<sup>36</sup>

Finally comic theatre became gritty realism when on top of receiving a fine the three editors were sentenced to six months hard labour. As Barry York documents Locke made a ruling on every page of *Oz magazine*: ‘page 5 was smutty, disgusting and blasphemous, page 7 filthy and disgusting’, page 13 ‘childish but obscene’ (and a libel of a prominent citizen) and page 16 ‘grossly offensive, blasphemous and obscene’.<sup>37</sup> Richard Neville documents that in addition Locke maintained that not only was the magazine like a lavatory wall but that its cover was ‘likely to encourage urination’.<sup>38</sup>

The extent to which the whole case had become ridiculous was revealed when on appeal all charges were dropped. The appeal Judge Levine commented on the importance of satire in the history of protest literature.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid p 40

<sup>35</sup> Ibid p 42

<sup>36</sup> Ibid p 43

<sup>37</sup> York, "Looking Back at Oz Magazine," p 11.

<sup>38</sup> Neville, Hippie, Hippie, Shake : The Dreams, the Trips, the Trials, the Love-Ins, the Screw Ups -- the Sixties, p 46.



According to Barry York *Oz's* influence extended to television when Walsh produced a satirical comedy for Channel 7 TV. The program became one of Australia's most highly rated and discussed TV programs, *The Mavis Bramston Show*. He continued producing Australian *Oz* up until February 1969. Eventually he joined mainstream media becoming managing director of Kerry Packer's Australian Consolidated Press.<sup>39</sup>

With the Australian *Oz* now off the streets the only alternative newspaper left to fill the void was *Ubu News*. Another Ubu member's work then became an example for the censors. David Perry's film, *A Sketch on Abigail's Belly*, about his pregnant wife Abigail taking a bath was banned by the Commonwealth Censors and Ubu appealed.<sup>40</sup>

This series of battles, no doubt wearing for Ubu members, did eventually win the war. Don Chipp Minister for Customs was well respected within the Push for releasing many plays, books and films including *A Sketch on Abigail's Belly* from bans. Finally Chipp legislated to liberalise the oppressive film censorship laws in 1970 when he introduced the R rating system.<sup>41</sup> By the early '70s it was a very different Australia. By then both male and female pubic hair was seen regularly on the cinema screen, and on the stage even male penises appeared.

Ironically Canberra, the home of the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board where all final censorship decisions were made in the 1960s is now one of the largest exporters of sex videos to the rest of the country. The projectors used by the Commonwealth Film Censors are installed in the

---

<sup>39</sup> York, "Looking Back at Oz Magazine," p 10.

<sup>40</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films : Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970*, p 134.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p 255

National Film and Sound Archive theatre bio box. The Archive also collects X rated videos produced in Canberra as a record of social change in the pornography industry.

### **The London Underground**

After the obscenity trials Richard Neville and Martin Sharp left Australia. Like many others including Bruce Beresford and Germaine Greer, they sought broader horizons in England. London at this time was seen as a safer port of call for Australian expatriate artists than New York which was perceived as less welcoming. This migration created an international network for the counterculture's movement between Australia and London.

In the *Australian Artist* magazine Greg Weight (photographer and part of the *Yellow House*), describes the London based cross arts community:

Martin Sharp had found in England the Pop culture he knew existed there. He became a recognised Pop artist and designed posters of Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and Donovan. He also found Tiny Tim, an artist whose influence and inspiration has remained with him to this day. Martin's second and most important art education was living in Chelsea in the late sixties. Eric Clapton, and the Australian film maker and artist Philippe Mora, were sharing Martin's studio, and other important British artists like Eduardo Paolozzi lived down the road.<sup>42</sup>

Sharp worked with Mick Jagger on '*Performance*', while below his Chelsea studio Germaine Greer was busily engaged in writing *The Female Eunuch*. The book instantly became a bestseller and gives an indication of how one sided libertarian attitudes to female heterosexuality were at the time. Greer also starred in Philippe Mora's experimental feature film, *Trouble in Molopolis* in the same year (1970). Besides Greer, Mora's cast included other Australian expatriates: Jenny Kee, Richard Neville and Martin Sharp.

---

<sup>42</sup> Greg Weight, *Australian Artist Magazine*, 16 April, 2005, Available: <http://www.greenplanet.com.au/gallery/msharp/workin.htm>. 20 April 2006.

Mora is an artist and experimental filmmaker, now based in the USA. Mora is discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to his crucial role in the later development of *Newsfront*. Even more famously Neville later founded London *Oz* magazine in 1967 and four years later was again embroiled in yet another obscenity trial. As in the Australian case all were acquitted on appeal. Neville's autobiography *Play Power* outlines the events of the case and became the hippy bible.<sup>43</sup> It was banned in Australia for three months.



<sup>8</sup> Mudie, op.cit., p.254.

<sup>9</sup> *Oz Magazine* No. 28 seized 18 June 1970 <http://www.richardneville.com.au/>

During this time Beresford wrote a piece for the London *Oz* magazine where he vented some of the frustrations of his new position managing the Experimental Film Fund for the British Film Institute (BFI). It was a scathing internal attack on the BFI, describing his employers at the time as 'vindictive, exploitive, self-regarding and irresponsible.'<sup>44</sup> Despite his dissatisfaction with the job Beresford spent five years at the BFI.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Neville, *Play Power* (London: Paladin, 1971), p 138.

<sup>44</sup> Neville, *Hippie, Hippie, Shake : The Dreams, the Trips, the Trials, the Love-Ins, the Screw Ups -- the Sixties*, p 12.

While *Oz Magazine* was provoking, it had no relationship with the labour movement unlike the student-led French Situationists who fuelled the riots in Paris in 1968. After all the courtroom dramas, the editors Neville, Anderson and Dennis took a holiday. Thoms, who was in London escaping criticism in Australia of his experimental feature *Marinetti* (discussed in Chapter 2) stepped in as acting editor. Neville, Fisher and Mora all eventually returned to Australia. They would all play another important part in the story of the impact of the counterculture on Australian cinema in the development of *Newsfront* discussed in Chapter 3.

Donald Horne maintains in *Time of Hope* that avant-garde movements and countercultures constantly re-invent themselves. He notes that this '60s youth revolution might have seemed stridently new but in reality it was merely a return to the eighteenth and nineteenth century romanticism of Rousseau and Thoreau. The emphasis on personal freedom, returning to nature and abhorrence of industrialism was present in counter culture maxims such as 'doing your own thing', while the term 'civil disobedience' is taken from the title of one of Thoreau's most influential essays.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Directors of *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain***

As two demiurges of Australian film, Thoms and Beresford both provide insights into Australian experimental cinema histories. Both Beresford and Thoms were filmmakers, change agents, and provocateurs in film culture debates. In relation to experimental film both are figureheads for a radical aesthetic that at the time was in opposition to a Hollywood studio model. Nevertheless

---

<sup>45</sup> Horne, *Time of Hope Australia 1966-1972*, p 43.

Beresford would later produce films such as *Driving Miss Daisy* within the Hollywood studio system.

In Australia in the sixties most filming was aimed at the TV market as the feature film industry had virtually been abandoned. Film going audiences had very limited access to films with different approaches. Some may have seen the French avant -garde films of the twenties, such as *Andalasian Dog (Un Chien Andalou)* or perhaps Norman McClaren's work through film societies, but the American post war new wave cinema remained out of reach.

### **Bruce Beresford**

Beresford's leading role in forging an experimental film community in Australia and in the U.K in the sixties is little known, despite his later international success. David Stratton maintains that he is, in commercial terms, Australia's most successful director.<sup>46</sup> Known for his skill with actors he has produced a broad range of films ranging from the ocker satire of the *Barry McKenzie* films, to the historical narrative of *Breaker Morant*.

Beresford and Dusan Marek (surrealist painter and animator), were the first to make independent short films not designed for the commercial market. True to the individual vision of the 'auteur', their films were personally crafted and they controlled the whole production process including directing and editing. Beresford's first film *The Hunter* (1960), about the senseless slaughter of kangaroos, was better received overseas than in Australia.

---

<sup>46</sup> David Stratton, The Last New Wave : The Australian Film Revival (London ; Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980), p 41.

Beresford pioneered underground film production methods while a student at Sydney University. At university he solicited the assistance of other drama students, writers and willing assistants in the production of *The Devil to Pay* made in 1961-62. The plot involves a master criminal's pact with the devil for wealth and success and his eventual undoing by a traitorous woman. As director Beresford choreographed a talented team of over thirty people including: Michael Newman writer, a young John Bell in the lead role, Richard Keys photography, artist John Coburn, composer Peter Butler and producer Richard Brennan.

Pike and Cooper comment that:

This short 16mm narrative with overtones of *Citizen Kane* traced the rise and fall of a master criminal, and at the time when few narrative films of any artistic pretensions were being made in Australia, it was seen as a ray of hope by the struggling supporters of an indigenous creative cinema. In 1963 Beresford left Australia for Europe and in 1964 went to Nigeria to work in the government film unit there and in theatre. In 1966 he was appointed supervisor of the British Film Institute's production board and later film advisor to the Arts Council of Great Britain.<sup>47</sup>

Beresford resourcefully solved technical issues in relation to sound recording by using a narrated voice-over dialogue between the criminal and the Devil. Made at a cost of \$1000 it was Australia's first underground film, made before the term was coined and also the first feature movie made at Sydney University. Bob Ellis has reported on Beresford's directorial style for the University's press:

Beresford's unflappable "organised genius", his capacity to steamroller the less committed, his moodiness, his pretence of listening while obviously thinking of something else, his genuine tenderness with actors, his new habit of addressing everyone as "buddy", and an easy if heavy humour: "Ah, Ellis in Wonderland!" Or to someone trying to cook: "You'll never get a part in westerns, buddy. You're not home on the range."<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film, 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*, p 265.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Coleman, *Bruce Beresford: Instincts of the Heart*, Imprint Lives, ed.^eds. (Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1992), p 37.

Without financial backing, a distribution system, production equipment or studio, Beresford used a self-help process of filmmaking that became a model for the underground to follow. In a film style version of Art Provera he improvised equipment and materials from the everyday, using car headlights to light a scene and borrowing money from friends to acquire film stock. Semi organised students gave their time freely to realise the vision, never expecting the film would actually be finished.

In 1963 Beresford was working for an advertising company at the Rocks, before leaving for Nigeria. Something of his own autobiographical experience of this time may be included in Bell's role in *The Devil to Pay* when the disheartened advertising agency employee turns criminal.

Peter Coleman's biography includes Beresford's own thoughts on the film:

As a pastiche of ill-digested influences Orson Welles, Jean –Luc Godard, John Cassavetes, Sergi Eisenstein “It's horrible,” he now says. “I had nothing to say. At least with *Hunter* I knew what I was talking about. I had been on kangaroo shoots. But with *The Devil* I just wanted to make a film. It's pretentious. Awful.”<sup>49</sup>

Coleman also reveals that after a very lengthy production period, the film was finished and broadcast late on Sydney TV in 1962. It won an honorable mention at the film awards that year. Coleman comments that it established a theme that would percolate through Beresford's later work,

It is also important as a first statement of a major Beresford theme: the sacrifice of one's humanity for an ideal, the theme of his films from *The Getting of Wisdom* and the *Fringe Dwellers* to *King David* and *Black Robe*.<sup>50</sup>

The precedent was set. The means to produce underground film in Australia could be begged, borrowed and bartered. A series of experimental films would follow including: Richard Brennan's

---

<sup>49</sup>Ibid p38

<sup>50</sup> Ibid p.42

unfinished drama *Lend Me Your Stable* and the later *The Up Turned Face* produced for the Sydney University Film Group. Only the vision remains in the National Film and Sound Archive collection.

Beresford's experiences coordinating teams of egocentric students at Sydney University when making *The Devil to Pay* began the development of his skills in managing talent. Coleman concedes that it was no small challenge:

It involved transmuting into a production unit some 30 or more seething, egocentric actors and technicians - mainly students and a few from advertising agencies. They included many who were later prominent in Australian stage and film: John Bell actor, Peter Butler, composer, John Coburn, artist, Peter Fenton, sound mixer, Richard Brennan, producer, Michael Newman, writer, Richard Keys, cameraman.<sup>51</sup>

By 1966 Beresford was living in London. He first gained a foothold in the film industry when he acquired a position at the British Film Institute (BFI) running their Experimental Fund. He was hired by Michael Balcon, chairman of the Experimental Film Fund Board and well known producer of the Ealing comedies. Balcon was impressed by Beresford's knowledge and enthusiasm for film.

Beresford's five years at the BFI were controversial when the earlier activist became himself a target for others' political action. In 1968 British filmmakers' dissatisfaction with the BFI erupted when prominent filmmakers including Ken Loach, Susannah York and John Schlesinger signed a manifesto '*Why We Want to Dismiss the Governors*'. This was followed in 1971 by mass resignation of over half the education staff who claimed the BFI was anti-intellectual. Finally the resignations flowed from the BFI boards including Balcon's and Beresford's. Beresford left his mark though in

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid p. 37



the form of a film titled *Return of the Swamp Virgins and I was a Transvestite for the CIA* with a script by Clive James. It shot a broadside at his critics and remains in the BFI library.<sup>52</sup>

The BFI, as a cultural institution was created in 1933 with the political purpose of competing with the cinema patronage of Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler. It has had a controversial political life. In 1964 the Wilson Government had tripled the experimental film fund in a bid to win votes from an expanding arts constituency. More recently it has been restructured as a result of a report tabled in British Parliament. Richard Paterson (Knowledge Manager) at the BFI gave a staff lecture at the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) in Australia in 2004, outlining the issues raised by the report including criticisms that the BFI was too London-centric and inaccessible.

This situation is no less politically turbulent in Australia for the NFSA was also recently restructured as a result of an Australian Government Museum Review, never published. The outcome of the Review was the amalgamation of NFSA with the Australian Film Commission (AFC). One of the reported rationales for the amalgamation was that the NFSA was too Canberra-focused and inaccessible. In 2007 the Government announced further governance changes with the creation of the Australian Screen Authority, a merger of the Australian Film Commission, the Film Finance Corporation of Australia and Film Australia Limited.

Beresford returned to Australia in 1972 to drive the first mainstream feature film through the brand new Australian film funding system. *The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie* was produced by Phillip Adams and directed by Bruce Beresford. The \$250,000 budget was entirely met by the Australian

---

<sup>52</sup>Ibid p. 38

Film Finance Corporation. Perhaps because it was now safe to do so the alternate life of hippy culture became itself a target for comic satire. Adams believed that Australia was ready for another *Sentimental Bloke*.<sup>53</sup>

Australia is the most highly urbanized and sUrburbanized population in the world. In contradiction to this reality an ongoing cultural metanarrative of Australian nationalism is the career of the larrikin, usually a bush larrikin. The mythology has persisted from the *Sentimental Bloke*, to Ginger Meggs, Ned Kelly to *Aunty Jack*, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Roy and HG*, *Frontline* and *Kath and Kim*. The contemporary larrikin, however, is tempered with greater cultural diversity in TV shows like *Pizza*.

David Stratton in *The Last New Wave* links *The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie*, to the comic ocker tradition of *Dad and Dave* and *George Wallace*.<sup>54</sup> The traditions of the larrikin, bushranger or underclass immigrant reveal the divisions in a class system that Australians fail to admit. A critique of this cultural nationalism is one of the subjects of the film *Newsfront* directed by Phillip Noyce, an early Ubu associate, which is discussed in Chapter 3.

*The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie* returned the government's financial investment. The ocker film genre has since sold well internationally; *Crocodile Dundee* remains Australia's greatest box office success. Beresford's career in the short term received a set back as he was typecast as a schlock master. Eventually he joined the 1970s Australian film renaissance when Adams offered him the direction of the film of David Williamson's play *Don's Party* (1976).

---

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, p 42.

<sup>54</sup>David Stratton, *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980), p.44.

Beresford is not the only example of new wave experimental filmmakers who later became involved with the early 1970s genre of ocker films and or television programs. Perhaps something of Ubu Roi's vulgarity lingers as an influence here, an extension of that long tradition of rough or street theatre.

### **Albie Thoms**

Thoms gained much of his film education through friends including Bruce Beresford and John Bell who were all interested in film as an art form not as entertainment alone. By the mid '60s Thoms had begun to professionalize his career, starting out as a production trainee at the ABC. Fellow trainees included Bob Ellis and Richard Brennan. ABC TV also employed the artist Garry Shead, first as a painter of scenery and later as an assistant editor. Thoms worked in the drama department on productions such as: *My Brother Jack* with John Seal, *Nice and Juicy*, and the big budget cop show, *Contrabandits* (*Water Rats* is a remake). Thoms wrote and directed *Contrabandits* 1967 from storylines given by the Customs Department. He also wrote and directed some episodes of *Skippy* with the late Lee Robinson. While his day job included directing TV series, his passion remained underground filmmaking.

During this time he resigned from the ABC, disgusted with the poor pay and frustrated by a lack of creative control. He strongly argues that the industry had a creative blockage when it came to relating to artists:

There's still this attitude that artists' work isn't work - although that's changing, ...But at the moment, the administration people pay themselves adequately while the artists suffer<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup>Mudie, Ubu Films : Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970, p 113.

Thoms was later unable to break back into television after the intense criticism of his experimental film *Marinetti* (1969) discussed in Chapter 2. He tells fellow film maker Richard Keys in an oral history for the National Film and Sound Archive, that as punishment for *Marinetti* he was locked out of the TV industry.<sup>56</sup> His professional career in TV was finished. There would be no more offers forthcoming to write and direct episodes of *Skippy*.

Thom's role in the *Yellow House* art commune emerged after Ubu had dissolved and after Thoms returned to Australia having found more sympathetic audiences overseas for his film *Marinetti*. Martin Sharp approached Thoms to help in creating a 24/7 art happening. In many ways the *Yellow House* became an organic extension of Ubu's philosophical goals for democratizing the arts. It enabled Thoms to continue to combine film and experimental theatre.

Joanna Mendelssohn's Catalogue of an exhibition that marked the twentieth anniversary of the *Yellow House* at the NSW Art Gallery in 1990 lists the films screened during 1971 as including works by: Perry, Shead, Clark, Thoms, Weir, Noyce and the Cantrills amongst many others. Thoms was the organiser of the film program and the creator of the fur tunnel. The list of performances at the *Yellow House* included: *An Invocation of the Spirit* of Antonin Artaud, Jerry's play *Ubu Roi* and a tribute to poet and Sydney Push identity Harry Hooton.<sup>57</sup> Ellis D Fogg is quoted in Mendelssohn's catalogue as seeing these performances as an extension of the 1960s underground.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Thoms, *Oral History*, op.cit.

<sup>57</sup> Joanna Mendelssohn, *The Yellow House, 1970-72* ([Sydney: s.n., 1990), p.38,40.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid p11

Sharp named the house after Van Gogh's house and studio in Arles, France. Van Gogh's *Yellow House* was based on the unrealised romantic dream of an artists' colony founded on brotherly love, a utopia. It provided a model for what Sharp viewed as the role of the artist to pursue novel ideas for arts sake.

At the *Yellow House* Thoms created the headquarters of the unlikely Ginger Meggs Memorial School of Art. Its inspiration came from the carrot tops of both Van Gogh and the cartoon character Ginger Meggs. In the avant-garde tradition the Ginger Meggs School was an art school of events rather than classes. Run cooperatively, it provided expansive cross arts instruction and was well distanced from the narrow confines of art school education of the era. It presents an interesting model for today's art education debates about the development of visual culture curriculums that better represent students' visual experience.

In 1975 the Australian Film Commission took over film funding from the Australia Council. Thoms successfully applied for a job at the AFC as Manager of the Experimental Film Fund on a one-year contract. Thoms, like his friend Beresford, entered the art bureaucracy in Australia. At this time the funding system for film was for loans not grants as in other art forms. Film loans were repayable should the film be a commercial success, such as *Barry McKenzie*. In his new position Thoms instituted a number of significant changes to the film funding system and its relationship to filmmakers, most notably including money for them to be able to support themselves in line with other art forms. Many of the changes he initiated remain today.

At first sight there seems to be something of a contradiction played out here between Ubu's libertarian and Marxist views and the somewhat naive faith in a Government controlled art system. Thoms comments on this quandary himself in Bertrand's study *Government and Film in Australia*;

It was producing a strange concept indeed - a government – dependant alternative cinema. On the other hand, this inbuilt contradiction, and the reaction against it from more dedicated avant-garde, filmmakers, have generated the tensions which sustain the movement's diversity and vitality.<sup>59</sup>

Ubu's role in building infrastructure to support independent film production, distribution, exhibition and debate is discussed in Chapter 2.

### **The importance of *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain***

Not a feature film or a documentary, the experimental film *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* provides a far richer layering of understanding of the power of the past in shaping present and future. The film demonstrates how the media mobilizes fear and paranoia for political ends by narrativising complex real world events in contradictory ways. It shows how these events, treated as commodities by the media for any purpose from entertainment to religious or political indoctrination, disempower people, reducing them to passive spectators. As discussed Ubu were initially greatly influenced by European avant-gardes. In the next chapter I discuss how their later films opened up to include references to an international avant-garde.

The film also demonstrates the artifice of narrative representation, how events can be interpreted according to any ideological persuasion through the use of the illusion of authority, in this instance

---

<sup>59</sup>Ina Bertrand & Diane Collins, *Government and Film in Australia* Australian Screen, ed.^eds. Australian Film Institute (Carlton South, Vic.: Currency Press, 1981), p 149.

the newspaper headlines. It applies Brechtian epic theatre and materialist film practice to bring together an awareness of film's construction and its historical, social and political context.

It directs our attention to how narrative is selectively constructed around a plot, the ways stories are told and meanings achieved for audience understanding. Even though the film is constructed from the most basic camerawork, lighting and mise-en scene, it convincingly demonstrates how action and events can be molded into cause and effect, no matter how absurd their composition.

The actual duration of the film is only six minutes. It is an excellent example of a successful short film structure, evoking the political power of film and using it to articulate complex ideas in an unpredictable way. It is a successful expression of Thoms' interest in using non literary elements to convey ideas, inspired by both experimental film and theatre avant-garde traditions.

*It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is an important Australian example of what Jeffrey Skoller describes as the purpose of avant-garde or experimental films, that is to attempt to break the viewer's habituated acceptance of linear narrative by building up multiple scenarios and considering other virtual outcomes. By this process in our search for a coherency of events and meanings, we are forced to face up to the central construction of both narrative and history, that is the blurring of fact with fiction and the randomness of events. This blurring of fact with fiction and consideration of possible other virtual outcomes is another of the important but unrecognised impacts of experimental film on mainstream cinema. It is discussed further in Chapter 4 in relation to *Newsfront*.

## Chapter 3

### Ubu and the counterculture



In this chapter I will focus primarily on Ubu and particularly on Albie Thoms as a central figure in Australia's underground scene. My analysis includes the orbit of other satellite figures who interacted with Ubu members and made their own impact.

No creative network in the Australia art scene prior to this era or since has initiated such a surge of creative fervour nationally and internationally. As a result of the counterculture, artists from all mediums had the support to interact and workshop what an Australian artistic identity might look and sound like. That environment was created within a network or scene that as noted in Chapter 1 included SUDs, the Push, Ubu and London and Australian counterculture communities.

The common denominator of this community was the shared valuing of utopian ideals driven by a passion for social, political and artistic change. Juno Gemes was a very significant identity within both the Australian and the London underground network and has an interesting comment on this situation. Gemes was not a member of Ubu but she did take an active part in both Ubu's beginnings with SUDs and the Ubu Roi plays and postscript activities at the *Yellow House*. In an interview with Iain McIntyre about Australia's psychedelic era, she provides an outline of the movement's objectives:

We all wanted a revolutionary experience. We wanted to create a revolutionary underground that would make people think for themselves. We opposed the Vietnam war, the war based economies. We would hold up our ideals. There was no need for divisive competition. We could make the World Work for Everyone on the Planet. We loathed and rejected racism, the White Australia Policy and were against everything that Menzies stood for. We wanted to create a truly Australian culture.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Iain McIntyre, *Tomorrow Is Today : Australia in the Psychedelic Era, 1966-1970* (Kent Town, S. Aust.: Wakefield Press, 2006), p 98.

Gemes's comments reflect a search for autonomy through resistance and withdrawal from mainstream culture, an experimental and collaborative attitude to creativity, and the use of aesthetics to intervene in and disrupt dominant political and social parameters. These are all hallmark issues of an avant-garde movement pushing the borderlines of art, aesthetics, politics and social mores. In the next chapter *Newsfront* is discussed as a film produced a decade later by a group of counterculture revolutionaries that clearly continues these ideals. The film is a political and social document of the Menzies era, the White Australia policy and the struggle for an Australian cultural identity symbolised through the divisive competition between two brothers.

The satire industry boomed in the later years on the Menzies' era. For example Richard Walsh of *Oz* magazine pushed satirical comedy into television by writing *The Mavis Bramston Show* for Channel 7 TV 1964-1968. It challenged 'the establishment' and Australia's working class from a middle class intelligentsia perspective. It was one of Australia's most highly rated and discussed TV programs at the time. As Walsh states in the final issue of *Australian Oz* in February 1969, 'God, the Queen and the RSL', were all fair game.<sup>2</sup>

The title of show came from an in joke in theatrical circles that was related to the common practice at this time of hiring second rate overseas actors over more talented locals and the dominance of foreign productions often of poor quality. These visiting faded stars were referred to as "Mavis Bramstons". The show satirized the cultural impotence of the period, highlighting the absence of an Australian voice or accent of its own in either theatre or film.

As Stratton comments little if any post war film production occurred in Australia with the exception of Charles Chauvel's films such as *Jedda* (1955), *Sons of Matthew* (1949) and (U.K) Ealing Studios

---

<sup>2</sup> York, "Looking Back at Oz Magazine." [National Library of Australia News](#) 11.May, 2001, p 10

productions in Australia of the Kangaroo westerns *The Overlanders* (1946) and *Bitter Springs* (1950).<sup>3</sup> *The Shiralee* (1957) was another Ealing Australia production. The comedy dramas *Smiley* (1956) and *Smiley Gets a Gun* (1958) were produced by the London Film Production Company.

The 1960s counterculture would transform this situation. By the '70s these artists had asserted themselves in such a dominant way as to create the confidence in Government to invest in a culture, thereby stimulating both Australian film and drama. In contrast to the 1960s stereotype of druggy disorganisation, Ubu's success in creating a vibrant and viable film collective focused on four common goals: film production, exhibition, distribution and debate. Their goals were achieved through creative collaborative action. Ubu's most important initiatives were the founding of the Sydney Film Cooperative and the handmade film manifesto. Both were manifestations of a key Ubu principle —access to filmmaking for all as a political and social right.

Adrian Martin begins to fill the void of critical work in this field in *Australian Screen*. He provides one of the few Australian analytical approaches to the genre of experimental film and surveys the historical development of experimental film from the 1960s to the 1980s. Martin puts forward a schema of experimental forms, and notes that these many forms often overlap each other. This is an invaluable overview that traces the change-over of experimental forms from 16mm to Super 8. Martin correctly notes Ubu's important role as experimental leaders in developing and promoting many of these experimental film forms. I concur with Martin's definition of independent experimental avant-garde as films made on low budgets sometimes with a single person crew,

---

<sup>3</sup> Stratton, The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival, p 4.

destined not to be 'released' as a mass media product.<sup>4</sup> Martin's schema is discussed later in this chapter in reference to Ubu's films.

## **Production**

Gil Brealey began the first Australian Experimental filmmaking group in Melbourne in the 1950s. In the 1960s prior to Ubu, only a small amount of independent work had been done in Australia.<sup>5</sup> Ubu members formally founded the Sydney Film Cooperative on 17 July 1969 although Mudie notes the name had been linked to Ubu since 1967.<sup>6</sup> In libertarian style it had no chairperson and ignored organizational institutional rules. It was registered under the NSW Co-operatives Act and Co-op Directors turned over biannually.

Ubu members were influenced by Jonas Mekas's New York based Film Cooperative model established in 1962. Mekas was the voice of America's New Cinema group. The London Film Co-operative also followed suit in 1966. Thoms suggests the Sydney Co-op was influential internationally as several European experimental film groups established cooperatives using it as a model.<sup>7</sup> The Co-ops were vitally important as artistic centers for the exhibition and distribution of film and the exchange of ideas and equipment. While Co-op members were a resource for each others various film projects as crew and cast, the pure personal expression supposedly remained with the cinema 'auteur'. The Co-ops provided grass roots support for the production and distribution of film that did not fit the commercial cinema exhibition models or its big budgets. These filmmakers' works were personal artistic expressions akin to other art forms such as painting or sculpture.

---

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Indefinite Objects: Independent Film and Video', Australian Screen, edited by Albert Moran and Tom Regan, Ringwood Victoria, Penguin, 1989 p, 174.

<sup>5</sup>McFarlane, Mayer and Bertrand, The Oxford Companion to Australian Film (p 144

<sup>6</sup> Mudie, Peter., Ubu Films, Sydney: UNSW Press, 1997. p 74

<sup>7</sup> Albie Thoms, Polemics for a New Cinema, Sydney, Wild &Wolley, 1978, p 356.

Sydney was the first state capital to host a film co-op but it eventually became part of a national network. Later Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, Nigel Buesst and Peter Tammer would all found film cooperatives establishing independent experimental filmmaking in most state capitals across the country. The Melbourne and Sydney film co-ops were Australia's largest. Both had strong links to experimental theatre. The Melbourne Co-op was founded on 5 July 1975 and through the Cantrills had strong connections to *La Mama* Theatre, the Cantrills combining theatre sets for *La Mama* with multi screen projections.<sup>8</sup>

The offspring of this fervor of arts collaboration across the nation seeded not only a 1970s renaissance in Australian film but a similar renaissance of Australian drama. Cooperative action built collective confidence in Australian creativity.

Mainstream print media often picked over *Ubu NEWS* pages for sensational headlines providing Ubu with a wealth of media coverage and building audience interest. The following article in *The Sunday Telegraph* tracks the counterculture of underground film in a review of Ubu's *The Film* by Alan Barnes:

#### UNDERGROUND FILMS COME TO THE SURFACE

THERE'S - this cameraman, see, and he's filming a camera-man who's filming a cameraman filming a bloke walking up the street.... It sounds crazy, I know, but that really is one of the scenes from a film, which will be shown in Sydney tonight. It is one of these experimental movies, which the *avant-garde* in America are calling 'Underground' films these days. They're really just celluloid experiments by eager youngsters with nothing but cameras, a few feet of film, and fertile imaginations. I guess you could liken them to 'action' painting. Anyway about a dozen fellers in

---

<sup>8</sup> Faculty of Arts, Arthur Cantrill, 2004, University of Melbourne, Available: <http://www.sca.unimelb.edu.au/staff/arthur/>, 12 January 2007.

Sydney - and a few in Melbourne, Adelaide and other cities – are making these little gems.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Film* four camera men chase each other down a street, all filming each other simultaneously. As Thoms comments it typifies the sense of fun and shared passion for film as a medium that was characteristic of Co-op members.<sup>10</sup> It also continues investigations in perception begun with the Cubists, in an exploded viewpoint, depicting subjects from multiple angles simultaneously overlaid onto one another. *The Film's* expression of movement and technology are also akin to the Futurists' experiments.



10 Mudie, *Ubu Films*, p 54

<sup>9</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit,p 58

<sup>10</sup> Albie Thoms, *Polemics for a New Cinema* (Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1978), p 350.

## *The Film*<sup>11</sup>

Brian Doherty in his Masters thesis (Sydney University 1996) correctly identifies Ubu's greatest legacy as the establishment of the Sydney Film Cooperative.<sup>12</sup> In the decade that followed the Sydney Co-op went on to provide a solid base for another generation of filmmakers, many of them women, assisting to evolve and expand independent filmmaking in Australia. Jennifer Stott's, 'Independent Feminist Filmmaking and the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative' in *Don't Shoot Darling!* (1987), provides a feminist analysis of the impact of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative. Stott notes these later feminist filmmakers continued to be committed to the democratic film practices upon which Ubu had founded the Co-op. They shared the vision of a different low budget film industry committed to collective production and to radical aesthetics.<sup>13</sup>

From the Co-op and counterculture emerged filmmakers like Jan Chapman. The first film Chapman directed is now a classic historical document of the era of people power, effecting overdue political and social change through demonstration and agitation. *Just a little note to tell you I am well and feeling happy* was made in collaboration with Phillip Noyce, her first husband. Noyce and Chapman were both aged 20. It documents a 1970 student siege at Sydney University. The siege was held in protest against police invasion of the university campus in the process of arresting a Vietnam draft dodger. The iconic band *Cream* provides the accompanying music track. The film was first screened in an International Underground Film Festival in London in 1970.

---

<sup>11</sup> DVD 1 No 7 *The Film* (16mm film) 1966

An improvised happening filmed with four cameras, 16mm, B/W, 12mins, prod – Garry Shead; dir / phot - John Clark, Michael Pearce, David Perry, Garry Shead, David Stiven, Albie Thoms, Roger Whittaker; edit- Michael Pearce, David Stiven, Garry Shead; cast – John Clark, John Firth Smith, Judy Firth-Smith, Susan Howe, Rosemary Jaynes, Michael Nessler, Michael Pearce, David Perry, Garry Shead, David Stiven, Albie Thoms, and Roger Wittaker.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Doherty, 'The Ubu Scene and the Emergence of Underground Film in Australia 1965-1970 Discourse Practice, Heterogenesis', University of Sydney, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Creed, Annette Blonski and Freda Freiberg, *Don't Shoot Darling! : Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia* Richmond, Vic.: Greenhouse, 1987 p 118.

Stott like Doherty believes that the Co-op's work changed the way people viewed films and created an audience demand that previously did not exist by presenting an alternative to narrative mainstream cinema.<sup>14</sup> The AFC would later subsidise the Co-op enabling it to support a 114 seat theatre, to produce its own newspaper *Filmnews* and run a rental library of 1,000 independent films and videos, that is until 1985, when the Sydney Film Co-operative closed as a result of escalating deficits.

### **Handmade films**

In September 1967 Ubu's members signed a *Hand-made Film Manifesto* written by Thoms. In the vein of the Futurist movement's manifesto that initiated mix media happenings, concrete poetry and kinetic art, Thoms wanted to stimulate a burst of creative production and to have handmade films acceptable as an art form.

The manifesto's stated aims were to:

1. Let no one say anymore that they can't raise the money to make a film – any film scrap can be turned into a hand made film at no cost.
2. Let photography be no longer essential to film-making --hand-made films are made without a camera.
3. Let literary considerations of plot and story no longer be essential to filmmaking -- hand-made films are abstract.
4. Let no consideration be given to direction and editing—handmade films are created spontaneously.
5. Let no media be denied to hand-made films—they can be scratched, scraped, drawn, inked, coloured, dyed, painted, pissed-on, black and white, or coloured, bitten, chewed, filed, rasped, punctured, ripped, burned, burred, bloodied, with any technique imaginable.
6. Let written and performed music be rejected by makers of hand-made films—let hand-made music be created directly onto the film by any technique of scratching or drawing etc. imaginable.
7. Let no orthodoxy of hand-made films be established – they may be projected alone, in groups, on top of one another, forward, backward, slowly, quickly, in every possible way.
8. Let no standard of hand-made films be created by critics –a film scratched inadvertently by a projector is equal to a film drawn explicitly by a genius.
9. Let hand-made films not be projected in cinemas, but as environments, not to be absorbed intellectually, but by all the senses.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p122.



UBU FILMS presents

instructions  
& notes

**HAND  
MADE  
FILM  
KIT**

THE EMULSION OR NON-SHINEY  
SIDE OF THE FILM SHOULD  
BE TREATED

the area between two consecutive sprocket holes is  
one frame and lasts for a projection time of  
 $\frac{1}{24}$  seconds.

the treated film should be colored with any  
fluorescent coloring material.

HAND-MADE FILMS MAY BE RETURNED TO  
UBU FILMS FOR POSSIBLE PRINTING AND  
DISTRIBUTION.

the sound track area may be scratched to produce  
hand-made music or the image can be  
continued in this area

to ensure that words, etc. are projected  
correctly the diagram indicated must be  
used.

a slightly damp film stock will be easier to  
work with.

FOR AN AUDIENCE TO REGISTER A PARTICULAR  
WORD OR DRAWING, IT SHOULD BE  
REPEATED AT LEAST 24 TIMES.

ALL INQUIRIES MAY BE DIRECTED TO  
UBU FILMS  
54 GEORGE ST  
REDFERN 2016  
696489

this kit contains:

- 100 ft black spacing
- rayo blade
- stencil and emery paper
- 35mm film
- sample film strip
- sack needle
- 3 texta colors
- instructions

head or  
start of  
film

one  
frame

emulsion  
side  
uppermost

THE  
END  
THE  
END  
THE  
END  
THE  
END

sound  
track  
area

image  
area

produced and distributed by UBU FILMS  
54 george st redfern 2016  
phone 696489

Thoms' manifesto is a call to arms outside the coded boundaries of the cinema or gallery. The process of handmade films draws attention to the mechanical and material nature of film as a photochemical record, breaking with the illusion of narrative linear figuration.

96

In the same year that he wrote the manifesto Thoms created the handmade film *Bluto* (1967) using scalpels, razor blades, needles and textas to scratch and colour the film emulsion. Mudie notes Thoms scratched the edge of the film which passes under the optical sound reader on a projector 28 frames ahead of the picture light method to produce the sound track. The result is a cacophony of squeaks, blurts and rumbles.<sup>16</sup> *Bluto* was rich, kinetic and completely abstract. Sent off to Festivals internationally, it was very well received. Perhaps the best way to experience it is to imagine you are travelling through the layers of paint in a Jackson Pollock painting. Lightshows like Pollock's painting used frameless abstract images to produce a new kinetic abstract art. Unlike Pollock's paintings, handmade films were not part of the art market. As Peter Wollen's second category in 'The Two Avant-Gardes' defines, structuralist cinema emerged from visual art styles such as abstract expressionist painting and minimalist sculpture.<sup>17</sup>

According to Emmanuelle Toulet's archeological study of cinema the technique of painting on film is as old as the medium itself, originating in the Lumiere Brothers' film processing factory, where hundreds of women were employed to colour film by hand. Often dangerous work (the risk of fire with the old silver nitrate film was high) these women were highly trained colorists, painstakingly hand tinting and toning the photographic film proofs. Colour was used in silent films to create mood: red for fire or violence, lavender for love scenes, or blue for night scenes. For special films this process was sometimes done frame by frame or with stencils where variations in dye colour or tone created each as a unique work of art in its own right. The expense of this colouring process limited its use and the luxury colour treatment might be applied to only a few sumptuous scenes. Exhibitors

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p 55

<sup>17</sup> Wollen, 'the Two Avant-Gardes', Readings and Writing: Semiotics Counter-Strategies (, London: Verso, 1984.p 20

could then decide between the monochromes or pay more to enable their patrons to enjoy the colour version.<sup>18</sup>

As a technique hand painting on film also has a long avant-garde tradition. Man Ray had earlier experimented with camera-less photography. His Rayograms were produced as direct exposures of objects on photographic sheets exposed to light. He transferred this concept to film laying nails, drawing pins along the film or sprinkling it with salt and pepper and exposing it to light.<sup>19</sup> Man Ray's Rayograms are the precursors to the modern layering and compositing graphics now commonplace as a result of software programs such as Photoshop.

Other important earlier innovators included: Hans Richter, Len Lye and his protégé, Norman McLaren. Len Lye's work was also critical as an international link between earlier and later experimental filmmakers within Australasia. Lye made the first abstract films in Australia as early as 1921. The innovations Lye used resulted from industrial advances in colour film printing methods then only beginning, including Gasparcolour and Technicolour.<sup>20</sup>

Thirty years later Warhol would also adapt commercially used printing technology, this time from the screen printing industry for fine art purposes. In a style reminiscent of Lye's traveling matte film stills, Warhol's *Campbell soup*, and *Marilyn Monroe* repeat prints also used hand painted images, textures and strong use of colour, positive and negative.

---

<sup>18</sup>Emmanuelle Toulet, *Cinema Is 100 Years Old* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995. p20.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Horrocks and Len Lye, *Len Lye : A Biography* (Auckland, N.Z.: Auckland University Press, 2001), p 141.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p146

Over time the technical conventions of abstract film began to take shape. These included: separation of light patterns from objects, the obscuring of object identification by rapid motion, extreme close up, lighting and camera angle, the flicker from light to dark and the editing of sequences in relation to their similar visual or kinetic relationships.

The process of handmade films draws attention to the mechanical and material nature of film as a photochemical record. Just as collage in cubist paintings drew attention to the material of the object in painting, Rayograms and abstract film drew attention to the material of film.

Several significant international exhibitions have recently placed experimental film at the centre of visual studies. Most recently an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou titled *The Movement of Images Art and Film* 5 April 2006-29 January 2007 connects the history of static, kinetic and performance arts forms and film. The exhibition catalogue argues the contemporary relevance of a survey of experimental film works:

Nowdays, at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, while we are witnessing a massive migration of images in motion from screening rooms to exhibition spaces, a migration borne along by a digital revolution and prepared by a twofold phenomena of dematerialization of work plus a return to theatricality of the art scene, it becomes impossible not to say necessary, to redefine the cinema beyond experimental conditions which governed it in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century - that is to say, no longer from the limited viewpoint of film history, but, at the crossroads of live spectacle and visual art, from a viewpoint expanded to encompass a general history of representations.<sup>21</sup>

This exhibition follows on from the exhibition in Vienna at The Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wein (MUMOK) 15 July 2005 -14 May 2006 *From the Collection Nouveau Realisme Art*

---

<sup>21</sup>Philippe-Alain Michaud and Musee national d'art moderne/Centre de creation industrielle (France), Le Mouvement Des Images = the Movement of Images (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2006.p 16

*and Reality in the 1960s*. This show represented works from Fluxus, the New Realism and Vienna Actionism artists who linked their art to agitprop and replaced the canvas with actions in physical space and expanded cinema.

Fluxus artists' practice like Nam June Paik's was based both in performance and composition. He pioneered media based art just as these media technologies began to dominate daily life in the '50s, '60s and '70s. Other Fluxus artists included: Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, Yoko Ono and the organizer of the Fluxus movement George Maciunas. Many of these artists had been taught in the 1950s in John Cage's experimental music techniques.

In 1962 Nam June Paik and George Maciunas staged the first Fluxus Festival in New York and in 1965, Maciunas wrote his Flux manifesto on art and amusement which included the following paragraph:

To establish an artist's non professional, non parasitic, non elite status in society, he must demonstrate his own dispensability, he must demonstrate self-sufficiency of the audience, he must demonstrate that anything can substitute for art and anyone can do it. Therefore this substitute art-amusement must be simple, amusing, concerned with insignificances, have no commodity or institutional value. It must be unlimited, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all. The artist doing art meanwhile, to justify his income, must demonstrate that only he can do art. Art therefore must appear to be complex, intellectual, exclusive, indispensable, inspired. To raise its commodity value it is made to be rare, limited in quantity and therefore accessible not to the masses but to the social elite.<sup>22</sup>

Maciunas's interest in Duchamp combined with Paik's connections to Cage's experimental composition consolidated the Dada legacy. By 1965 Duchamp had become a huge influence for another generation of European painters, sculptors and performance artists including Joseph Beuys.

---

<sup>22</sup> fluxus 'at' artnotart 'dot' com, Fluxus Debris!, 2003, @ Art / not Art, Available: <http://www.artnotart.com/fluxus/>, 12 January 2007.

George Maciunas was also a close friend of Jonas Mekas founder of the New York film Cooperative and voice of the US new wave cinema. In the '60s Maciunas also set up artists communities in New York's Soho area, that were models of inspiration for Sydney artists communes at No 10 Cunningham street and the *Yellow House*.

The philosophy of handmade films as both painting and performance relates to fluxus approaches. Ubu , Gemes and the Cantrills are the Australian exponents of this avant-garde sharing its philosophical interest in: media crossroads, using found sound, text and image, performance as fun and cinema as an art form rather than a product of the commercial entertainment industry. Their practice as experimental filmmakers is only now becoming part of the wider ambit of the art world, just as the moving image is only now being acknowledged as a central part of the historiography of visual culture.

Unlike Maciunas's fluxus manifesto, Thoms' hand made film manifesto initiated a limited response only and it never became a popular art form. Structuralism was part of the attempt to validate experimental film as art with its own pure language by reducing it to its central elements. It did free audiences, however to see the essential aspects of cinema as light, time and motion.

As Martin notes Ubu members were the first to promote the anarchic –primitive tradition style in Australia which includes scratch films and found footage manipulations. This style Martin surmises draws on two European precursors, outsider art and the experimental film manifesto of Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'Acinema'.<sup>22</sup> Ubu, meanwhile, were not limited to a binary division between

---

<sup>22</sup>Adrian Martin, 'Indefinite Objects: Independent Film and Video', op.cit. p182

narrative and structuralism. Thoms' film *David Perry*<sup>23</sup> and *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* combine both narrative and structuralist filmmaking.

### **Ubu Lightshows / Expanded cinema**

When handmade films were projected upon moving surfaces the psychedelic became a visual representation of the counterculture era, breaking all the rules of perception in film and art. It enabled Ubu to explore a whole range of techniques exploring the transience of the medium of light that came to be known as Expanded Cinema. The term describes works that do not conform to the traditional single screen format. No two works were ever the same.

The lightshows represent a cinema of involvement, combining live bands, slides, overhead projectors and films projected over performers and audience alike. Two of Ubu's key interests converged: audience interaction achieved in the theatre of the absurd and the handmade film to create ephemeral light effects of colour and motion. The lightshows were events or happenings where the artists' focus was not an object, or necessarily even an outcome but the process of the happening itself and its active engagement with the public.

The concept of light shows as a commercial venture emerged from the First Intergalactic Festival concert, at the Cellblock Theatre in 1968. The \$175.00 profit was used to pay off Ubu's overdraft.

<sup>24</sup>Ubu's lightshows and film distribution therefore grew to become part of achieving an economic lifecycle that could sustain one of its overarching principles '*involvement without impediment*'.

---

<sup>23</sup> DVD 1 No 8 *David Perry 1968* A handmade film, created as a synthetic portrait of David Perry. Photographed, opaque, hand-coloured film off cuts and clear film were combined with a soundtrack of Perry talking about his own films and set to music by Thoms. The most widely seen of Ubu's handmade films, it was selected for the Directors Fortnight in Cannes.

<sup>24</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit, p150

<sup>25</sup>This is one of the key concerns of avant-garde practice that Skoller identifies: the seeking out of autonomous alternatives to mass culture, mass consumerism and the art industry.

Helen Frizell reported on Ubu's entrepreneurial approach in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 17/ 4/ 68 in an article titled '*Parties at a price*':

Ubu films, a filmmakers' co-operative headed by David Perry, Albie Thoms and Andrew Read are now doing good business enlivening parties, conventions and promotions with the latest electronic and lighting devices. For about \$20 they will turn a 12ft by 15 ft room into a different sort of nightmare, with flicker wheels, posters and certain detergent packets which thrive under ultra-violet lighting. For another \$10 they will throw in a xenon strobe light, a box shaped unit which flashes light on and off instantaneously. In a darkened room, this gives the impression that the fun crowds are moving in jerky, film like frames.<sup>26</sup>

The lightshows were a spontaneous combustion of music, film and painting into the one experience, the 'happening'. Just as shadow, and magic lantern shows were the popular art form at the turn of the twentieth century the psychedelic lightshows emerged in the 1960s. The time line of *Tomorrow is Today* notes August 1968 as the first time that warm oils and jumbo strobes were used in Australia specifically at Ubu's *Liquid Light* show at St Aloysius College and the *Trip without Glue* at the Briar's club<sup>27</sup>

Ellis D Fogg a.k.a. Roger Foley was an associate of Ubu's and a well known counterculture identity who as well as creating his own light show assisted with many other lightshows and happenings. He contributed a womb-like Capsule room to the *Yellow House* environments and collaborated with

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p12

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p102

<sup>27</sup> McIntyre, *Tomorrow Is Today : Australia in the Psychedelic Era, 1966-1970*, op.cit, p117.



Vivienne Binns to produce an environmental lightshow in 1971 titled *Woom* at Watters Gallery, Sydney.<sup>28</sup> He collaborated with Ubu to produce some of Australia's first rock concerts and psychedelic light shows. His Fogg machine provided an ephemeral projection screen and was so productive it threatened to asphyxiate the audience.

In a lecture at the National Film and Sound Archive in 2004 Foley described some of the techniques used in the experimental lightshows including the wet show, a technique unable to be replicated on a computer. Multiple overhead projectors upon which two clock glasses were placed were used. In between each glass a colourful cocktail of chemicals and substances that would not mix with water was positioned. The top glass was then manipulated moving the colourful substances to create symmetrical light patterns. The chemicals would splash out and cover the operator during the performance hence the name. Gemes notes this technique was pioneered by Mark Boyle a painter who used oil paint on water and projected his shows onto Pink Floyd in the London underground club UFO<sup>29</sup>.

Foley was involved with another conceptual, and minimalist art group, just down the bottom of the hill from the *Yellow House* in Woolloomooloo called the *Inhibodress*. *Inhibodress* included: Mike Parr, Tim Johnson and Peter Kennedy. *Inhibodress* received acclaim from art critics like Daniel Thomas and Elwyn Lynn yet the mediums they used such as video, performance, sound and installation were largely excluded from commercial gallery and museum displays at that time. Their

---

<sup>28</sup> Vivienne Binns, *Vivienne Binns Curriculum Vitae*, Sutton Gallery, Available: [www.suttongallery.com.au/downloadfile.php?filename=files/downloads/Binns%20CV%20SG%202006.pdf](http://www.suttongallery.com.au/downloadfile.php?filename=files/downloads/Binns%20CV%20SG%202006.pdf) -, 12 January 2007.

<sup>29</sup> McIntyre, *Tomorrow is Today: Australia in the Psychedelic Era, 1966-1970*, op.cit, p 114.

environment was starkly different and ascetic compared to the *Yellow House*. Both groups occasionally assisted each other with filming. Foley states that he also emerged from a theatre background and first discovered psychedelics in 1962 when he started experimenting with lights borrowed from theatres he worked in, going on to build his own strobes.<sup>31</sup> Today Foley continues to operate a lumino kinetic design company and is gathering material to write a history of 1960s happenings.

Juno Gemes also participated in Ubu's wet shows. Using a large glass dish on top of an overhead projector, she added coloured chemicals and gold fish to create a living patina of light. Ultimately the colourful chemical environments and the heat overcame the fish.<sup>32</sup> Gemes has finally placed on public record her pivotal role in the birth of experimental theatre in Australia in McIntyre's book about the psychedelic era. In that context her impact on the counter culture also has relevance to Australia's mainstream cinema.

Gemes's activities influenced the counter culture scene and became a catalyst for later events, affecting the trajectories of other artists within the scene. In collaboration with Jim Sharman, Gemes developed a play that she states dealt for the first time with the gritty realities of Australia history, *Terra Australis* (1965). It signaled the early stirrings of a renaissance of an Australian theatre; cast members included Garry McDonald and Helen Morse.<sup>33</sup>

Gemes traveled to Europe to expand her cross arts experience and knowledge of experimental theatre working with the Italian Spoleto Festival, organizing 'Happenings' in London underground

---

<sup>31</sup> Mr Fogg's Last Newsletter 23 December 2006, [fogg@fogg.com.au](mailto:fogg@fogg.com.au)

<sup>32</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit., p10

<sup>33</sup> McIntyre, *Tomorrow is Today: Australia in the Psychedelic Era, 1966-1970*, op.cit., p113

clubs and adding her bottom to Yoko's famous film. She went on to work with Yoko on a number of performance pieces and with two Belgrade performance groups the Living Theatre and the Theatre Labratorium.<sup>34</sup>

On her return to Australia she brought this rich experience into collaboration with other artists, filmmakers and theatre designers, musicians and performers in the development of No 10 Cunningham Street also referred to as the Factory for Art, Research and Technology (FART), the Powerhouse, or the House of Happenings.<sup>35</sup> Like the later *Yellow House* it contained a series of environments that provided backdrops for performance pieces, 'live ins' music and lightshows. The emphasis was on connecting art and life as one continuous experience.<sup>36</sup> As Anne Marsh comments in *Body and Self Performance Art in Australia 1969-96*:

1960s happenings claimed to be 'democratising' art particularly performance as it included the audience in the work, in different contexts outside the gallery.<sup>37</sup>

Gemes was also a member of the *Human Body* performance group which used Cunningham Street as a workshop space. Ellis D Fogg at times added lightshows to *Human Body* performances and Ubu screened film on their performances. Their creative product was cycled through the national underground network. Gemes notes that *Human Body* works were commissioned for *La Mama* and the *Tribe* in Brisbane. Similar to Ubu's *Theatre of Cruelty* their works were labour intensive and cross media.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid p 114, 115

<sup>35</sup> Ibid p118

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 117,

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 119

The commercial media were perplexed as to how to deal with performance as a hybrid art form. Was it theatre or was it art? Gemes notes that some critics and commentators to their credit read the mood correctly. Daniel Thomas (curator at the AGNSW) recognized the Cunningham Street artists as an Australian avant-garde and (*Bulletin*) journalist Sandra Hall regularly wrote about them.<sup>38</sup> In response to the lack of critical arts debate in the mainstream media *Ubu News* expanded to include feature articles and colour illustrations.

Gemes comments that these underground activities attracted audiences of other artists including: Peter Weir, Martin Sharp, Peter Kingston, Brett Whiteley and John Bell. The opportunity to observe audience reactions and to expand their own visual understanding must have been very useful for the later careers of these Australian artists. She also notes that feminist meanings in performance works were often lost on ‘stoned out audiences.’<sup>39</sup>

In the 1970s, Gemes took up photography and not theatre as her major expressive medium and continues to use her work as a tool for social change and political action. Gemes states her artistic goals at the time:

My concern was not only with creating my own work, but with creating the possibility to create for many other innovative artists.<sup>40</sup>

Gemes has continued to be a significant figure in Australian arts. She has for many decades been a political advocate for Aboriginal civil rights, beginning this work while she was a founding resident

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p118

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p120

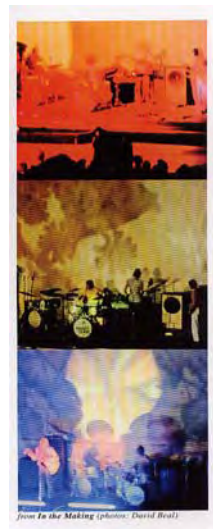
<sup>40</sup> Ibid p120

at the *Yellow House* where she worked with Michael Glasheen (experimental filmmaker) on their film *Uluru*.<sup>41</sup>

The practices of Gemes, Foley and Ubu are all fundamental components in a creative community from which Australia's most significant auteurs have emerged. The fact that much of this practice was non commercial and that some of it is not well documented has no doubt contributed to the lack of critical attention it has received. The significance of this counterculture as a hothouse of ideas and talent growth is fundamental to what happened next in the Australian art world and is discussed in detail in chapter 4.



Booklet front cover  
12 Mudie, op.cit. p .124.



13 Mudie, op.cit. p 157

Mudie documents the interactivity of this free flowing community. The lightshows evolved into improvised underground festivals and were extremely popular events attracting large audiences. They provided platforms for cross arts collaboration for Sydney and Melbourne artists. One held at the Union Theatre in 25-31 August 1969 brought the national underground community together and included recitals by poets Sweeney Reed and Bill Beard, performances by the experimental theatre

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p120

group Café MAMA, the band *The Tribe* and the dance group *Human Body*, music by *Taman Shud* and experimental films by Arthur Cantrill, Nigel Buesst, Albie Thoms and happenings by Ushma.<sup>42</sup>

Mudie describes the level of interaction between performance, film and painting in the context of David Perry's film *Poem 25*.<sup>43</sup> It is an early example of concrete/sound poetry. Perry wrote the numbers directly onto film to coincide with the actor's speech on the stage. Each number was repeated frame by frame for the duration required by the performer to speak the number out loud. *Poem 25* was hand drawn onto clear film and then printed in reverse polarity so the negative became positive; the film was then projected beside the actor. No camera was involved. The poem was originally written by German Dada collagist, Kurt Merz Schwitters.

Another of Ubu's performance films within their interpretation of Artaud's *The Theatre of Cruelty* play is *Spurt of Blood*. Thoms' film of the *Spurt of Blood* play uses the same cast and crew as *The Theatre of Cruelty*. Shot over two weekends in the gothic architectural setting of Sydney's Deaf and Blind Institute, the building on City Road that was then disused and had been acquired by the University of Sydney, *Spurt of Blood*,<sup>44</sup> utilises many French *avant-garde* theories of the twenties including Cocteau's and Artaud's ideas, such as the use of grotesque masks. Mudie notes the masks also had a practical application assisting in overcoming sound synchronisation issues. David Perry contributes some fascinating animation sequences to the film.

---

<sup>42</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit.,p 213

<sup>43</sup> 4 *Poem 25* 1965 DVD 1 No 4A handmade film animating Schwitters's poem. Originally silent film, it was first projected over Leventhal on stage while he read Schwitters's poem during the Theatre of Cruelty – it exists now with the voice on the optical soundtrack. 16mm B/W, sound, 1.5mins. prod/dir – Albie Thoms; anim – David Perry; poem – Kurt Schwitters; voice – Harry Leventhal.

<sup>44</sup> *Spurt of Blood* 1965 DVD1 No 3 (16mm film) 1965The difficulties of young love and the absurdity of religion, seen in a medieval setting. 16mm, B/W, sound, 6.5 mins. prod / dir - Albie Thoms; dir phot / anim /edit – David Perry; costumes / masks – Michael Day; snd rec - Lex Watson; Wr – Antonin Artaud; cast – Geoff Borney, Tricia Callagan, Harry Leventhal, Dick May, Ralph Goldstein, Paul Thom, Mary Patterson, Libby Smith and Susan Howe.



14 Mudie, Peter, Ubu Films, op.cit., p.24.

## Exhibition

If experimental film was neither art nor commercial film, then where could it be exhibited? It had to find an alternative so it went underground. In her 2002 Longford Lyell Lecture Jan Chapman outlined some of the underground film venues and their issues in relation to exhibition.

Whilst a student at Sydney University I had met the Australian director Phillip Noyce who already had met independent filmmakers Albie Thoms and Aggy Reed, when they came to speak at Barker College on Sydney's North Shore, about filmmaking when he was in his final year at school. The idea had taken form that you could make a film by hiring a camera, getting a group of people together and creating a personal expression. The beginning of a substantial revival came therefore not through the occasional co-production, but from a movement of young people shooting 16mm underground films that ranged from works of documentary and fiction to the avant-garde. There was the Carlton Cinema Group in Melbourne and Ubu Films in Sydney which developed into the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative in 1969. Early Sydney Filmmakers Co-op screenings at the *Yellow House* artists' commune in Kings Cross, and also the Third World Bookshop in Goulburn Street, were illegal because the premises were not licensed as cinemas.

As Mudie notes Ubu developed some entrepreneurial approaches to finding exhibition venues. On 12 April 1966 Ubu was putting together its first screening program in Sydney including *Blunderball*, plus the premier of Perry's *SwanSong in Birdland* and Brennan's *The Up Turned Face*. The venue

was Sydney's Union Theatre. The Union's 600 seat capacity was overwhelmed when over 1000 people turned up.<sup>45</sup> A second Sunday night screening had to be made to meet the demand. Sundays provided Ubu with the opportunity to screen their films for a venue hire fee. At this time cinemas were legally forced to close on Sundays. Later when this law changed they still remained closed as proprietors could not afford projectionists' penalty rates.

Mudie notes that Ubu developed an exhibition policy for distributing profits that aimed to stimulate production in an environment devoid of any other support. Filmmakers' rates of payment related to the length of the film in relation to the program's total time. Eventually Ubu were forced to offset costs for venue hire but consistently set the margin of 75% of profits to be returned as artist's fees.

<sup>46</sup>Thoms comments that this system was based on the democratic distribution system initiated by Jonas Mekas for the New York Film Cooperative and was adopted by Co-operatives around the world including the Sydney Filmmaker Cooperative. The revenue from light shows assisted the Co-op to return these fees. The Co-op changed this policy in 1976 to a 50% split.<sup>47</sup>

From this first film program Ubu took off, quickly becoming the common platform for independent filmmakers to exhibit their works. According to Mudie such was Ubu's success they were able to screen the works of what were then budding young filmmakers: works by Connie and Arthur Cantrill, Matt Carroll, Paul Cox, Frank Eidlitz, Jeanette Grant Thompson, Yoram Gross, Kit Guyatt, Chris McCullough, Dusan Marek, Phillip Noyce, Bruce Petty, Jim Sharman, Peter Weir and Paul

---

<sup>45</sup> Mudie, Ubu Films, op.cit., p 37

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p13

<sup>47</sup> Thoms, Polemics for a New Cinema, op.cit pp 172, 355, 403.



Winkler to name a few. Ubu were then asked to show the films in Canberra by the ANU Film Group and screenings took place on April 29-30 1966.<sup>48</sup>

A common link between this eclectic group of filmmakers is an interest in Surrealism. Thoms observes that Dusan Marek, and Yoram Gross were important immigrant artist innovators in this context, breaking the ground for highly personal filmmaking.<sup>49</sup> As observed by Giannetti, Surrealism was characterised by a love of irrationality and a rejection of convention. Influenced by Marxism, Surrealists attacked repressive capitalist institutions and particularly the Catholic Church. Freud's theories were incorporated including an obsession with dreams, sexual symbolism and the power of the subconscious. Automatism was embraced as a form of "uncontrolled" creative activity as was the use of free association. The Surrealists believed in the supremacy of the image over language in conveying emotion. Later avant-garde artists continued in the certainty of this belief.<sup>50</sup>

Like other conceptual artists Ubu members were concerned with the manipulation of ideas, rather than the technical perfection of commercial cinema. Thoms discusses the mainstream commercial cinema's dismissal of experimental film, in his book *Polemics For A New Cinema*.

All the fine arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been 'experimental'. The commercial cinema, *per se* a commercial art form, has been relatively inflexible. But fine arts films have often been disregarded for their 'experimental' nature, as if this implied some imperfection and are often considered because of this inferior to formalistic perfect commercial cinema.<sup>51</sup>

As indicated by Thoms, Canberra played an important role in Australian avant-garde cinema promoting the appreciation of New Cinema through significant purchases made by the National

---

<sup>48</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit., p 6.

<sup>49</sup> Thoms, *Polemics for a New Cinema*. Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1978, p 360.

<sup>50</sup> Giannetti, *Understanding Movies*, p 389-93.

<sup>51</sup> Albie Thoms, *Polemics For A New Cinema*, op.cit., p. 76.

Library. This in turn stimulated growth particularly in expanded cinema.<sup>52</sup> Canberra became a centre for expanded cinema production when the Cantrills took up a residency at the ANU as Creative Arts Fellows. Some of the Films, made at the ANU during their 1969-70 residency included the feature-length *Harry Hooton* (1970) , purchased by the National Library, *4000 Frames* (1970), *White Orange Green* (1969), *Bouddi* (1970) and *Video Selfportrait* (1971).<sup>53</sup> Audiences at this time had an appetite for the non-mainstream and the rise of 16mm film clubs created a nexus between private filmmaking and public exhibition that fed this desire.

## Distribution

From the first screening, Ubu's exhibitions were so popular that people wanted to hire the films to do their own screenings. To meet this demand Ubu established a distribution office in John Clark's printing office in Redfern. Ubu's exhibition and film distribution networks began to feed off one another. By setting up a distribution system Ubu controlled the supply of the product, traditionally the center of power in the commercial industry.



15 Toni Rendall and Read working in the Ubu office Mudie, op.cit.,p. 125.

A film collection that included both Australian and international films was started by Ubu members. These films were later used for private hire, touring programs and film society screenings. Mudie comments that the distribution collection started out modestly, but quickly expanded to over 130

---

<sup>52</sup> Albie Thoms, '1972 The Australian Avant-garde', *Australian Film Reader*, eds by Moran A and O'Regan T, Sydney, Currency Press, 1985, p 267.

<sup>53</sup> Melbourne Independent Filmmakers, *Arthur & Corinne Cantrill* 2003 Available: <http://www.innersense.com.au/mif/cantrill.html>, 1 Dec 2006.

titles by 1969. Such rapid success brought with it expanding administration and financial issues.<sup>54</sup>

In an article titled *Wild Talent*, John Baxter states his belief that Ubu's greatest pioneering achievement was the creation of an independent distribution system that stimulated production and exhibiting of local films.<sup>55</sup> Independent film makers now had an organization that would market, transport and merchandise their work.

### **UBU News**

Martin observes that the scarcity of writing and documentation on this form of filmmaking, now more than forty years old, suggests the ephemeral nature of independent film practice. Independent film he states is the most under-preserved and undocumented film form in Australia, its individualistic nature dictating the precarious balance it holds for both the filmmakers who struggle to produce it and its conflicting role as art cinema.<sup>56</sup>

Ubu did however, print its own newspaper, *Ubu NEWS* in accord with their objective to provoke debate. *Ubu NEWS* documented the censorship battles and was the voice for experimentation in film and music, championing alternatives to mainstream Hollywood cinema in its pages. The newly introduced technique of off set printing lowered costs and spawned a plethora of independent newspapers. *Ubu NEWS* became an effective communication tool to lobby for the beginning of arts funding and to agitate for an end to the Vietnam War. It gave the counterculture community a voice and the underground movement an identity.

---

<sup>54</sup> Mudie , *Ubu Films* op.cit p 13

<sup>55</sup> John Baxter, *The Australian Cinema* ([Sydney]: Pacific Books, 1970.

<sup>56</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Indefinite Objects: Independent Films and Video,' op.cit., p.173, 174

Mudie observes that *Ubu NEWS* which included cartoons by Martin Sharp somehow managed to evade the fate of the Australian or UK editions of *OZ magazine*. There were though two instances of police intervention into *Ubu NEWS* affairs that demonstrate the political subterranean concerns of the time. In the first incident plain clothes police arrived at Tula press in Darlinghurst and told Clark to stop printing “this filthy communist doctrine”.<sup>57</sup> The second involves Phillip Noyce and is discussed later in chapter 4.

Ubu’s battles to free up Australia’s censorship laws had other by products. As Mudie correctly notes the dismantling of outmoded censorship assisted in the critical development of the press and this in turn assisted with building support for the establishment of government financial support for the arts.

58

### **Making *Marinetti***<sup>59</sup>

Thoms’ film *Marinetti* represents both the beginning and the end for Ubu. For that reason a close examination of its provenance and reception is essential to understanding the consequences of Ubu’s art-oriented independent approach to filmmaking on the development of a mainstream Australian film industry.

Cantrill notes that Thoms used the theories of the experimental sound composer John Cage and earlier Dada theories on chance in both shooting and editing the film. Thoms would shoot film and

---

<sup>57</sup> Peter Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit.,p.19

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p 7

<sup>59</sup> *Marinetti* 1969 16mm / colour, sound, 85mins. Prod / dir / wr / edit – Albie Thoms; phot – David Perry; prod mgr – Aggy Read; snd rec – Harry Medak; music dir - John Sangster, music: John Sangster, Mick Barnes, cast: Clemency Weight, Susan Howe, Aggy Read, David Perry, Abigail Day, Mary Patterson, Bronwyn Stevens –Jones, Judith Rich, Deborah Allard and Dick Weight.

sometimes toss the film segments on the floor rejoining them at random.<sup>60</sup> In effect the writing process for *Marinetti* was the editing. The idea that the editing could be the writing was very discouraged in Australia at that time. This was partly due to the demands of film finance where there is an imperative for scripts to be locked off before people will invest.

*Marinetti* used an evolving script originally just a few lines that developed as filming progressed. John Sangster improvised with other jazz musicians to form the sound track. John Cage's use of chance and readymade sound was inspiration for compositional devices. *Bodgie Dada and the Cult of Cool* by Gail Brennan and John Clare maintains that Australian jazz musicians were also exploring elements of chance in their music and collaborated with Ubu members.

John Sangster claims to have 'played' an automated percussion solo by means of alarm clocks, egg timers, a metronome and other devices.<sup>61</sup>

Sangster played his automated percussion solo on the set of the Sydney production of *Hair* in the Metro theatre in Kings Cross along with the band *Tully* and with Thoms on lights. *Marinetti* is acknowledged as one of the best examples of Sangster's most fluid and colourful works of the decade.<sup>62</sup>

The techniques Thoms used to construct *Marinetti* have credibility in the history of film. Chaplin was famous for improvised scripts, shooting material, editing it and re-shooting. In more recent times Woody Allen works this way, while French New Wave cinema and Italian post war cinema also used improvised scripts.

---

<sup>60</sup> Arthur Cantrill, 'A Milestone in Australian Filmmaking?', *Broadside*, 1969, p32

<sup>61</sup> John Clare, Gail Brennan, *Bodgie Dada & the Cult of Cool*, Sydney, University Press, 1995, p. 125.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p126.

*Marinetti* records a man's reactions to the presence of both his past and present girlfriends at a party. The people in *Marinetti*, though, are not characters in a conventional narrative. Instead they are canvases for colourful projections, upon which the abstract shapes of a film and sound poem are reflected. The images move between love story and nightmare. Visual effects are created through polarised lights, stroboscopes, altered colours, textures and film speeds.

The opening minutes of the film are completely black, the only stimulus being a vocal sound track. At a party, friends can be heard discussing the Italian poet, Filippo Marinetti. Finally the black flashes to white as a flicker effect. This is then replaced by a green room at first flicking past the eye in half frame flashes, the shortest period in film time. Voice, music and sound effects develop to an overlapping cacophony of sound collage that sometimes clashes and sometimes blends with the visual images.

Sandra Hall in the *Bulletin* records in August 1968 Thom's debt to Marinetti the Futurist:

In '65 I put some of his plays in the 'Theatre of Cruelty' and later on I was writing an article for the theatre magazine *Masque* about happenings, the ones he'd done long before everybody else ever thought about them – and the whole structure was quite clear to me. The techniques, anyway.<sup>63</sup>

Thoms states he began *Marinetti* in 1967 and comments on its conception:

....A direct outgrowth of theatrical theories of Antonin Artaud and in particular my theatre production of 1965 the *Theatre of Cruelty*. The *Theatre of Cruelty* took as its basis Artaud's dictum: *Theatre is a delirium and is communicative*.<sup>64</sup>

Artaud's delirium was drug induced as was quite probably his later mental illness. Thoms sees *Marinetti* also as a drug induced journey:

Today, through drugs, people are aware of the magic that exists everywhere around us. My film *Marinetti* is a trip, a voyage of discovery, an eighty minute experience of the delirium of life.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup>Thoms, *Polemics for a New Cinema*, op.cit.,p94.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p95

<sup>65</sup>Ibid, p 94

A pattern of timing emerges which Arthur Cantrill described as: 'slow fast, moderately fast, climax, slow.' (The natural pattern of lovemaking).<sup>66</sup> Thoms uses multiple superimpositions of movement and the lights of Kings Cross to build the film to its literal climax --an orgasm. The climax is overlaid with found film newsreel footage and painted and scratched film and finally replaced by tranquil music and birds. Thoms saw *Marinetti* as an exercise in perception. He notes the film took him over eighteen months to make and cost him \$5000.<sup>67</sup> At the time this was a huge investment of both time and money.

Thoms used many non conventional experimental techniques in *Marinetti*. The camera work was an extension of his psychological state of mind. Both John Matthews in *Cinematics* and Joan Kerr in the *Nation* shared a similar reading of the film. Joan Kerr saw the film as having a mythic function depicting the twentieth century human condition from the idyllic, to the insane, to the knowledge that the whole world is insane. The only options left being avoidance, endurance or enjoyment.<sup>68</sup>

Mathews saw the film as it is, a piece of formal abstraction with multiple layers of autobiographical and conceptual levels. The theme was the destruction of a personal world by an impersonal one and the regaining of an individual vision at the price of madness. He described the techniques used as superimposed duplication, triplication of colour images over black and white and a sound effects plot. And he stated that it posed a key issue: where to from here?<sup>69</sup>

### ***Marinetti's* world premier at the Sydney Film Festival**

---

<sup>66</sup> Cantrill, 'A Milestone in Australian Filmmaking?', op.cit , p32

<sup>67</sup> Thoms op.cit p94

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p 96

<sup>69</sup> John Matthews, 'Marinetti', *Cinematics*, (1970)

*Marinetti* held its world premiere at the Sydney Wintergarden Theatre as an adjunct to the Sydney Film Festival on June 17 1969 to a capacity audience of 2400 people. The only two Australian films made that year were *Marinetti* and Tim Burstall's *2000 Weeks*. Both films were booed at the screening. *Marinetti* nearly created a riot with people walking out in protest.

The media attention that had for so long surrounded Ubu and assisted in promoting their activities and attracting new audiences now turned hostile. A close examination of the critical responses and reviews compiled in Mudie's chronology demonstrates the ferocity of its rejection. Charles Higham previously an Ubu supporter, complained of eye strain in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 23/6/1969.

<sup>70</sup>Thoms notes that Higham in a 1966 *Bulletin* article had attacked imitation Hollywood or Ealing Australia and recommended a rejection of the traditional film industry in favor of the personal visionary films of Mekas in New York and Baile in California.<sup>71</sup>

There was considerable variation in the number of walk outs recorded between the *Daily Telegraph* 18/6/ 1969 – '1000 audience bored with sex film' and the *Sydney Morning Herald* 18/6/1969- '500 Walk out of Sydney "no plot" film' (Peter Forbes's column).<sup>72</sup>

Cantrill comments that film critics were not excited and there were no references to *Marinetti* in overseas film magazines.<sup>73</sup>

---

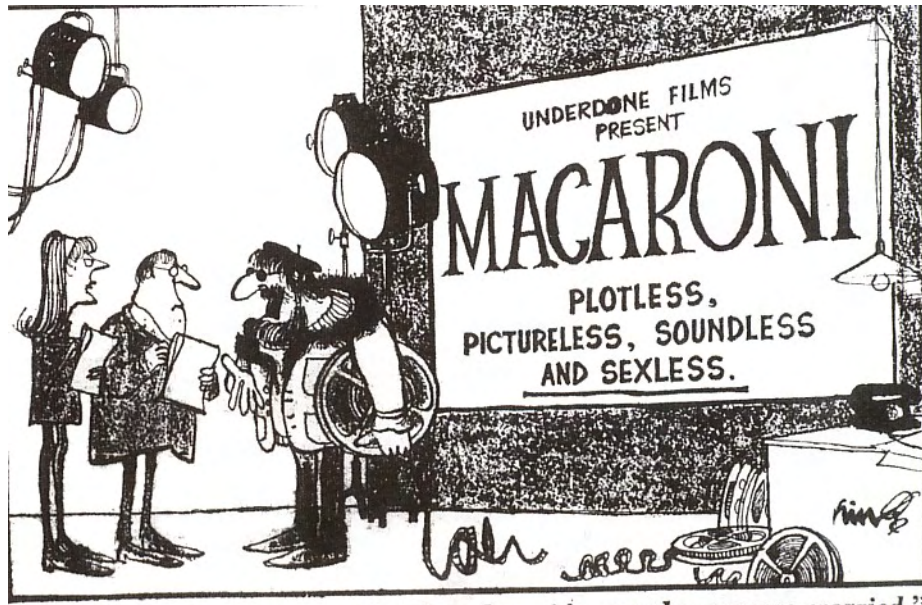
<sup>70</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit.,p198

<sup>71</sup> Thoms, op.cit, p346.

<sup>72</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit., p200

<sup>73</sup> Cantrill, 'A Milestone in Australian Filmmaking?', op.cit.,p.33.





**"It's ninety minutes of nothing but, boy, it's got the censors worried."**

Higham)

from Daily Telegraph - 18/6/1965

16 Mudie op.cit p198

Yet there were others who applauded *Marinetti*. They also had their own theories as to why the Sydney Film Festival audiences were so dismissive. Thoms himself writes in *Polemics for a new Cinema* from the distance of nearly a decade:

The increased intolerance in Australia marked by a ban on drugs and by more rigorous censorship, limit the future of the 'cinema of cruelty' in this country. While it derives from notions of Marinetti, Jarry, Joyce, Artaud, and other Europeans, and relates to the film experiments of the American underground, *Marinetti* is essentially an Australian film, a Sydney film, deriving from the environment here. It is not without irony that of all the cities where it has been shown the Sydney audience at its world premier was the most hostile.<sup>74</sup>

Cantrill was also supportive:

What a shock for Australian cinema audiences who are still living in the French new wave '50's! With their film sensibilities retarded by censorship and isolation from the New Cinema what must their ultra – what must their ultra conformist minds be thinking? The film has no plot! No story! What's it all about? <sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Thoms, *Polemics for a New Cinema*, op.cit., p 98.

<sup>75</sup> Cantrill, 'A Milestone in Australian Filmmaking,' op.cit.,p 33.

Structuralist films like *Marinetti* were formalist film experiments with an emphasis on editing techniques, pulse and time. *Marinetti* was a personal journey, an Australian expression of American New Cinema concerns. The Sydney Film Festival audience may not have been countercultural enough to have kept pace with the changes wrought in film theory by the international new wave that overlaid structuralism and psychoanalysis as new methodologies for meaning making in film.

At this point it is worth referring to P. Adams Sitney, a leading US experimental film critic. Professor of the Council of the Humanities and Visual Arts at Princeton University, author of the first historical study of the post war American avant-garde cinema, titled *Visionary Film*. Sitney identifies several dominant forms of avant-garde film within the 1960s including the meditation or trance film, the mythopoetic film, the rogue wanderer and structural film. *Marinetti* includes the techniques Sitney identifies as particular to structural films: the flicker effect, loop printing and re-photographing off screen.<sup>76</sup> It differs in one aspect from the standard structuralist style in that it does not use a fixed camera position. *Marinetti* is an example of Sitney's rogue wanderer style.

The Sydney Film Festival began life in 1954 the same year that François Truffaut published his famous auteur theory in the 'Cahiers du Cinéma'. In *Understanding Movies* Louis Giannetti asserts that the '50s and '60s were dominated by the debate surrounding the French New Wave theory of the auteur. For the critics and filmmakers that supported the theory of the auteur it was not the literary text that shaped a film but the director's vision. A good director would have consistent themes across the work and a signature style that could be used to assess the oeuvre. The benefits of the theory were that it recognized many previously ignored directors who had been dismissed as low

---

<sup>76</sup> P.Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film the American Avant-Garde*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1974, pp 430, 407.

art entertainers including: Hitchcock, Ford, Fuller and Hawks. The high moral ground thematic films were rejected in favor of American popular films that reflected everyday life and showed directorial skill in their delivery. Literary prejudices were cleared away. As Alexandre Astruc commented;

The filmmaker / author writes with his camera, as a writer writes with his pen.<sup>77</sup>

Thoms incidentally was able to recoup some of the film's budget from the Wintergarden screening and organised more screenings to recoup the rest of his money. Melbourne and Brisbane audiences were much more positive. As were European and the US audiences when Thoms left the country and took *Marinetti* on tour. In France the Director Henri Langlois of the *Cinematheque Francaise* championed the film, placing it in a program he curated for the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Ubu was reeling from the negative media coverage of *Marinetti* and struggling from cash flow problems and chaotic credit arrangements from interstate screenings. Audiences had dropped. Ubu's film collection was passed on to the Sydney Filmmakers Cooperative and Phillip Noyce was appointed Manager.<sup>78</sup>

Giannetti concedes that the auteur theory was used by the French new wave movement as rationalization for their intensely personal and idiosyncratic films. One of the contradictory aspects of the theory was the privileged role of the director contrasted with the intensely collaborative nature of filmmaking. In the late '60s and '70s layers of cultural theory were added to the film critic's repertoire, diminishing the excesses of the auteur theory as readers / spectators as well as texts themselves were seen to bring their own meanings. Psychoanalysis, semiotics and structuralist theoretical approaches also brought an opening out of approaches to meaning making.

---

<sup>77</sup> Gianetti, *Understanding Movies*, op cit , pp 415 , 31

<sup>78</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit pp 222, 253

*Marinetti* is an auteur film in that it is an intensely personal film reflecting Thoms' life, and friends and in Alexandre Astruc style written in the shooting. But it is also an abstract film or painting as Thoms states:

Much of *Marinetti* was made working directly with film materials, painting, scratching even biting the film stock.<sup>79</sup>

It has many intensely beautiful visual effects but as a feature length film it is very demanding of its audience. The difficulty for Australian audiences to engage with American New Cinema is noted by Cantrill who cites as an example the fact that the Sydney Film Co-op had been prevented by the censors in attempting to bring Ed Emshwiller's classic work *Relativity* (1966) into the country.<sup>80</sup>

American and Australian New Cinema films certainly required effort on the part of the audience. As Thoms observes it was continuation of Duchamp's premise that: the perceiver completes the creative cycle and makes the work whole. Thoms goes on to state that the sudden availability of hallucinogenic drugs necessitated a need to create a delirium in order for audiences to be able to communicate. *Marinetti* is a demanding film and it takes effort to withstand the chaotic delirium for eighty minutes. Thoms likened the booing to the reception Jarry received for his *Ubu Roi* plays in 1896.<sup>81</sup> The ABC screened a minute of the simulated orgasm sequence on *This Day Tonight* just prior to promoting the premiere.<sup>82</sup>

*Marinetti* came out on the cusp of critical change and the stirrings of the long dormant Australian cinema. This product of an Australian new wave influenced by the US New Wave with its personal

---

<sup>79</sup>Thoms, *Polemics of a New Cinema*, op.cit, p97

<sup>80</sup>Arthur Cantrill, 'A Milestone in Australian Filmmaking,' op.cit, p33

<sup>81</sup>Thoms, op.cit, p 95 ,94, 96

<sup>82</sup>Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit, p 197.

subject matter and lack of any narrative structure may have been very challenging to an industry sheltered from these new concepts of what filmmaking might be. Ubu's success in establishing a grass roots independent film industry that attracted large audiences presented a threat to an emergent traditional film industry. Cantrill notes that the greatest hostility came from the film industry and the commercial media who were outraged.<sup>83</sup>

Thoms states in an oral history for the National Film and Sound Archive, that as punishment for *Marinetti* he was locked out of the TV industry.<sup>84</sup> There would be no more offers to write and direct episodes of *Skippy*. His professional career in TV was finished. There is no evidence of this from any other source than Thoms himself. His career and his own artistic practice are characterized by a conflict between art and industry. At the time he was editing *Marinetti* he resigned from the ABC, citing poor pay and frustration from the lack of creative control. He argued that the industry had a creative blockage when it came to relating to artists:

There's still this attitude that artists' work isn't work - although that's changing. But at the moment, the administration people pay themselves adequately while the artists suffer<sup>85</sup>

He states that at the time of the premiere he felt deserted by colleagues who he believed failed to rally to offer the solidarity he needed.

A little over a month later, in August 1969, there was a breakthrough when Prime Minister John Gorton announced he would provide funding for an Australian Film Industry and Film School. Art and film funding were to be combined in the new Australia Council for the Arts. Ubu associates, Phillip Noyce and Jan Chapman, would later become students and staff at AFTRS. Ubu and the

---

<sup>83</sup> Arthur Cantrill, "A Milestone in Australian Filmmaking?," *Broadside* (1969): p 33.

<sup>84</sup> Thoms, Oral History, op.cit.

<sup>85</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit., p113

counterculture were major contributing factors in creating the climate that led to the realization of the film school and is further discussed in Chapter 4. That the revival became industry rather than art focused, however, necessitated the marginalization of Ubu's achievements and the direction of funding towards commercialization.

As discussed in Chapter 1 the SUDs *Theatre of Cruelty* had brought group members together, it seeded the ideas for *Marinetti*. Marinetti the Futurist originator of mix media happenings, therefore appropriately makes an appearance at both the beginning and the end of Ubu's collaborations. From this point on Ubu members went their individual ways to discover the question posed: Where to from here?

### **The aesthetics of Independent Filmmaking**

In considering Thoms' work in reference to the auteur theory a persistent theme is his concern with representations of time.

#### ***Man and his world*<sup>86</sup> (1967)**

*Man and his world* alters perceptions of time, by stretching one second of real time to fifty seconds of film time screened in reverse. A complex montage about an individual's existence in a world of changing technology, it prefigures his later work for *Marinetti*. Thoms outlines the making process in his oral history. He obtained a plaster cast head from East Sydney Technical College and filled it with milky fluid and using a special high-speed camera that took 1500 frames a second, he then fired a gun at the head and captured the explosion on film. The footage is then reversed so the head

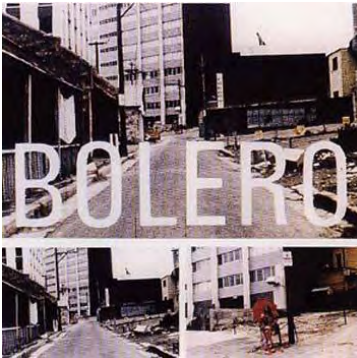
---

<sup>86</sup> DVD 1 No 6 *Man and His World* (16mm film) 1967

A depiction of the contemporary world in which a one second image is stretched to fifty seconds and overlaid with rapidly changing split – screen images. 16mm, colour, sound, prod / dir / wr – Albie Thoms; phot / edit –David Perry; cam op –John Clark, Keith Hutchison; prod mgr – Aggy Read; music –Mick Liber.

slowly re-assembles from fragments of exploded plaster and milky liquid. Footage of urban Sydney was then superimposed over the top and tinted with a shifting tri colour traveling matte during printing. It was entered in the Montreal Expo in Canada, a requirement of entry being that all films had to be no longer than fifty seconds long. *Man and His World* reached the finals and was purchased by the *Cinematheque Canadien*.<sup>87</sup>

At the time of *Marinetti's* premiere Thoms was best known for his film *Bolero*, a 14 min, continuous tracking shot down a Sydney laneway to the sound track of Ravel. It was entered into the Belgian international experimental film festival in 1967. *Bolero* is an excellent example of the cooperation of experimental filmmakers and highlights the contradiction in the auteur theory vis a vis the role of the director within a situation of intense collaboration.



17 Mudie, op.cit. p82

Mudie describes the complexity of achieving a seemingly single continuous shot. Dolly tracks for the camera could not be used without them being visible in the shot, so Read's car was modified to become a camera dolly. The car boot lid was removed and its tyres deflated and it was then pushed backwards while Perry operated the camera from inside the boot. Read steered the car towards its target at the end of the street, while Thoms timed the correct pace of the tracking shot against chalk marks on the road to maintain the position of the car in relation to the correct time and place in the

---

<sup>87</sup> Thoms, Oral History, op.cit.

shots continuity. The result is a smooth almost unperceivable progression down a street, not an easy thing to achieve without a vast amount of expensive equipment.<sup>88</sup>



18 Thoms, Howe, Read, Perry, and Nick Casey, preparing to shoot *Bolero* (photo Matt Carol) Mudie, op.cit. p82

The winning film at the Belgian Festival that year was the famous continuous shot film *Wavelength*, by the U.S experimental filmmaker Michael Snow. *Russian Ark* takes the same concept of the one continuous shot a lot further.

In an essay on the relationship between Bergson's and Deleuze's conceptions of time in film Jacques Aumont describes Deleuze's time-image:

the cinematic apparatus implies not only the passage of time, a chronology into which we would slip as if into a perpetual present, but also a complex, stratified time in which we move through different levels simultaneously, present, past(s), future(s) - and not only because we use our memory and expectations, but also because, when it emphasizes the time in which things take place, their duration, cinema almost allows us to perceive time.<sup>89</sup>

Both *Man and His World* and *Bolero* achieve this concept of time be it in very different forms of expression. Thoms describes in *Polemics for a New Cinema* the process he used in constructing *Marinetti's* complex time representations.

---

<sup>88</sup> Mudie, *Ubu Films*, op.cit p82

<sup>89</sup> Donato Totaro, *Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonian Film Project*, 1999, Available: [www.horschamp.qc.ca/9903/offscreen\\_essays/deleuze2.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9903/offscreen_essays/deleuze2.html), 19 January 2007.



The film was made without a script as such, to a pattern that existed in my mind, that was aided by notes on scraps of paper, and existed to a greater extent in lists of numbers, figures representing frames, which are film's own method of measuring time.

To the music, improvised to the images by musicians, was added electronic music made by accelerating and decelerating tapes,

....just as the opening blank screen accustoms one's eyes to seeing more, to seeing more quickly, to perceiving greater detail.

As the images build, so too does an awareness of the experience that is about to happen.

He also notes that criticism of Ubu's short films as inconsequential experiments motivated him to make a feature length experimental film.<sup>90</sup> In contrast to this statement Thoms notes his interest in continuous shot films resulted from his frustration with the constant short takes dictated by the television industry he worked in at the time.<sup>91</sup> Thoms' chapter on *Marinetti* makes no comment on the collaboration process with Perry or Sangster. He does comment on the artistic merit of Perry and Sangster's work on the film in *Tharunka*:

What wasn't done with Perry's camera-work hasn't been conceived. Albie implicitly states as expected: with Sangster working on it, reeds and organ of Tully included in assistance: the soundtrack is superb.<sup>92</sup>

John Mathews again in *Cinematics* addresses the contradiction inherent in the auteur theory within *Marinetti* when he notes:

It tends to resolve the paradox of film being a group activity, yet one man's dream, by exploding it and hence giving rise to new tensions. It has gone beyond dazzling clarity of the cinematic image to a self-negating world of optical illusion.

Mathews goes further to maintain

These developments are not radical, but decadent Thoms is exploiting the contradictions of a medium now in its dying stages before its total supersession by electronic technology.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Thoms, *Polemics of a New Cinema*, op.cit., p97

<sup>91</sup> Danni Zuvela, *The Ubu Movement an Interview with Albie Thoms*, 2003, Senses of Cinema, Available: [www.sensesofcinema.com/03/27/albie\\_thoms.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/03/27/albie_thoms.html), 13 January 2006 2007.

<sup>92</sup> Rod Milliken, 'Marinetti Lives,' University of New South Wales, Students' Union, '*Tharunka* Newssheet,' Kensington, University of New South Wales Students' Union, 1969.

Thoms continued experiments with time and the flicker effects used in *Marinetti* in his next film *Sunshine City*. In both *Sunshine City* and *Palm Beach* Thoms uses overlapping sound montages as a tool to split the present into two narrative directions. Thoms' films like Warhols' are concerned with exploding the myths of compressed time in film and demystifying the filmmaking process.

Forty years on film as a medium is very near death, yet the work of these early Australian experimental filmmakers is still awaiting serious assessment. In between time an electronic counter culture has gathered momentum using open source software to produce and debate creative product and then distribute it via a creative commons online community. It similarly seeks democratic process and access to the arts but technological censorship has replaced moral censorship continuing to hamper the growth of this artistic community.

Martin's assessment rightly dismisses as too simplistic the dominant theory of an earlier Australian avant-garde history, as being motivated by either one of two distinct purist forms; a fine arts or a political anti-cinema approach that reveals the cinematic apparatus of the medium itself, the camera, the spectator and or the screen. He outlines five categories: the romantic –imaginistic tradition; a formalist-conceptual mode; anarchic-primitivism; an agitational-deconstructive mode; and a popular culture fiction impulse. As opposed to being divided by a previous binary approach such as non-narrative versus narrative these categories are fluid parts of a continuum from abstraction to

---

<sup>93</sup>John Matthews, 'Marinetti,' *Cinematics*, op.cit.

representation. He positions Ubu as the first to promote the anarchic –primitive tradition style in Australia which includes scratch films and found footage manipulations.<sup>103</sup>

Ubu's handmade film kit was important in promoting this style and their works would be included in many of Martin's other categories. Martin makes the qualification that there is much crossing over between the formalist-conceptualist and the romantic traditions that manifests itself in the work of later generations of film-makers. The change of medium from 16mm to super 8 signalled not only a shift in film format but a generational divide between filmmakers.<sup>94</sup> He concludes later film-makers such as Tim Burns and Lindzee Smith continued to explore Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* ideas, travelling to the US to become part of the New York 'Cinema of Transgression' movement. This style, Martin surmises draws on two European precursors, outsider art and the experimental film manifesto of Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'Acinema'.<sup>95</sup>

Filmmakers in the popular culture-fiction tradition style, Martin claims, seek to indulge themselves by absorbing fragments of popular culture and reusing them as pastiche, nostalgia, kitch or film 'quotation'. Martin takes the view that Ubu made a significant contribution to this style in the 1960s, after which there was a dearth of work of this type up until the 1980s.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Martin, "Indefinite Objects: Independent Film and Video," p 198. 175, 179.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p182

<sup>96</sup> Ibid p185.

The comic Ubu drama *Blunderball*<sup>97</sup> is a classic example of this style and was Ubu's first film after the SUDS production. A parody of Bond films and their Hollywood formula, it was written by Thoms as a twist on *Thunderball* 1965. Most of the Bond signature formula is parodied here beginning with the iconic gun barrel view and a Minus 007's tussle to release his revolver from its holster. Terrance McMullen as Jim Bond is far from athletic, as an amateur actor and university psychology lecturer weighing in at 15 stone. Any physical exertion by this anti hero is habitually followed by animated brow mopping. Similar to the later Mike Myer's Bond parodic character Austin Powers, Jim Bond is fat, ugly and very incompetent. In the opening scene Bond comes nowhere near death in an unspectacular stunt sequence.

*Blunderball* contains no parody or questioning of the intrinsic Bond sexism, confirming Gemes's earlier comment that the counterculture was not attuned to any feminist readings or interpretations of meanings. Pure Bond formula is used in the credits as the opening text is projected over Mary Patterson's naked thrusting belly.

Bond Athletic films presents Jim Bond the true story of minus 007 in *Blunderball* from Dr Nofinger with hate.

The plot is also formulaic. The villains, led by Ernst Stravo Blowfly (D'Arcy Waters), aim to destroy Jim Bond in a circle of villainy titled The Society for the Perpetration and Extension of Crime, Terror, Revenge and Extortion (SPECTRE). A girl is used to lure Bond to the exotic location of Lobster Lock Island (Bare Island and fort) in Botany Bay. Bond infiltrates the villain's fortress, has a run in with the henchmen and is captured. Miraculously Bond escapes to wreak havoc on the

---

<sup>97</sup> *Blunderball* 1966 DVD1 No 5 *Blunderball* (16mm film) 1966 A burlesque of the James Bond films – a blundering – 007 battles against the master criminals Dr Yes and Ernst Stravo Blowfly. Prod / dir / wr / - Albie Thoms; art dir / phot / edit – David Perry; cam op – John Clark; prod mgr – Aggy Read; music, Python Lee Jackson, Id; narr -Clive Graham; wardrobe – Susan Howe; cast: Terence McMullen, Cam Perry, Brian Millis, George Brandt, Chris Hill, Darcy Waters, and Mary Patterson.

villain's plan, followed by the mandatory extended chase scene and a low tech getaway using a surf board. The fortress is destroyed in a minor nuclear explosion (a cut in of found explosion footage). Bond triumphantly emerges from the waves onto Bondi Beach dressed in an immaculate dinner suit and is mobbed by an army of babes in bikinis. Richard Neville plays a minor crook and Sue Howe and Tina Kaufman are mentioned as Bond girls in the credits.

Unlike other Ubu films *Blunderball* was designed to make money that would then fund other Ubu experimental film projects.



9 <http://www.bondsupp.freemove.co.uk/movie/tball.htm>



20 Mudie, op.cit., p.33.

Using Martin's aesthetic schema Ubu's practice can be seen to have been significant across the continuum of experimental film forms. Not only was Ubu ground breaking in promoting new and diverse film forms, its influences flowed on to later generations of independent filmmakers using Super 8 formats. A substantial survey exhibition of Australian art film of either film format is yet to be compiled for Australian audiences.

A compilation video of Ubu films exists through the National Film Library lending service. Many other films by their associates are stored only as preservation copies in the National Collection of Film and Sound precluding their viewing, and providing an archive of yet untapped visual arts, for the moment preserved from view. Many of these films and others listed in Martin's article are difficult to view in the now obscure original formats of 16mm and Super 8.

As mentioned, Skoller contends that the seeking out of autonomous alternatives to mass culture, mass consumerism and the art industry are key features of both avant-garde art practice and countercultures. The failure of leftist politics in Australia in the 1960s to challenge conservative control led to the emergence of a counterculture. Australia's political situation in the early part of the new millennium was not dissimilar to today.

Ubu's commitment to 'involvement without impediment' and to the democratization of process is philosophically comparable to today's expanding online counter culture. A new social movement of Web 2.0 folksonomies is now using the internet to collaborate, on production, exhibition, distribution and debate. Media integration has for the first time made this possible on the same machine. The future holds the promise of expansion of opportunities for individuals to continue the notion of the auteur by producing and distributing work via the internet and therefore have a chance contesting the Hollywood entertainment system.

The use of readymade found material has also been strongly embraced by this new counterculture as content for sound and image mash ups. The social and political movements driving the push for Creative Commons licensing, open source access and user led input are akin to the libertarian spirit

that created the film co-ops more than forty years ago. Mia Garlick a legal advisor on Creative Commons issues defines the principles of this movement:

Creative Commons hopes to secure a realm for participatory culture where people can share, comment and build upon each other's work, rather than simply passively receive content.<sup>98</sup>

Thoms' assessment of new computer generated experimental cinema is that it is devoid of socialist political ideologies.<sup>99</sup> The advent of the Creative Commons license movement is again asking borderline questions concerning the issues of artists' rights to be able to engage, and utilize the national culture. Web 2.0 and Creative Commons' aims are to stimulate production and provide artists with a hyper distribution model. The Co-op's exhibition policy attempted to do the same thing. In Ubu's era the question of access to an international community to share artistic ideas meant the necessity of overcoming the oppressive censorship laws of the time. In a new millennium the Web 2.0 and the Creative Commons movement is challenging the restrictions of corporate content owners and providing a grassroots mechanism to enable collaboration and artistic growth, akin to Ubu's aims to expand independent production, distribution and debate of cultural product.

---

<sup>98</sup> Mia Garlick, 'Opening up a Creative Dialogue' 2005, Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT's), Available: [http://www.anat.org.au/pages/forumspubs/FilterArchive/Filter61\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.anat.org.au/pages/forumspubs/FilterArchive/Filter61_WEB.pdf), 6 December 2006.

<sup>99</sup> Zuvela, *The Ubu Movement an Interview with Albie Thoms.*, Senses of Cinema, Available [www.senses of cinema.com/03/27/albie\\_thoms.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/03/27/albie_thoms.html) 17 January 2007

## Chapter 4

### The impact of experimental film on mainstream Australian cinema



What was the impact of Ubu and the counterculture in forming Australian cinema history? A generation of Australian filmmakers now acknowledged internationally was informed by this movement. Yet their origins have never been properly looked at, nor has the impact of this experimental movement on Australian mainstream film. These early 1960s experimental films have been ignored or dismissed by historians, art historians and film critics alike, yet they present a far more authentic critically aware history of Australian life than the grand nationalistic narratives of 1970s mainstream Australian cinema that superseded them.

In this chapter I will demonstrate that this aesthetic based cinema practice offers far more inventive ways of representing history than social documentary or feature film, that avant-garde historiography is deserving of critical research and an essential component to visual literacy. Art cinema's long legacy means it can no longer be dismissed as merely a laboratory of ideas for commercial use.

*Newsfront*, and *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* are anti- histories. Both films question such fundamental givens as Australia's dependency on foreign imperial powers for defence, oppressive censorship and cultural ideologies of sexual and political control. Both films propose alternate outcomes and in doing so both question what is generally perceived as authentic in telling history. They combine narrative and structuralism, still and moving images and found object film to explore the passage of time.

Ubu and the Sydney Film Co-op they founded were a symbiotic relationship. One did not exist separately from the other. The Sydney Film Co-op provided essential skills and experience as an

early training ground particularly for Phillip Noyce but also for others involved with *Newsfront*. This early exposure to the history of avant-garde through association with UBU members and the Co-op gave these filmmakers' practice a depth of understanding that has assisted in their maintaining careers at the forefront of their fields forty years on, see for example *The Truman Show* directed by Peter Weir, or *Bone Collector* directed by Phillip Noyce, *Driving Miss Daisy* directed by Bruce Beresford and *No Worries* directed by David Ellis. Although many later joined the Hollywood studio system their early experimental beginnings as the 'auteur', of their films, personally crafting the whole production process including directing and editing, printing and distribution has resulted in a deep aesthetic, social, political and practical understanding of the craft of filmmaking. At the time this was an economic necessity for these filmmakers and a political choice in opposition to industrial capitalistic production processes.

There has been little to no critical evaluation of the debt of mainstream Australian cinema to earlier artistic experimental movements and the national network of film co-operatives established by Ubu and other Australian experimental filmmakers. This thesis seeks to begin this discussion in reference to one key film *Newsfront* (1978) as a case study. David Stratton has written an excellent and detailed outline of *Newsfront's* development in his book *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival*<sup>60</sup>. Here he correctly describes *Newsfront* as perhaps one of the most contentious and embattled films in Australian filmmaking history in terms of its concept and script ownership. He notes that *Newsfront* grossed over 2 million dollars and ran for nine months in Australia. Stratton fails to deal with *Newsfront's* innovation as a montage film indebted to the ready-made as part of an

---

<sup>60</sup> David Stratton, *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1980.

international avant-garde heritage. The ready-made concept was transferred to the film medium by experimental filmmakers in the US and Australia in the 1960s.

Montage is used in the film as a political statement to draw out the impact of social institutions such as the church and state on people's personal and professional relationships. It also functions to question metanarratives in the story of Australia such as attitudes to race and gender. Noyce uses montage in the film to tell an alternative history in keeping with themes in his earlier work discussed later in this chapter.

Stratton also makes no mention of the combination of narrative and structuralism that is critical to *Newsfront's* construction, nor does he make connections between the experimental techniques used by the makers of *Newsfront* and an Australian experimental film movement. He does though document the impact on the young Noyce of the influence of Ubu including this quote by Noyce:

Something clicked with me. Here are these local guys making films very cheaply-for as little as \$200 – and they were more relevant to me than anything else I had seen. They seemed to reflect the speeded up – fragmented preoccupations of my generation at the time.<sup>52</sup>

*Newsfront* is unique as a film critique of the policies and practices of the media industry. It carefully tracks the production, exhibition and distribution methods of the newsreel companies in creating a social consensus on war and Australian identity. This has never been connected to the fact that Noyce took over management of the Sydney Co-operative after Ubu dissolved.

Phillip Noyce's connections to Ubu and to the Sydney Film Co-Operative introduced him to a very different way of operating than that of the mass media industries, which segmented and divided

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp211, 201.

practice with different people responsible for each area of production. In the Co-op Noyce worked collectively participating in all areas of production, exhibition and distribution. This fact must have informed his direction of *Newsfront*, a film that reveals the power relations and dynamics of capitalist control that function behind the scenes in the media industry.

In addition the call for government support for an Australian cinema in the late 1960s, of which both Ubu and the film Co-op were a part, was also made in the context of a Hollywood dominated market where desperate cinema owners struggled against declining audience numbers as a result of television. The call for support of Australian film was then in opposition to the dominance of Hollywood. *Newsfront* was an important part of the Australian film renaissance that occurred in the 1970s. This renaissance occurred as a cry of support for a national industry in resistance to the cultural dominance of American media. In this context *Newsfront* was intended to be a powerful political and social analysis of the impact of past and contemporary metanarratives on Australian culture and daily life.

As highlighted previously, *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* owes a debt to an earlier avant-garde art heritage. This is also true for *Newsfront* even though it was produced as a commercial film. This chapter looks at that earlier avant-garde art heritage in relation to *Newsfront* and how it informed the practice of the filmmakers who produced it. David Elflick, Philippe Mora, and Phillip Noyce and writer Bob Ellis were all involved with the counterculture scene, with UBU and the Sydney Film Co-operative.

***Newsfront* Promo**<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> [Promo DVD 2 Clip 10](#) (Australian: 1978), vol., ed. David Elflick Palm Beach Pictures.

*Newsfront* was successful both critically and commercially. It played an important part in the 1970s cinema renaissance. It received 18 international awards drawing significant overseas attention to a newly rekindled Australian film industry. Even at home, the film set several firsts. One was the astonishing fact that it was nominated in fourteen categories for the AFI Awards – a record that was to stand for 25 years until it was equaled in 2003 by *Gettin' Square*.<sup>54</sup> It ended up winning 8 AFI Awards. It included an excellent cast of Australian actors who later came to dominate the industry.

The story time of the film is an eight year period, beginning in Sydney in 1948, with Ben Chifley as Australia's Prime Minister. The film tells the story of the lives of the newsreels cameramen who unwittingly captured and narrated Australia's history on film during this period. This symbolic time span of Australian history is told through a collage of newsreel footage from the era and includes: the election of the Menzies's Government, the Liberal party's unsuccessful attempt to ban the Communist Party, the conquest of Everest, the Korean War and the visit of US Vice President Richard Nixon to Australia.

The film ends with the controversial 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne and the arrival of television. Along the way we see national issues such as: immigration, the Communist threat, war in New Guinea, the Redex trials, the Maitland floods and bushfires, all reported on in a propagandist style through the medium of the newsreel. Woven through this audio visual recording of national and international events is the domestic drama of newsreel cameraman Len McGuire's (played by

---

<sup>54</sup> Ingo Petzke, Phillip Noyce : Backroads to Hollywood (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2004, p 99.

Bill Hunter) private life. Through Len we witness the impact of technological change on his career and the company that employs him.

The passage of time in *Newsfront* is organized around a series of chaptered tableaux, each beginning with a still image. *Newsfront* as in *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is concerned with the binaries of the era. Patricia Mellencamp notes that 1960s and 1970s avant-gardes were concerned with:

.....still photography versus moving images, art versus mass culture, narrative versus formalism and silence versus sound. A Cold War logic of duality.<sup>55</sup>

*Newsfront* is set within the context of the cold war. The golden years of the newsreels occurred in the 1940s when they were the only moving image record of the news. Newsreel theatres such as the famous State Theatre in Sydney that features in the film were incredibly popular. People would take their shopping and drinks in there to watch a series of newsreels that ran all day and screened a mix of recent news events and infotainment stories. The importance of newsreels, therefore, in constructing history cannot be overemphasized.

Skoller in his book *Making History in Avant-garde Film* describes the impact of image culture on history making. He notes major shifts in the epistemology of history over the last fifty years. In part he identifies these shifts as the result of technological changes and their flow on implications to the construction of meaning through narration. Skoller cites the unprecedented growth in image culture begun in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as having the dual functions of both supporting and unsettling traditional forms of historiography. Still and moving images are now key texts in our belief in, and assimilation of, the past. As he concedes:

In this sense, photography, film and television have become the major ways in which we contextualize the past in relation to the present.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, 'An Empirical Avant-Garde' Laleen Jayamanne and Tracey Moffat, *Fugitive Images from Photography to Video*, *Theories of Contemporary Culture*, Petro, Patrice ed., vol. v. 16 Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. p 173

These are now accepted as valid a carrier of authoritative historiography as written texts or artifacts.

In this period of Australian history two newsreel companies dominated production, Ken. G Hall's company *Cinesound* and the Fox owned *Movietone News*. Hall's company *Cinesound* prided itself on its Australian content like the fictional *Cinetone* Company in *Newsfront*, promoting itself as the 'eyes and ears of Australia'. *Movietone* akin to the Company *Newsco* in *Newsfront* was backed by international production companies that carried foreign content.

In the real time of the Australian film industry this was a very bleak period. Australian film technicians were forced to eke out a living on newsreels and government documentaries alone for forty years between the 1930s and the 1970s. The enormous popular success of *They're a Weird Mob* in 1966 marked a turning point and a sense that the Australian industry could be renewed and from that point lobbying began to stimulate the government to invest in the film industry.

Peter Coleman the author of *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Sedition* (1962), was also a key figure in the beginning of a government funded film industry as a bureaucrat in the Gorton administration. Coleman was on the Film Committee 1969 and then Chair of the Interim Council for AFTRS 1971, 1972.

Andrew Urban interviewed him for his history of AFTRS *Edge of the known world: the Australian Film, Television & Radio School: impressions of the first 25 years*. In an interview Coleman credits Gorton with a genuine interest in film and a belief that it was important for the development of Australia. Coleman produced policy for Gorton to trigger a re-start of an Australian film industry

---

<sup>56</sup> Jeffrey Skoller, *Making History in Avant-Garde Film Shadows, Specters, Shards* (University Minnesota Press, 2005), pxxi.

with three recommendations: a film bank, a film fund for experimental films and a film school. These recommendations became part of the 1969 election campaign, the first time that arts policy had informed an electoral push.<sup>57</sup> Richard Paterson Knowledge Manager at the British Film Institute<sup>58</sup> gave a staff lecture at the NFSA in Australia in 2004 in which he revealed that in the U.K the Wilson Government had in 1964 tripled the experimental film fund in a bid to win votes from an expanding arts constituency.

David Williamson's play *Don's Party* dramatises this era, the characters wrongly anticipating the fall of the conservative government that was later narrowly returned to power. Williamson's play is about the turning points and tensions of the time and the corruption of power on both sides of politics. The film of *Don's Party* was later directed by Bruce Beresford in 1976. In it John Gorton has a bit part as himself. In 1969 Gorton announced the slow phasing out of Australian troops involvement in Vietnam.

Stratton notes that the enormous popularity of the British film *They're a Weird Mob* (1966) that mobilised action towards a revival of the film industry. It was from this point that government lobbying began. It was hampered by even tougher censorship that threatened to deny Australian access to new cinema developments overseas. He notes that the film co-produced by Michael Powell and John MaCallum was the longest running film at the Greater Union's State Theatre in Sydney.

<sup>59</sup>By the 1970s the Government finally provided funding to the industry and a renaissance in Australian film began. As a film medium the newsreel was superseded by the introduction of TV in 1956 and finally extinguished by the introduction of colour TV in 1975. Pike notes that TV did

---

<sup>57</sup> Urban, *Edge of the Known World : The Australian Film, Television & Radio School : Impressions of the First 25 Years*, North Ryde, NSW: Australian Film Television & Radio School, 1998.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Paterson (Knowledge Manager) at the British Film Institute

<sup>59</sup> David Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, op.cit, p48.



initially create more work for Cinesound but only in the realm of advertising.<sup>60</sup> Ken G Hall himself moved into television in 1956 taking up a position in the Packer owned nine network.<sup>61</sup>

In *Newsfront* we see people at work filming, editing, projecting and exhibiting the news. The structuralism of film is constantly referenced. The light from the projector lamp in the State theatre bio box, reminds us that film is a lightshow. Other shots of car headlights in the rain in the Maitland Flood scene are reminiscent of Ubu's infamous wet shows. The stuff and process of filmmaking and editing is constantly referenced throughout the film and is present as part of the *mis en scene* of almost every scene.

*Newsfront* documents both technological change and the impact of foreign competition in the Australian film industry. As a fictionalization of history and a subversion of the newsreel style it touches on almost all of Australia's most dearly cherished metanarratives including: the Anzacs, mateship, nationalism, the story of the labor movement and the land of the fair go. *Newsfront* is a history of a history. Audiences in 1978 may have read it simplistically as a nostalgia trip rather than a complex comment on the construction of both film and history as political constructions.

In the back shadowing of today's history wars, *Newsfront* is an insightful comment on the manufacturing and construction of historical narrative, which remains far ahead of its time. The history wars in Australia in the last few years have placed question marks over the epistemology of history and its teaching. The authoritative self validating productions of state supported cultural institutions have been questioned. The disciplines and rules used in the production of historical truth

---

<sup>60</sup> Pike, "The History of an Australian Film Production Company: Cinesound 1932-1970." MA. ANU, 1972

<sup>61</sup> Dr David Free, *Australians in Hollywood* Available:

<http://www.portrait.gov.au/content/exhibit/hollywood/content/b30.htm>.

are now mostly acknowledged to be determined by the distinct ideologies, political sympathies and social and cultural points of view of those producing the history.

*Newsfront* in that context is a highly subversive film about the indoctrination of and by the media and our passive acceptance of what amounts to propaganda. It questions what is authentic and inauthentic in the dissemination of news and thence to history making. *Newsfront* draws its historical, aesthetic, political and social subversion from the Australian counterculture avant-garde movement a decade before.

Today as film laboratories across the world close down, sack their employees, dump their film stock and cinemas prepare to move into digital projection, *Newsfront* becomes an ever more potent document of film's impact on our past, present and future. Film has been an enduring medium lasting over a hundred years. It is now a historical artifact. *Newsfront* uses 1940s newsreels as raw material to view the past and to recreate events. These events are then placed in a new fictionalized context, that of the private life of the newsreel cameramen. As in the Wizard of Oz, we see the wizard revealed and the voice of god narrator of these newsreels at work.

As a history film *Newsfront* enables us to think through images in non linear assemblages while simultaneously highlighting both history and film's linear constructions. It does so within a complicated relation to time and cinema's own extraordinary technological and formal development. Combining the movement aspect of cinema through inter cutting and match cutting and complex time relations, the film shifts between actual and virtual histories.

An important organizing principle in the film is the use of still images from the McGuire family album at the beginning of each story chapter. These snapshots relate the genealogy of a domestic history that we experience as slices in narrative time. Through Len's family album we see that the personal is political and that our lives interact with events of national and international import within the dynamic flow of time. As in daily life these events are experienced as randomly colliding and conflicting and manifest not as singular conclusions but as evolving and successive montages from which meaning builds.

The film was produced as a commercial dramatic feature film on 35mm with a run time of 106 minutes on an estimated budget of AUD 600,000. Interestingly it was itself affected by technological change during its production. The distributors did not want a black and white movie as they wanted to on sell the film for television. The introduction to Australia of colour TV in 1975 meant that a feature film produced in black and white would have been completely out of vogue.

Mike Molloy (who had been a newsreel cameraman himself) was the chosen cinematographer. He refused to shoot the film in colour as he believed it should be authentic to the newsreel footage it contained. Molloy is discussed again later in this chapter in reference to his association with other filmmakers involved in *Newsfront's* early conception. Eventually Molloy was replaced by Vince Monton as Director of Photography and a mixture of colour and black and white film was used to match moods with archival footage. Black and white film had to be sourced from old stores having become almost impossible to acquire. Experimental filmmakers including Ubu frequently used outdated film stock to minimize costs. Fortuitously this made grading the film easier as the age and quality of the found film was similar to the newsreel footage used.

The transitions between the life of the newsreel cameramen and the mash ups of historic newsreel grabs are symbolized by swapping between colour and black and white film, with some exceptions. The simplistic narrative of the black and white newsreel footage contrasts starkly with the complexities and colored realities of the narrative of the cameramen's own lives. The newsreels were all shot in black and white as colour film was not introduced into Australia until 1955. The colour though is also used to symbolise the mood of the film's eras, that is, colour for boom times and black and white as fortunes recede for the Newsreel industry.

The first Australian feature film shot in colour was *Jedda* directed by Charles Chauvel. Stratton notes Chauvel's *In the Wake of the Bounty* was experimental in that half of the film consisted of documentary footage from Pitcairn Island in 1933. It also launched the stellar career of Errol Flynn who afterwards left Australia for Hollywood stardom.<sup>62</sup> It is therefore a much earlier example of an Australian commercial film that uses found footage than *Newsfront*.

In the 1930s and 1940s an American monopoly of Australian film exhibition venues had all but squeezed out local product. One of the few people making films during this period besides Chavel was Ken G Hall (1901-1994). The character in *Newsfront*, A. G Marlow General Manager of *Cinetone* (played by Don Crosby), is based on Hall, who ran the *CineSound* newsreel company that was controlled by Greater Union.

Hall's *Cinesound* newsreels were a crucial part of the development of an Australian film industry. The NFSA has an annual Ken G Hall award in commemoration of his considerable role as a pioneer in the industry. Phillip Noyce received the Ken G Hall award in 2005, for his outstanding

---

<sup>62</sup> David Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, op.cit, p3.

contribution to the art of film and to the cause of film preservation, particularly through his authentic treatment of archival footage in his 1978 film *Newsfront*.<sup>63</sup>

The real life inspiration for *Newsfront* came from the true story of brothers Ross and Syd Wood, who at one stage did work for rival companies, although the Maguire Brothers bear little resemblance to them. *Newsfront* dramatises the real life rivalry between Australia's two great newsreel companies *Cinesound* and New York based Fox *Movietone*. The conflict of the film chronicles the personal and professional competitiveness between brothers Len Maguire *Cinetone's* chief cameraman and Frank Maguire (Gerard Kennedy) who works for the opposing company *Newsco*.

The implication of this sibling conflict is also a metaphor for the differing values of two generations. Frank symbolizes what will typify the future Australia in a global economy, entrepreneurial opportunism, commercialization and fervent individualism. Len is the past and is portrayed as being the deviant character whose outdated attitudes of loyalty and integrity alienate him in succession from his religion, family and workplace as each betrays his sense of a fair go. Len's struggle to maintain his values throughout exposes the impact upon the individual of the external forces of economic, technological and cultural change. We witness the force of history on Len's life and connect his experiences to our own today. Len is a patriarch, a Catholic labour man, who represents his generation's wavering belief in god, king and country and its replacement by a younger generation's belief in the cult of the individual.

---

<sup>63</sup> NFSA, *National Film and Sound Archive's Ken G Hall Award 2005*, Available: <http://www.screen sound.gov.au/Screen sound/Screenso.nsf/HeadingPagesDisplay/About+UsTributeKen+G+Hall+Award?OpenDocument>.

The following analysis of the film scene by scene is an attempt to uncover the film's subversive import, meanwhile tracking its connections to the counterculture and Ubu's legacy.

### Scene 1 Waltzing with Chico

The opening credits begin with newsreel archival footage of Chico Marx performing for Australian soldiers. Americans and Australians sing along together as one family. In a strong American accent Chico says '*Let me sing you a little song, a number I heard is very popular over here*', '*it is something about a bum walking along the road and he meets a dame named Matilda*'. In this context even the authenticity of an Australian icon like *Waltzing Matilda* becomes questionable. *Waltzing Matilda* is a song linked to the birth of the Australian labour movement and the 1890s Depression and Shearers strike. Banjo Paterson fitted his words to Christina Macpherson's tune.

Perhaps the result could be read as a romanticised story of the swagman—shearer Hoffmeister's death, commemorating the defiant spirit behind his militancy; or perhaps the words hark back to the earlier suicide by drowning of a 'swaggie' at Combo waterhole between Dagworth Station and the town of Kynuna.<sup>64</sup>

At the outset this scene sets up an association to an Australian history of protest and the struggle for industrial democracy, a history increasingly relevant to contemporary Australia's changing industrial relations legislation and the demise of the labour movement. It is also testament to how meaning is lost in cultural translations. This implies that what is typical of the entertainment we receive from America is that it bears only superficial reference if any to an Australian cultural context.

This is followed by a montage of iconic newsreel footage presenting a visual jigsaw of Australians at work and play, peace and war through time. The credits set up the film's narrative structure and stylistic context, preparing the viewer for juxtapositions between past and present time. This vehicle

---

<sup>64</sup> National Library of Australia, *Who'll Come a Walzing Matilda with Me?*, National Library of Australia, Available: <http://www.nla.gov.au/epubs/waltzingmatilda/1-Orig-Christina.html>.

of montage is the underpinning of *Newsfront's* experimentation. It is used to critique the nature of narrative construction, concepts of authenticity and how they coalesce to assemble notions of national identity.

Montage is the foundation stone for cinema's unique form of meaning making. Its origins as in *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* relate to an avant-garde visual tradition, to the relationship between painting and film and to the broader impact of art movements on the developing aesthetics of experimental filmmakers including Ubu. Malcolm Le Grice in his work *Abstract Film and Beyond* draws a line between innovations in painting by Cezanne and the medium of film. Cezanne he says became aware that the 'appearance of the world was something constructed from the activity of the observer'.<sup>65</sup> He then set about modifying pictorial conventions to create new perceptions and realized that the process of painting itself conditioned our perception.

Cubism built upon Cezanne's work on perception. It presented an exploded viewpoint, depicting subjects from multiple angles simultaneously overlaid onto one another. Three dimensional spaces fragmented on to a two dimensional picture plane. These external forms, rendered as multiple viewpoints became reconstructed fragments for assemblage by the observer. Eisenstein like Cezanne realized that perceptions were inseparable from their time and space relations and that these could be manipulated and juxtaposed to create new meanings.

Artists could now create perceptual experiences beyond the world of reality. The traditional static lens of painting began to move. Montage cinema's pure language became a form of meaning making by mental gestalt. In film montage is the combining of independent shots by the observer

---

<sup>65</sup> Malcolm Le Grice, *Abstract Film and Beyond*, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1977, p10.

through film editing that creates the narrative meaning. The viewer constructs a meaning as perception builds, connecting and linking images in a type of conceptual gestalt. In his book *History of Film* David Parkinson explains some of the concepts behind early theories of montage used by film pioneers like Eisentein and Kuleshov.

As Kuleshov has shown, while montage or the collusion of independent shots, might give a film its dynamic, its meaning comes only from audience perception, so Eisentein drew on the example of Japanese pictographs (bird and mouth = sing and so on) to show how juxtaposed images could convey more complex or abstract concepts.  
<sup>66</sup>

Eisentein's theories are expanded in his famous works *The Film Sense* (1942) and *The Film Form* (1948). Here he defines five types of montage that can be used together or in a sequence. 'Metric' montage is a mathematical approach, determined by the time, tempo and the duration of a shot as opposed to its content. 'Rhythmic' montage combined shot content with an emphatic or counterpoint function, to create sequences of sustained tension. 'Tonal' montage' and 'Over tonal' montage became obvious not through shots or individual scenes but through the emotion of the whole film's mood. The texture of the film was created through the synthesis of metric, rhythmic and tonal editing. Eisenstein concentrated most however on the fifth method, 'intellectual montage', the linkage of shots to express abstract ideas and to make political statements. As in his film *Strike* the slaughtered cattle are a metaphor for the massacred workers. *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is seen as a perfect expression of these theories.

Mike Jones makes the linear connection between photography, film and contemporary motion graphics [in this quotation from his article] in *Screen Education*;

Mise-en-scene takes a great many of its techniques from traditional two dimensional art-forms principally painting and photography, in following and employing rules of form and visual aesthetic. Montage on the other hand is 'pure cinema', unique to the moving image. In

---

<sup>66</sup> David Parkinson, *History of Film*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1995, p76.



the practice of motion graphics, however, the two meet on a much more uniform ground than ever before.<sup>67</sup>

In the opening credits viewers see the synthesis of all of Eisenstein's theories on montage employed: metric montage in cutting the image to the beat or tempo of the music and rhythmic montage in the counter pointing of iconic images of Australia's people, places and events, to create sequences evoking empathy and nationalism.

Intellectual montage has already been addressed in relation to Chico Marx's rendition of *Waltzing Matilda* as a political statement. This positions *Newsfront*'s filmmaker's political persuasion firmly in the left. The music in the film as in these opening credits is almost all American or performed by Americans. Chico Marx or African American singers sing archetypal Australian songs in a strong American drawl. The film's musical scores convey the reality of an Australian culture that is already colonised and immersed in American culture. A thematic musical signature throughout the film is Jack O'Hagan's iconic tune *The Road to Gundagai*. The choice of music by William Motzig's (Film Music) underscores the whole film's tone and emotion shaking any complacent or simplistic answers to the vexing question of authenticity in history and its telling.

## Scene 1

The first scene begins with an ocean liner filled with post war migrants arriving at the docks. Len and Chris busily prepare their outmoded film cameras to record the liner's welcome. Australia's isolation from the rest of the world is suggested. John Stott's (Editor) editing between newsreel footage of post war migration and Len and Chris's preparations, seamlessly blends time and

---

<sup>67</sup> Mike Jones, 'Poetry in Motion or Vertical Editing: Constructing Meaning Through Video Motion Graphics and Compositing,' *Screen Education*, 32 Spring, p138.

narrative. This manipulation of time and context creates the film's expanding tension between the construction of historical narrative and the construction of propaganda.

The newsreel footage used in this scene supported Calwell's 'Populate or Perish' policy. After the Second World War Australia needed more workers to feed the post war economic boom and to get ambitious projects such as the Snowy Mountain scheme off the ground. The government recognised that there was an urgent need for immigration and the representation of migrants quickly changed accordingly. Calwell's policy restricted immigration to certain European nations only.

Uniform immigration legislation was one of the major reasons propelling Federation. Australia's first act of Parliament was the signing of one of the most restrictive national policies to control immigration known, of course, as the White Australia Policy (or colour bar). Australia's lingering beliefs in British-ness and long held fear of foreigners meant that there were mixed responses among the Australian population at the time to Calwell's policy. It was widely believed that a population consisting of a single race and ethnic group was important for stability and growth. No nation in the world has so changed its population as Australia did in those post war years. It is perhaps an ironic accident of history that Calwell (Minister of Immigration) and a stalwart of the White Australia Policy was the one to initiate this change.

The racism of the White Australia policy is clearly emphasized in the selection of an Arian Baltic couple interviewed as a fine example of migrant stock arriving in Australia. The metanarrative of the pure white race is evoked as it is perhaps more subtly in *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*. This scene also sets the film within the context of a widely recognizable post war era.

The central themes of the film set up the links and tensions between media, culture, politics and technology. *Newsfront* records what historical grand narratives traditionally do not, the impact of technology change and globalization on peoples' everyday lives.

## **Scene 2 Professional Ethics**

In the next scene the cameramen are filming a migrant's citizenship ceremony at which PM Ben Chifley officiates. Chifley introduces the ceremony by saying that Australia is a country *where democracy is not just a platitude*. Intellectual montage is used here again politically to highlight the insincerity of the Chifley government's immigration policy in the light of what we know of the White Australia Policy depicted in the earlier scene. The immigrants swear allegiance to Almighty God, King and country.

The shots are swiftly edited between the cameramen filming and the archival newsreel of the ceremony itself. An overlapping sound track from the newsreel onto the shot of the cameramen assists in building the veracity of audience belief that they are actually present at the ceremony's location.

The narrative thus smoothes over gaps in time through the editing process, making us believe we are present as history is recorded. We are alerted to the fact that time in both film and history is linear and is constructed. As Skoller comments:

Fiction and history are genres that signify in the same manner, producing the effects of a self contained verisimilitude.' <sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Skoller, op.cit., pxxii.

Skoller is correct in articulating that stories and histories are both about producing the illusion of reality. Both appear objective but in fact the more natural the story seems the less transparent are the underlying ideologies. Both navigate memory and place and the objects they inhabit. *Newsfront* is then a complex experiment with narrative and the formal representation of images of history.

The fierce competition between the two newsreel companies is recorded on the medium itself, when at the ceremony Len challenges Charlie (played by John Ewart) the *Newsco* cameraman after he intentionally obstructs Len's shot.

Len '*I didn't appreciate what happened in there*',

Charlie '*Sorry mate but you are the enemy*',

Len '*Haven't you heard of professional ethics*'

We see Frank's dynamic Newsco Company located in a stylish new architectural setting. Frank explains to his staff the need to make their newsreels appeal globally as he tells them '*I'm tough because I care*'. His management style is radically different to the old guard at Cinetone. The contrast between old and new companies is visually clearly demarcated.

Len's character emerges as a person with a strong sense of a fair go, a macho action man, scorning a desk job. Even though the footage is ruined by his rival, Len doesn't reveal what happened to A.G. when he is questioned. It would be against his ethics to do so. Both Len and Chris (Len's camera assistant played by Chris Hewitt) are reprimanded by A.G. in his office. The hierarchy of working life is revealed by this treatment of the cameramen, who are presented not as artisans or

professionals but as larrikin school boys hectored by the hard task headmaster A. G (played by Don Crosby).

### **Scene 3 Good Old Frank**

Back at the *Cinetone* studio the viewer sees the same footage now being selected for an edit list. A G calls the shots in, out. He operates like a conductor fading in and out music and narration to the passage of images on the studio screen.

A. G asks Len ‘*Where are the wide shots, wide shots of the whole event?*’

Len says ‘*You don’t need it stay in close and let the faces tell the story.*’

Traditionally newsreels were shot in mid or wide shot with few close ups and on fixed cameras.

This framing added to the newsreel’s sense of authoritative distance. Len is therefore pushing for change himself in advancing film techniques within the newsreel.

Len’s assistant Chris is the cockney new chum whose humour provides a pressure release value. His character also highlights the historical origins of an Australian class system as transported from England, meanwhile evoking the metanarrative of the larrikin epitomized in Australian films such as the *Sentimental Bloke*. It is interesting to note in reference to *Newsfront*’s themes of authenticity, nationalism and globalization that the original print of *The Sentimental Bloke* was discovered in the U.S at George Eastman House listed in a catalogue as *The Sentimental Blond*.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> NFSA, ‘the Bloke’ Is Found Available:

<http://www.screenound.gov.au/Screenound/Screenso.nsf/HeadingPagesDisplay/PreservationProjectsSentimental+Bloke%22The+Bloke%22+is+found?OpenDocument>.

*Newsfront* is an example of what Skoller contends to be the virtual in the process of narrating history that brings two antithetical processes together, invention and historicism. This binary of invention and history has long been a source of conflict in recording Australian visual history. It was the source of a fierce conflict between Frank Hurley (Official WW1 Photographer) and Sir Charles Bean (Official War Historian). Hurley produced composite photographic battle scenes in order to visualize virtual heroic, spectral and spiritual images of men at war. Bean saw Hurley's inventions as 'historical untruths' and inappropriate as records because they blurred history with artistic expression.<sup>70</sup>

Hurley in WW1, and experimental filmmakers and artists today continue to consider broader aspects of history's textures and layering of pasts and presents, accessing psychological states, obsessions and virtual experiences beyond their own or historical recreation. The past is never severed; it emerges in our lives daily through objects and language. *Newsfront* in its use of found material and narrative construction of past-present, forces us to recognize the impacts on our life experiences of past generations and to recognize that they inflect and commingle with our experiences today. The film's use of the visual artifact provides authority to the narrative account of events through the eyes of the filmmakers. Skoller's use of the work of the historian Michel de Certeau is relevant here:

As de Certeau suggests, the imposed break between past and present, the hallmark of traditional historical forms, hides the process of its own production. As a medium cinema has both supported traditional historical forms in mainstream cinema and challenged 'the objective truth' of recreated events (avant-garde cinema). Mainstream cinema Skoller points out focuses on a history of tangibles, photographing what can be seen, narrating the story or re-creating events. Any gaps in the details are really guess work that is neatly filled in for us.

---

<sup>70</sup> Martyn Jolly, "Australian First World War Photography," History of Photography Vol. 23.No. 2 (1999).

As Skoller puts it,

Such a cinema uses its vast image and sound –making technologies to give us images of events that in the past could only be imagined: from the point of view shots in the hold of a slave ship during the Middle Passage to ground zero of the atomic explosion at Hiroshima.<sup>71</sup>

In *Newsfront* the cameramen themselves are not aware they are constructing history or that what they are doing is part of history making. The assistant editor jokes to the chief editor Geoff (played by Bryan Brown) who is cutting great lengths of film onto the floor, ' *Go easy that's world history you're kicking on the floor* ',

Geoff says ' *Its no loss, none of them are.* '

#### **Scene 4 Amy Takes Inventory**

Amy enters the editing room and makes a date with Geoff to go through the inventory. Obvious sexual tension exudes. The two editors bet that Geoff will score with Amy. This scene highlights the unequal social environment of human relationships tragically portrayed throughout the film. It sets up a barrier of isolation between characters, walling them apart from any sincere emotional engagement with one another. The impossibility of relationships prospering in this environment is sadly reflected in the lack of intimacy Amy finds in her male partners, first with Frank and then later with Len. This is also a critique of the sexual mores of the immediate past generation, as the film was produced from the perspective of the liberated 1970s.

Only A.G and Amy really understand what they are doing in constructing the news and that knowledge provides a special bond between them. We compare the random process of combining

---

<sup>71</sup> Skoller, op., cit pxv, xiv.

history and narrative in the studio and the linear strips of film that hang around the editing room as part of the same mise en scene. The film moves then from the process of editing to the process of exhibiting with a montage of shots including the State Theatre, audience queues, full houses and film cans arriving in bio boxes labeled '*Cinetone News Urgent! Newsreel film useless if delayed*'. The process behind the film industry is thus revealed, from the selective capture of events by the cameramen, to the editing into a narrative and its distribution and exhibition to the public. The light from the projector cuts a tunnel through the darkness of the State Theatre. *Newsfront* uses a structuralist approach within its narrative to constantly draw our attention to the material of film and its essential elements: light, time and motion.

### **Scene 5 The Red Conspiracy/ Ada & Elsie**

Australia and the US were almost equally concerned about the communist enemy. As discussed in the first chapter *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* was created as a comment on the fall out from the Cuban Missile Crisis. *Newsfront* continues the political commentary on Australia's involvement in Cold War conflict including newsreel footage of the Korean War.

The crisis in Korea originated in the closing phases of the Second World War, when control of the Korean peninsula, formerly occupied by Japan, was entrusted to the Allies, and the United States and the Soviet Union divided responsibility for the country between them at the 38th parallel. Over the course of the next few years, the Soviet Union fostered a strong communist regime in the north, while the US supported the government in the south; by mid-1950, tensions between the two zones, each under a different regime, had escalated to the point where two hostile armies were building up along the border. At the end of the war Australian casualties numbered more than 1,500, of whom 339 were killed. Almost half a million South Koreans died as a result of the war, and an unknown number of North Koreans<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Information compiled by Ed Evanhoe, [Australia in the Korean War 1950 - 1953](http://www.korean-war.com/australia.html), Available: <http://www.korean-war.com/australia.html>.



*Newsfront* is made not long after the cessation of conflict in Vietnam. Noyce was an anti war activist along with other filmmakers of the counterculture movement including Jan Chapman. Chapman was also associated with both Ubu and the Sydney filmmaker's Co-op. The first film she directed is now a classic historical document of the era of people power, effecting over due political and social change through demonstration and agitation. *Just a little note to tell you I am well and feeling happy* was made in collaboration with Philip Noyce. It documents a 1970 student siege at Sydney University. The siege was held in protest against police invasion of the university campus in the process of arresting a Vietnam draft dodger. The iconic band *Cream* provides the accompanying music track. The film was first screened in an International Underground Film Festival in London in 1970.

Both Australia and the US were just as concerned about the Communist enemy within. The pressures of political ideologies at the time of the McCarthy era are referenced in the selective construction of the news. The Newsreel propaganda is delivered through 'Voice of God' narration. The term 'Voice of God' is used as the narrator is invisible and has a patriarchal authoritative tone.

*News of the week, Wharfies strike – industrial lawlessness, militant red legged Wharfe laborers threaten strike action outside the Arbitration Court.*

The 'Voice of God' introduces *The Red Conspiracy* an exclusive *Cinetone* interview with Malcolm Shardly former Secretary of the Communist Party of Australia that *reveals his motives for rejecting the world wide red conspiracy*. Malcolm like an automaton claims

*I want to awaken this country to a real danger*, the 'Voice of God' says *You say that this danger is the Communist party*. The newsreel is clearly an effective medium for telling the public what to think and fear.

*Newsfront* was released on the 29 July 1978 three years after Australia completed the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and less than two months after Menzies death on the 15 May 1978. Filming had begun a year earlier in October 1977.

The next newsreel demonstrates television for the first time and features popular radio stars Ada and Ester. These old fashioned girls herald in a new technology-TV; we see them through the moving horizontal bars across the screen (film like) while the ‘Voice of God’ narrator tells us about a new *broadcast medium that maybe one day will come to Australia*. The opening still shows the backs of the TV technician’s overalls on which are clearly printed the brand names Pye and Astor. Pye and Astor were well known radio manufacturers who later moved into television production in the 1950s. Rather than product placement, this demonstrates the ability of mediums to morph into others and their many overlaps as one supersedes another, adapting and laying claim to its genres.

The link between media, culture and technology both enable and disable access to the past in the present as new technologies constantly emerge. Newsreels, 16mm films, 35mm slides and video (being replaced by digitized streaming) are examples of carriers that once enabled broad access but now occlude access as use of the outdated equipment required to view these mediums becomes more difficult.

Unlike Ubu’s films, *Newsfront* made in 1978 clearly shows the immense impact of feminism in progressing gender equity in Australia in the early 1970s. The principle of equal pay for work of equal value was adopted in 1972 by the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission.

The gender divisions are carefully constructed. In the scene set in Len's backyard barbeque the men and women are separated in a form of socialized apartheid. In the Redex trial scene at the country dance men and women wait uncomfortably at polarized ends of the dancehall. This scene represents everything the Push and leftist counterculture movements were fighting against.

*Newsfront* has many layers of time. Set in the '40s and '50s, created in the late '70s, we view it back shadowed from the perspective of a new millennium: a present defined by a very different technological era of transport and communication. Yet the issues in the film have not dated. We can still see our own lives in the film's layers, dominated then as now by issues of globalization and technological change. Our own history is as it was then an ephemeral continuum recorded in light, time and motion.

### **Scene 6 Moral Primitive**

In this scene we discover the reason for Len's fierce loyalty to the company, the character contrasts between the brothers and their distant relationship. When Chris Hewitt's character asks Len

*That bloke your brother why did he leave the company?*

Len replies *Because he is a disloyal self seeking bastard.*

Chris –*Why shouldn't he leave if the money's better?*

Len –*The Company looked after us during the Depression – the battling Maguires didn't go on the dole.*

Again Len is portrayed as a man of integrity, a company man, another type in the metanarrative of the Aussie battler in contrast to his brother Frank's flashy entrepreneurial style.

The lack of opportunity to express political opinions on either side of the political divide is also depicted in a later scene between Len and Chris. Len tells the new chum what to think about the labour movement on the way to a shoot.

Len - *So what do you think of the new PM Ben Chifley?*

Chris – *Well he's a bit common ain't he, an engine driver*

Len – *Curtin is the best PM we ever had and just you remember that he is not to be joked about.*

### **Scene 7 'We've seen the best of our times'**

In *Newsfront* A. G Marlow's character is used as a vehicle to discuss the struggle to maintain Australian content amidst American cultural imperialism and the industry's inevitable retreat into the falsehood of nationalism in a desperate effort to survive. A.G laments to Ken (the narrator) *I used to turn around four features a year before the war.* We see the decline of the Australian film industry through the character of A. G based on the real life character of Ken G Hall.

Thoms in his book *Polemics for a New Cinema* considers Hall's contribution in a separate chapter *Ken G.Hall:1977.*<sup>23</sup> Thoms observes that Hall's own autobiography contains little discussion of actuality film, suggesting that Hall himself did not consider it memorable. According to Thoms, Charles Chauvel's feature film production overshadowed Hall's own previously prodigious rate of production. As Stratton observes Chauvel's swashbuckler *Wake of the Bounty* (1933) not only launched Erol Flynn as a star but it was also an experimental film in that it intercut found documentary film of Pitcarn Island.

---

<sup>73</sup> Thoms, *Polemics for a New Cinema*, p194.

David Stratton notes that Hall, unlike Chauvel, had his own studio, Cinesound controlled by Greater Union. In the 1940s Greater Union's board decided to cease production of feature film at Cinesound.<sup>74</sup> Hall's last film *Smithy* (1946) was financed by US Columbia Pictures but it bombed at the box office and so Hall's film career ended. As it turned out Hollywood did not believe in him.

Andrew Pike's thesis on Cinesound notes the company's shift to propaganda:

With the cessation of feature production in 1940 problems of exhibition no longer faced the company: creative effort was devoted to the production of propaganda films under contract to various government bodies, especially the Department of Communications.<sup>75</sup>

Thoms goes on to suggest that Hall also failed to see the opportunity that television provided for the production of telemovies when he headed up TCN-9.

At Cinesound studios Hall produced eighteen classic Australian feature films. Mostly folksy comedies or jingoistic tales of the Ozzie battler, Hall's films entered the Australian vernacular, for example *On Our Selection* (1932), *Strike Me Lucky* (1934) starring the famous comedian Mo and Dad and Dave Come to Town (1938), *The Squatter's Daughter* (1933), *Tall Timbers* (1937) and *Ophan of the Wilderness* (1936).

According to Geoff Mayer's website 'Screening the Past', in May 1956 Lee Robinson and Chipps Rafferty bought the Cinesound studio at Bondi and formed Australian Television Enterprises.<sup>76</sup> Albie Thoms latter worked with Robinson on several episodes of *Skippy*.

---

<sup>74</sup> Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, op.cit pp 2, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Andrew Pike, 'The History of an Australian Film Production Company, Cinesound, 1932-1970, ANU MA thesis, p xv.

<sup>76</sup> Geoff Mayer, *Screening the Past Lee Robinson (1923-2003)*, La Trobe University, Australia, Available [http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr\\_16/gmfr16.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fr_16/gmfr16.html)

*Newsfront's* A. G Marlow is therefore a romanticised version that does not reflect the real life career of Ken G Hall. Hall was not opposed to foreign investment and control, in fact he openly courted it. Nor did he die out with the medium of the newsreels but moved into television. It also highlights the ongoing dependence on the US today to finance many films made in Australia that use both Australian and American crews.

### **Scene 8 Anzac Day – 1949 Damien Parer in ‘No Man’s Land’**

Conflict is built through the mirrored reflection of the two brothers, Frank’s lack of commitment set against Len’s fierce loyalties and weighty responsibilities. Frank coldly casts off Amy his partner of six years, the company and the country to achieve his own ambitions. He makes off shore connections and starts importing overseas material and labor which then threaten the local industry. Len is Frank’s antithesis. He toughs out a difficult home life, strained by his long absences from home. Len’s sense of national loyalty is offended by Frank’s announcement that he is leaving Australia for the States,

*This is the best bloody country in the world,* he says.

This national spirit is fed most effectively by the passionate fire of the Anzac mythology. Fact and fiction are again interestingly blurred in this scene, when the grand narrative of the diggers’ sacrifice is stripped bare by the joking quip from the Newsco cameraman, *We shall dismember them*. The scene including the WW II footage by Damien Parer combines the heady mix of religion, war and sex. The intensity of this scene is conveyed in Parer’s footage taken just prior to his death. The men and Amy, the only women present, watch the newsreel in the studio spellbound by Parer’s coverage of *no man’s land jungle warfare*. Male domination in the business of both war and news making is

obvious. Parer and his famous footage have since become synonymous with the blooding of a nation, the enduring battler spirit and the sacrifices made by Australia's diggers. Len clearly identifies with Parer both as a Catholic and as a man of action.

Damien Parer and Ken G Hall were jointly awarded Australia's first Academy Award in WW2 for *Kokoda Frontline*. Hall accepted the award on behalf of the late Damien Parer, killed in action.

Interestingly Parer was known to have recreated scenes for the benefit of the camera. He had learned his trade as a war cameraman from Frank Hurley in New Guinea. Issues of authenticity in the recording of war as history are continued from Hurley's WW1 composite photographs to the WW2 medium of the newsreel. The newsreel was the only moving image record of WW2 available to the Australian public.

Finally the tension of the scene is unceremoniously broken when the numbers at the end of the film reel flash up on screen and count out the illusion of the film. Noyce uses a structuralist filmmaker's technique here to shatter suspended belief. Immediately following this a pornographic screening begins. Stratton observes in his section on *Newsfront* in *The Last New Wave* (p206) that in the wake of television the newsreel theatres were converted to sex cinemas. This scene then juxtaposes propaganda with pornography and the twin male passions of sex and war. These two passions have arguably been the driving force behind the invention of all modern reproductive technological mediums from photography to the internet.

### *Scene 9 'Talking like the Women's Weekly'*

The separation between Amy and Frank and the lack of intimacy in their relationship is painfully revealed in this scene. Frank is unable to acknowledge Amy as his intellectual equal, dismissing her attempt to connect with him emotionally by joking that she sounds like the *Women's Weekly*. Frank sees women as the stereotype presented by the media and as a result he is unable to relate beyond superficialities. Amy picks up on this and tells him, '*There is something really dead about you Frank*'. Frank's dishonest treatment of Amy, pretending that nothing is happening when we know that he is leaving her, is offset against Len's legally married status. Frank is not faithful to Amy and neither is she faithful to him. At the scene's end Frank and Amy park by the beach. They are together but utterly isolated from one another as an American song plays on the radio.

### **Scene 10 Good Catholics / Early Morning Swim**

All the scenes set in Len's home are metaphors for his life. As Bob Ellis comments on the blurb of the DVD of *Newsfront* these men were 'buccaneers on mortgages' adventurers and soldiers forced to settle down. Len is an adventurer tethered to a mortgage. One of the most significant scenes of the film is set at Len's house, outside in the suburban sanctuary of the backyard. Len's work colleagues assist with the building of an extension to his house and enjoy a barbeque. The internal building frame of the house provides a metaphor for the caged and limited freedoms of their lives. The house symbolises the containment of the self within a narrowly conformist society. The oppression of this cage is strongly conveyed in the following scene when after a rain squall the party moves inside into the kitchen.

In her domain Len's wife, Fay (played by Angela Punch Macgregor) reveals her deeply held religious beliefs. The responses of Len's work colleagues to this shows the deep sectarian divisions



that characterized Australian society of the period. The contrast between the God's Police role played by Fay and the other wives and Amy's role as the Company Whore is inferred at this point when AG's wife (played by Ann Hardy) asks Amy '*how are you Amy*' and she replies '*Oh! You know, making out*'. Geoff's wife (played by Jude Kuring) fires him and Amy a jealous and knowing look. This scene displays the difficulties that the genders have in communicating in the mire of Christian morality.

Death is another theme that runs throughout the film. This is highlighted by the use of still photography to depict the critical tension between the need to capture the rush of time towards death on film and achieve immortality. Roland Barthes in his epiphany on photography *Camera Lucida* makes relevant cross art connections:

The *camera obscura*, in short, has generated at one and the same time perspective painting, photography, and the diorama, which are all three arts of the stage; but if photography seems to me closer to theatre, it is by way of a singular intermediary (and perhaps I am the only one to see it): by way of Death. We know the original relation of the theatre and the cult of the Dead: the first actors separated themselves from the community by playing the role of the Dead: to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead: the whitened bust of the totemic theatre, the man with the painted face in the Chinese theatre, the rice-paste makeup of the Indian KathaKali, the Japanese No Mask...Now it is this same relation which I find in the Photograph; however "lifelike" we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.<sup>77</sup>

Len's house overlooks the graveyard and in this scene the brothers walk through it to get to the beach. Len challenges Frank on the fact that he is making a film about the communist menace but is a labour voter. Frank sees no conflict, *I'm paid to make films*. For Frank his brother's loyalty to the Company is not a virtue but a weakness, '*You're loyal, you're a good company hack*'.

---

<sup>77</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*/ Roland Barthes, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981, p32

### Scene 11 Enter Menzies/Auld Lang Syne, Frank

Yet again we are reminded in this scene that film is a constructed illusion and a powerful political tool. AG is not amused when Geoff editing a newsreel of Menzies gaining office, turns Menzies' wave into a gesture resembling an animated hail Hitler. Geoff quips *It was a joke and a political statement*, AG is furious. In the newsreel Menzies states his desire to create national unity and prosperity. Geoff cynically scoffs at Menzies's sentiments in the light of the Brisbane line.

The "Brisbane line" was an alleged plan to abandon Northern Australia in the event of a Japanese invasion. The allegation was made during an election campaign in October 1942 when Edward Ward, the Minister for Labour and National Services accused the previous government of planning this strategy. The accusation was unsubstantiated by Ward and firmly denied by Menzies and all members of the previous government. Curtin's initial failure to dismiss the allegation and General Douglas MacArthur's mention of it at a press conference in March 1943 led to the controversy gaining much momentum.<sup>78</sup>

The film again highlights the dubious nature of democracy at work in Australia through intellectual montage.

Frank's foreshadowed departure to the U.S. takes place. His hostile brother Len and his shattered mistress Amy wave him goodbye at the dock.

Thus, the film is very much a dialogue between the binaries of narrative and structuralism. The narrative of the cameramen's lives reveals their daily work of structuring and manipulating the news. *Newsfront* is obviously informed by what Adrian Martin describes as the formalist-conceptualist tradition or structural materialist style, that manipulates the properties of cinema itself, alternately

---

<sup>78</sup> Paul Hasluck, *The government and the people* Paul Hasluck, Australia in the war of 1939-1945, vol.II (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1970): pp. 711-717, *The Brisbane Line*, Australian War Memorial, Available: [http://www.awm.gov.au/Encyclopedia/homefront/brisbane\\_line.htm](http://www.awm.gov.au/Encyclopedia/homefront/brisbane_line.htm).

playing with the principal elements that make up cinema such as: the registration of the image by the camera, projections, mark making on celluloid, time, space, sound, framing and structure and focus. Most avant-garde filmmakers experiment with this film form, drawing back the curtain on the illusion of cinema.<sup>79</sup>

Between 1966 and 1972, government passed from Menzies and his conservative successors to Whitlam. Menzies for all his verbalized royal loyalties began the shift in alliance from the UK to the US as Australia's imperial protector. Donald Horne notes in *Time of Hope Australia 1966-72* that this period was characterised by dichotomous views of what democracy stood for. Some sectors of society believed the new performative style of street protest such as the Freedom Rides was an example of a healthy democratic system at work, while others perceived it as a terrible threat. Either way the resulting fracas sold newspapers.

### **Scene 12 Winter 1951 – The All Australian Newsreel**

With Frank in the *Newsco* Office in the U.S., Cinetone is increasingly locked out of the market as it cannot afford to compete. The Company made insecure by the encroaching competition from the American market retreats into nationalism. They decide to cover regional news. They will provide what the foreigners cannot, images of the true Australia. The mythology of the Australian bush and the outback are evoked by A.G in his efforts to convince both himself and his staff of this falsehood: he says *This is where the true Australians live*. The insincerity of this statement is tinted by the earlier reference to the Brisbane line, thus reinforcing the link between politics and economics in driving Australian national values and notions of identity.

---

<sup>79</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Indefinite Objects; Independent Film and Video,' *Australian Screen*, eds, Tom Regan and Albert Moran, Penguin, 1989, p176.

To highlight this backward move this section of the film reverts to black and white footage. The flaws in this grand historical narrative are thus cut up and smoothed over on the editor's desk. The cameramen are now sent off to record farcical footage of howling kelpies as an example of the all Australian newsreel. This harks back to the Dad and Dave comedies of earlier Australian mainstream cinema.

The issue of authenticity also relates to the studio set of *Newsfront*. The sets were actually filmed in the abandoned offices of the CineSound studio which had finally closed in the late 1970s. Other popular media are used to evoke the ambiance of the historical drama. The girls at the reception desk listen to the hugely popular radio soaps of the 1940s while doing their nails .... *When a Girl Marries*, which is, as the radio announces, *for all those who have loved and for those that can remember*.

It is true to say that all media are thieves, stealing genres, ideas and methods from each other, before assimilating them as their own and laying claim to their successes. Media and mediums have a long history of getting mixed up with each other. That is especially the case today as Information Communication Technology (ICT) increasingly converges onto the one screen of the computer or the mobile phone. *Newsfront* was made in the same year that Vietnam invaded Cambodia. The film itself references an earlier conflict into which Australia was drawn in aid of our alliance with America, and against the menace of communism, the Korean War.



21 Bill Hunter (Len McGuire) in *Newsfront* SSA Collection

### Scene 13 ‘Gutless wonders of the World Unite’

In this scene the effect of censorship in controlling individual’s actions and the fear evoked in the media is depicted through the conflict between the newsreel narrator and Geoff the editor. The conflict results when Geoff includes in the narrator’s script a reference to the Menzies government as a Police State. Ken the narrator (played by John Dease) refuses to use the script. He argues that survival is more important than freedom of speech. The narrator knows his career depends on government bodies like the ABC and even though he agrees with Geoff he says *I’m not calling any government that pays me a Police state*. Geoff soon after leaves the country representing the brain drain of talented Australians overseas. This is of course what many of the filmmaker themselves did to continue their careers. It seems *The Australian Creative Diaspora* continues today. An exhibition by that name at the National Portrait Gallery in 2007 documents the many filmmakers who have had to leave Australia in order to find work.

In the tradition of the Push and SUDS, *Newsfront* rejects the conservatism of the Menzies and then the Fraser governments. Just as *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* is important as an artistic response to the impact of a Cold War stalemate, *Newsfront* back shadows the fervent anti-communism of the

Menzies government as a transplant of American politics. Menzies calls a referendum to ban the Communist Party and imprisons two ministers he declares to be Communist. The narrator fearing a MacArthur style Hollywood blacklisting walks out on the job. Geoff finally submits, scratching out the reference from the script. His assistant editor rubs in his lack of conviction with the statement, *Gutless wonders of the World Unite*. The individual's internalization of censorship is clearly evident.

### **Scene 14 & 15 Spring 1951 - A Growing Family / Differing Opinions**

This scene demonstrates the power of the Catholic Church in defining sex and its limits and the compromising effect this had on personal relationships in the sectarian Australian society of the time. Fay's strong Catholic values are demonstrated through her refusal to use contraception resulting in her abstinence from sex and her suspicion of both Len's fidelity and leftist politics. The church is shown as another propaganda tool wielded by government in attempting to sway political opinion against Communism. In this scene the priest lobbies parishioners to vote to ban the Communist Party. Len rejects the priest's political propaganda with 'Oh Christ'.

In this scene Len is shown to be in opposition to all the surrounding authority figures including: his wife's parents and the church. The rigidity of Fay's values alienates Len and the relationship is increasingly compromised. Eventually Fay completely shuts Len out and the relationship is over. He packs his things. He loses everything including his fatherhood. Later in Scene 26 'Len's Changing World' we learn that Fay in contradiction to her previously rigid religious stance has found another partner who will be as she says '*a good father to the kids*'.

### **Scene 16 Winter 1953 –A.G Reaches the Peak**

In this scene A.G suffers the results of his sedentary hard smoking and drinking lifestyle. He gets so excited conducting his orchestra of climatic music and narration to accompany the Conquest of Everest newsreel that he has a heart attack and dies. At the funeral Amy especially and other work colleagues are visibly more upset than AG's own wife. This suggests that relationships formed at work can be far stronger and more passionate than personal bonds in this conformist culture.

### **Scene 17 'It's a bloody awful newsreel'**

Without A.G.'s skills the quality of the work produced drops. Amy's character epitomizes the frustration of an intelligent woman overlooked as a possible successor to A.G even though she has far more skills. See comments above on gender.

### **Scene 18 The Redex Trial**

The Redex car trials or cross-country pilgrimages became a national symbol of the do or die Aussie spirit of endurance and domination of a harsh landscape. One frame includes footage of the iconic radio and television star Jack Davey. The opportunistic nature of news making is observed in the Redex trial scene where Len and Chris set up their camera on a corner they know to be hazardous. They wait ready to film the inevitable accident. Len is so pleased with the action footage captured of the Volkswagon rolling that he almost forgets to assist the victims of the overturned car. Chris the camera assistant runs to the driver's aid, *Oh shit, You alright mate?* He is rebuked by the driver suddenly aware he has been set up; *You could have warned us* he says. The cameramen are unaware of the fame they have gained as a result of their coverage of these national events. They have become the face of the nation. One exceptionally beautiful edit feeds the footage of the car rally

onto the editor's reel back in the Cinesound studio as Geoff finalises the training of his assistant. These edits draw our attention to the medium that capture these events.

### **Scene 19 Chris and Ellie – The First Time**

The trials are an alluring event for Ellie Wilson the country girl, who has hitchhiked to town to be part of the excitement. Ironically she sees Chris as a city glamour boy. At the CWA supper they hit it off and spend the night together, two virgins with no sexual experience or knowledge. In the morning they kiss goodbye against the backdrop of the Hotel Dunedoo.

The film does not include any reference to Australia's indigenous communities and only one Aboriginal person can be seen in the film, that is in the country dance scene where the band plays American style square dancing music.

### **Scene 20 A Wedding and a new Romance**

Inevitably Ellie appears in the city to tell Chris that she is pregnant. Len tells Chris that there are only two options to his predicament, *to do the wrong or the right thing*. In the 1950s abortion was illegal; it is out of the question from Len's perspective as a working class catholic male. The lack of sexual freedom or choice is the consequence of the lack of knowledge or access to contraception. Ellie and Chris marry and at a Dimboola style wedding, Len finally makes his move on Amy, starting an affair.

### **Scene 21 & 22 February 1954 - Maitland Floods, The Floods Claim a Life**



Natural disasters always make for good visual footage and emotive drama. The original Maitland Floods newsreel held in the National Film and Sound Archive, narrates in titillating voyeuristic fashion a failed rescue attempt from a helicopter where two men fall to their deaths on live electrical wires. In this scene news making is identified as a male proving activity akin to war and sexual conquests. The professionalism and heroism of the cameramen is dependant upon their getting up close to conflict, floods and fires.

Chris is carried away by the currents of the swollen Maitland River and drowns. The newsreel company is not above using the deaths of young cameramen like Chris or Damien Parer in promoting their newsreel footage to the public with statements like *one of our cameramen died in the making of this newsreel* displayed on bill posters outside the State theatre. The public are asked to make a donation to Chris's widow.

### **Scene 23 Spring 1956 - Bushfires rage on TV**

Television arrives and everyone is looking through the electrical store window at the new appliances. The extent of American saturation of television content is clear already in this scene as bystanders watch a crooning Bing Crosby and the Mickey Mouse club through the window. In the crowd a young Elvis look alike adjusts his Brill creamed quaff with a comb. A powerful edit takes the viewer through the television footage of a bushfire to the scene itself being filmed.

The coverage of the bushfires clearly shows the dominance of the new media of television bringing the news as it happens. Charlie warns off the TV crew at the scene of the fires. The news is reinvented by live television which is immediate and free. The newsreels that took 6 days to

complete and charge an entry fee were unable to compete. The cameramen have lost their purpose along with the relevance of the medium they work with. Charlie sings the Aeroplane Jelly advertising jingle as a pathetic last post to Australian content.

#### **Scene 24 A new generation**

Just as Len is attempting to cope with the onslaught of new mediums and their devastating impact on his work, he is also forced to deal with generational change in the form of a new camera assistant (played by Mark Holden). The new assistant has long hair, a predilection for rock and roll music and lacks his predecessor's respect for his elders, signaling the beginning of youth culture and the beginning of the counterculture revolution.

Len returns home to Amy who has already seen the bushfires on television. Tensions in their relationship are already apparent when Len turns to Amy in bed and says, *It feels like something is over*. Back at the studio there is a suggestion that there is too much smoke and not enough fire in the footage Len has gathered. Len takes the comment personally as a suggestion that he failed to get in close enough to the fires. His integrity depends on the authenticity of his work and he takes pride in the fact that he has never used someone else's footage or cut in flames from another fire. Again we are alerted to questions of historical truth, narrative and film construction. Len's principles and concerns for authenticity are not shared by Cliff who tells Len to *Shape up or ship out*.

#### **Scene 25 Frank Returns with an offer**

Frank, the local boy made good, comes home dressed in a white dinner suit and replete with a female American Personal Assistant as an accessory to his own image making. He is now Vice President of

a movie company. He asks Len if he would like to join the company and assist with a film shoot, Len refuses and Frank then suggests to Amy that, *there is room for you if you want to come over*. Amy is yet another objectified form of competition between the brothers.

In the hotel lobby the African American entertainer (Ken Bernard) announces a song in tribute to Frank's return. Frank says *it must be my buddy, he owns the hotel in fact he owns the whole god dam sky scraper*. Len's response is *Whacko*. The singer launches into the '*there's a track winding back*'. Another Australian iconic tune is Americanised.

### **Scene 26 Len's Changing World**

Len drives by the State Theatre just as a film billboard is being pasted up outside promoting the next US feature *And God Created Woman* (USA 1956). Starring Brigitte Bardot the film was highly controversial and was one of the first US films to be boycotted nationally by the Catholic Church.

*And God Created Woman* was condemned by the Catholic Church's Legion of Decency within months after the *Baby Doll* (1956) boycott and caused a huge uproar in the United States for its sexual content.<sup>30</sup>

Phillip Noyce is intimately aware of censorship. He was arrested on a railway station in 1969 for selling obscene material in school uniform. The offending material was a copy of *Ubu NEWS* No 12 Feb '69. Noyce was convicted and released on a good behavior bond.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Et Dieu... Créa La Femme* Internet Movie Database, Available: <http://www.imdb.com/find?s=all&q=God+created+woman>, 17 January 2006.



22 Phil Noyce at Barker College (photo – William Noyce) Mudie, Ubu Films, op.cit, p.142

This series of battles, in which Ubu members engaged, assisted to liberalise the oppressive film censorship laws. Social institutions however like the Catholic Church were beginning to modernize as the impact of Vatican II doctrine begun in the 1960s started to take effect. The US introduced a ratings system two years earlier than Australia in 1968. *And God Created Woman* and *Baby Doll* suggested the beginning of the freeing up of sexual values in the US as both films after much controversy were given the Production Code Administration's seal of approval.

David Stratton comments that in the original script this scene was to be the end of the film. At a very late stage a script editor was brought in, scenes were reshuffled and the ending was changed to a more dynamic finish. Bob Elliis at this point asked for his name to be removed from the credits.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup>Stratton, The Last New Wave, op.cit.,p 210.

Finally the threat of international interests requires that the two rival newsreel companies amalgamate. Both Boards of Directors strategize a survival plan, against the common enemy of foreign content and control. Len is about to resign, his letter is typed and he enters the Board of Directors office, but decides against it on hearing that he has been given the role of shooting and directing the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. This is a small example of the interconnection between historic events and personal histories. The two rival cameramen Charlie and Len now share a desk.

Frank and Len visit Fay and the kids on an access visit. Len screens home movie Super 8 footage of the earlier backyard barbeque scene. Returning to the theme of death, Chris is seen clowning around playfully and then peers into the camera lens. We see his face staring at us this time as a specter of death and portent of our own immortality. Fay is as controlling as ever and cuts the screening and Len's access to the kids short.

### **Scene 27 The Melbourne Olympics – Blood in the Pool**

Here again we see the blood lust spectator sport that is the news, from the high drama and emotion of the natural disasters of fire and flood to the turmoil of politics played out on the sporting battleground. The scene starts with the original newsreel footage of the '56 Games. The newsreel narrator set the scene '*Political events in Europe cast a dark shadow*' ..... The 1956 Olympics in Melbourne coincided with a key event in the Cold War, the crushing of the Hungarian uprising by the Soviet Union. Several countries boycotted the games in protest and many Hungarian players defected following the games. The scene then cuts to colour with Len and assistant Mark at the side of the pool.

The legendary semi final water polo game between the Russian and Hungarian teams literally became a blood bath when the game turned into a political vendetta televised internationally. The match was called off in the final minutes when the pool filled with blood and spectators nearly rioted. Hungary won the match. Amy and Frank sit together and watch the event from the stands; Frank's American Personal Assistant has vanished. In this scene we see that Australia is no longer isolated but a part of world events to do with the struggle for democracy and individual freedoms, both key concerns of the Australian subculture.

### **Scene 28 'I'm inviting you to bite your bum'**

Len having captured the tumultuous footage of the water polo game is offered a large sum of money by Frank to sell one reel to his company. Len asks, *So what are you going to use it for Anti communist propaganda?* Len refuses to sell and tells Frank *I'm inviting you to bite your bum*. Frank is incredulous: *that guy is walking towards a precipice with his eyes wide open* he declares. Amy replies *he's just a bit old fashioned that's all*. Amy has swapped her romantic allegiances. She stays with Frank as Len walks away alone.

This ending is an analogy for the outcome of the Australian film industry. We know the outcome and the size of the competition. We have witnessed the American cultural dumping from the opening credits of the film throughout. In the face of unbeatable odds Len refuses to sell his film reel to the Americans for financial gain, providing a metaphor for the doomed position of Australian content in a monopolized American market.

## End Credits

The film maintains the illusion of being a newsreel till the end. Len is seen ghosted on a montage of newsreel footage, reflecting the passage of time. The film's theme tune *The Road to Gundagai* plays over. A koala runs up a tree and a newsreel intertitle appears '*The End*'. The representation is of a quaint, twee and simplistic Australia set apart from the events of the world. Yet we have seen in the scene before that Australia is unable to separate itself from world events that impact on it constantly. Australians themselves are not ready for this change just as Len, Amy and Frank were unprepared for the events of Europe to be shockingly played out in the pool in Melbourne in 1956.

## *Newsfront* and the readymade

The idea of mixing a substantial portion of newsreel footage with acted footage had not occurred to mainstream Australian filmmakers previously and was noted by *Newsfront*'s reviewers at the time.

*Newsfront* is undoubtedly a well-made film which has appealed to a wide section of the Australian public. It utilises a unique format which combines authentic footage with a dramatic narrative; it has humour, pathos, good performances, and tight direction. Above all it is entertaining.<sup>82</sup>

As already mentioned Noyce was introduced to avant-garde studies through his association with Ubu. Michael Wilding, Emeritus Professor in English and Australian Literature at the University of Sydney, was another important influence. Wilding's lectures were on Milton were highly regarded. He also taught an awareness of 20<sup>th</sup> Century movements. In an interview with Walter Chaw Noyce

---

<sup>82</sup> Michael Harvey, "Selling *Newsfront*," *Cinema Papers* No 22, July / August, 1979, pp. 436-439, 477.

reveals that he chose a Milton quote (*Better to Reign in Hell*) as the title of his first student film. For his first feature *Castor and Pollux* he chose another Milton quote from *Paradise Lost*.<sup>83</sup>

The ready-made is a significant premise of Conceptual art that has its roots early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in both Dadaism and especially in the work of Marcel Duchamp, a painter, filmmaker, cross dresser and fearless arts collaborator. Ubu brought in US experimental films including films by Bruce Connors, the Californian assemblage artist and filmmaker. Connors pioneered the use of collage with found footage in *A Movie* (1958). He outlines his methodology in *Critical Cinema*;

So I gathered a lot of movies that were sold at a local film supply store. I had no idea then that *A Movie* was going to turn out the way it did. I just started putting pieces of film together and running them on a projector. I'd turn on the radio and whatever was on was assumed as the sound track.<sup>84</sup>

Connors was not the first to use the technique. Adrian Martin claims in his chapter 'Collage and Montage Contemporary Australian Experimental Film and Video and its Origins' in the book titled *Contemporary Australian Collage and its Origins* that Jean Epstein made a montage film as early as 1925 titled *Photogenies*. Martin states that Jacques Brunius, critic, surrealist, and filmmaker, noted montage film as a category of experimental filmmaking in an article he wrote on the genre in France in 1948.

Interestingly Martin goes on to reveal that Guy Debord the leader of the Situationists used to re-cut and re-dub Hollywood films, a practice the Situationists termed detournment. Detournment enabled

---

<sup>83</sup> Walter Chaw, *Noyce Guys Finish First*, 2002, Film Freak Central, Available: <http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/diff/pnoyceinterview.htm>2006.

<sup>84</sup> Stott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema : Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. p254.



the subversion of meanings as a result of their new context and altered texts.<sup>85</sup> This was a political act of rejection of the mainstream film market akin to the anti art market approach of Duchamp readymades or the controversial headlines of *Oz* magazine. In *Newsfront* Geoff's re-cutting of the Menzies's footage into a fascist salute uses a similar technique.

As Martin correctly determines, collage, photomontage and montage are all conceptual forms dependant upon editing and colliding meanings. Whether using found or original material, selected or cut from the everyday, the re-contextualisation of an image, narrative or object re-determines its associated meanings. Film though is the only medium that is utterly dependant on editing for its form with the interesting exception of the continuous shot film such as Thoms' experimental film *Bolero* or the commercial film *Russian Ark*.

In Australia, Ubu used found footage and sound in experimental films throughout the late '60s. During this period the ready-made was widely used, perhaps most famously by Andy Warhol. It was already an established tool to critique and reinvent political and social constructs in Fluxus art happenings.

The ready-made be it an object, still image, sound or moving image has a unique ability to blur reality and illusion and in so doing forces viewers to question the limits of both. The power of the ready-made reveals that ultimately both reality and illusion are constructions of our own making.

---

<sup>85</sup> Adrian Martin , 'Collage and Montage Contemporary Australian Experimental Film and Video and its Origins', ed Arthur McIntyre, Contemporary Australian Collage and its Origins, 1990, Craftsman House Roseville, NSW, p.49

Director Phil Noyce and assistants visited the NFSA seeking ready-made Movietone and Cinesound footage, to fit into *Newsfront*'s storyline. The Film Archive separated from the National Library in 1984, to become the National Film and Sound Archive. The Archive at the time had copied for conservation purposes the nitrate originals of the newsreels from 1930s-1950s and some components of later newsreels onto acetate film. The opening montage of *Newsfront* includes many scenes from these films.

### **Experiments with time**

Skoller asserts that dominant cinema by such literal re-creations of historic events, divides the past and the present. This creates a gap forced by the objectification of both the narrative accounts and empirical interpretation of the remaining artifacts, which conceals the process of constructing history. Time is cauterized and the blending of moments between then and now are not transmitted. The past in this context always remains as another country. Dominant cinema as a historiographic medium therefore powerfully maintains the hierarchy of an authoritative and singular point of view of past events.

In reaction to dominant cinema, Skoller argues that avant-garde film seeks to invent cinematic methods that loop time, and that represent the inexplicable and non-empirical aspects of history. The marginal status of avant-garde film he maintains has enabled it to experiment with contemporary historical approaches. As a laboratory for ideas experimental filmmakers have used structuralism to release the physical aspects of the material of film and disclose its essential role in the fabrication of narrative. Skoller demonstrates in examples cited in *Shadows, Specters and Shards* that this formalist approach brings the present to the fore in the telling of events. In intuiting events

from incomplete fragments, spectatorship is activated in imagining and filling in the gaps and variables in meaning making. These poetic interpretations of the past open up readings to include virtual, mysterious and uncanny connections through time, defying the linear categories of traditional histories.

Skoller uses the motif of the shard to symbolize both the archaeology of constructing history from fragmentary remains and the collage quality of film as a construction of shots or slices of time embedded in emulsion. He therefore correctly identifies that both history and film share essential formal relationships as constructed forms, inherently including omissions, gaps and implied meanings. His point is that traditional history and dominant cinema construct narrative to conceal these tears in time in order to impose an illusion of a smooth chronology of unfolding events. Stories it is said are in the telling. The following quote defines Skoller's claims:

This cinema of evocation rather than representation calls attention to those aspects of history that exceed the visible and representable but nonetheless profoundly impact on our experience of everyday life.<sup>86</sup>

The critical question Skoller highlights is - what are the limits of representation? The epistemology of history must now include analysis of what is missing as well as what remains. By applying these concepts to cinematic historical constructions of narrative, Skoller argues that it is the interdisciplinary, aesthetic based cinemas that have brought new approaches to the interpretation of time and narrative in cinema. He claims that even dramatic social realist and social documentaries by contrast have continued to use the accepted formulas for historiography.

---

<sup>86</sup> Skoller, Making History in Avant-Garde Film, op.cit., p xvi

Skoller cites Walter Benjamin's theories on historical materialism as establishing forms of history as interpreted political positions, having the activity of 'allegories' as:

*Eternal images of the past....the way it really was* and a notion of historical materialism in which the experience of the past is produced as something unique by the conditions of the present. Benjamin writes: history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of 'now'<sup>87</sup>

Benjamin sees the present as a charged and constantly transforming construction created out of the engagement with the detritus of history objects, images, and documents. As he states; 'Truth is charged to bursting point with time'.

These traditional historical narratives assist in maintaining social and civil order within cultures and countries. Dissent is minimized as everyone consumes the same historical product. Alternative or anti histories however, constantly challenge singular points of view or the grand historical accounts that Jean – Francois Lyotard called metanarratives. Lyotard used the term metanarrative in his 1984 work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.<sup>88</sup> Here he discussed the postmodernist questioning of historical construction in relation to key western cultural values i.e.: the primacy of the individual, that science will progress humankind and the categorization and hierarchy of knowledge and rational thought.

Lyotard and other post-structuralist theorists recognised that these grand narratives in their ordering of history conveniently escaped the real chaos of people, places and historical events. Metanarratives ignore the multitude of views and conflicting actions to document a homogenizing human experience and present it as a commonly shared goal. He cites the crumbling Russian communist

---

<sup>87</sup> Skoller, *Making History in Avant-Garde Film*, op.cit., pp back cover, pxvii

<sup>88</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1984, Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi.

regime as one example of the dichotomies between proposed metanarratives and truth. Lyotard considered that political progress had to encompass a multitude of divergent views within a local context rather than singular homogenous theories.

Critics of Lyotard say his arguments are circular and that he also falls foul of dictating his own theories of metanarratives in questioning universal truths of right and wrong. How can you be sure that a metanarrative is being eroded if you question truth itself? Postmodernism becomes only another theory that uses rational ordering to organize the irrational.

Lyotard's theories, however, can be applied to the counterculture movement of Australia in the 1960s. They are relevant to Australian social and political protectionism in the 1960s and continuing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the 1960s the counterculture questioning of those protectionist metanarratives was epitomized by the fierce censorship battles. The metanarrative of Australia as a moral nation included control of both fertility and sexual expression to ensure the supposed common goal of a pure genetic race. The alignment of church and state was a powerful political force. Another ongoing metanarrative related to the defence of Australia and the notion that it is inextricably aligned to a larger power, British or American. The 1960s was, of course, characterized by the counterculture questioning of Australian defence policy in the context of Vietnam and conscription.

From this perspective history and film histories are as much about the characters and events not included as they are about the characters and events that are. This opens up histories to the layers of meaning created by different voices, localized experiences that may have previously been omitted. This multiple approach to storytelling builds layers of meaning providing a richer understanding of

the impact of the present on the past and visa-versa. The construction of past events occurs in the present. Narrative crafts both the real and the imagined to produce the appearance of truth. Rosalind Krauss correctly identifies that film is not reducible to one medium as it undergoes continuous technological change and interaction with all the other art forms and multiple subject areas. Film is the collision of visual aesthetics. In that sense film's essential condition is extended to include its sequencing and layering of visual and audio texts to become more than itself.<sup>89</sup>

Skoller states that it is this issue of media specificity that has sent many avant-garde filmmakers to review the past, sorting through the images of a century of film practice. Cataloging archives to re-cut, appropriate and reconstruct new histories. *Newsfront* in this context becomes a metanarrative of film's own ongoing technological development and the impact of the march of progress on the Newsreel cameramen who depended upon it for their living.

For artists who work with film the past is now their medium, they are as Skoller puts it 'post medium'. The question now is how they continue to represent this early confluence of technology and art in the future. Skoller sees that modernism has been defined by this ongoing process of casting off past technologies in the belief that new mediums will better capture the present. Yet artists confronted by these new mediums often unconsciously return to past paradigms and forms to come to grips with new technologies.

Montage is the assembling of disconnected images and or sounds so that they smash against each creating new meanings. Montage and history are similar in form in that they are both about comparisons between things. Both evoke new ideas and meanings in the mind of the spectator by meshing colliding information.

---

<sup>89</sup> Skoller, Making History in Avant-Garde Film, op.cit., pxxix.

Cinema as a way of capturing time has become an important means to assess representations of reality in history. Skoller maintains that:

...the promise of modern cinematic form as a new way of experiencing time at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century [became] the embodiment of a new, more complex way of thinking historically at the century's end.<sup>90</sup>

According to Skoller we 'experience time in relation to things, one moment in relation to another'.

He looks at constructions of historical narrative and how chaotic complex situations are smoothed over, ordered and interpreted as linear and preordained. In the interest of arriving at a logical structure to the narrative, the reality of what actually occurred can be warped and or over simplified. Skoller notes Michael Andrè Bernstein's work in which he analyses historical narratives' use of backshadowing and foreshadowing to produce a sense of inescapable cause and effect to what in actuality is a tangled knot of random interactions. The result is a binary two dimensional history. To subvert this linearity and dehumanization of the narrated event Bernstein introduces the possibility of sideshadowing where multiple potential alternative outcomes are presented. The possibility of multiple outcomes creates a stronger experience of the random impact of time in selecting outcomes, making counter histories ever more credible. Both *Newsfront* and *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* are examples of this.

Bernstein explains that:

...to sideshadow is also to look at what did not happen, as well as what did, what might have happened but didn't, and also what else happened.<sup>91</sup>

Bernstein's device for considering these implied unacknowledged histories deserts traditional historical conventions by including these potent potential histories. Creativity now exerts a political force, as historical documentation re-invents itself to accommodate the possible future unknown outcomes.

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, pp xxvii.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., pxxix

The device of using photographic still images from the family album in *Newsfront* is an example of this as we consider the possible other outcomes for the Maguire family. The actual family history and the virtual family history of the photo album are juxtaposed. In Regis Durrand's chapter 'Still and Moving Images - How to see photographically' in *Fugitive Images from Photography to Video* provides insights into our experience of still and moving image.

The differences between the film still and the photograph is that the photograph is only a reference to movement and time; it lacks the linearity of the film still. Even if a series of photographs are assembled or sequenced the photographic image remains halted in time. It is caught in a suspended dream, a hallucination. The film still though is part of a sequence. It has a beginning and an end even though it is a complete fabrication. Deleuze asserts that cinema is like thinking it is a closed loop a constant reaction between image and its relation. The photograph in contrast is the origin of the thought.<sup>92</sup>

### ***Newsfront's* counterculture credentials**

*AFI Awards* (Television) 1978:<sup>93</sup>

Almost every member of *Newsfront's* creative team had been a part of the late 1960s experimental film movement including: Phillip Noyce Director, David Elflick Producer, Richard Brennan Associate Producer, Philippe Mora Co-Writer and Bob Ellis the Screen Writer. The London and Sydney underground movements were strongly connected through the large number of Australian expatriates such as Philippe Mora and Bruce Beresford who lived in London during the late 1960s.

---

<sup>92</sup> Patrice Petro, ed., *Fugitive Images from Photography to Video*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995, p144.

<sup>93</sup> DVD 2 No 11



The authorship of the screen play for *Newsfront* became a controversial topic; it was initially disowned by Ellis and then after the film's success was reclaimed by him. Ingo Petzke's biography of Noyce reveals that Ellis's wife, the unacknowledged Anne Brooksbank contributed one of the most powerful emotional scenes of the film between Len and his wife Fay where Fay describes the impact his constant work absences have on her and the children.<sup>94</sup>

The following is a summary of the earlier experimental work of Elfick, Noyce and Mora in reference to their influence on *Newsfront*'s inception.

### **Phillip Noyce**

Australian Film Television & Radio School web site notes that Noyce's directorial credits for Australian films include as well as *Newsfront*, *Backroads* (1977), *Heatwave* (1982) starring Judy Davis, *Dead Calm* (1989) with Nicole Kidman, and the acclaimed *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2001), as well as successes such as *Patriot Games* (1992), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), *The Bone Collector* (1999) and *The Quiet American* (2002).<sup>95</sup>

The NFSA website documents that Noyce was awarded the Ken G Hall award in 2005 by the Archive for his:

Outstanding contribution to the art of film and to the cause of film preservation, particularly through the authentic treatment of archival footage in his 1978 film *Newsfront*, his long-term commitment to the preservation of his works through the National Film and Sound Archive, and his championing of the NFSA's Kodak/Atlab Cinema Collection.<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Ingo Petzke, *Phillip Noyce Backroads to Hollywood*, Sydney, Macmillan, 2004, p 75

<sup>95</sup> The Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS), *Phillip Noyce to Receive 2005 Ken G Hall Award*, AFTRS, Available: <http://www.aftrs.edu.au/index.cfm?objectID=0D93AFED-2A54-23A3-6A179B8F6A02CEB1>.

<sup>96</sup> National Film and Sound Archive, *2005 Ken G Hall Recipient, Phillip Noyce 2005*, NFSA, 16 June 2006 Available: <http://www.screen sound.gov.au/Screensound/Screenso.nsf/AllDocs/785895C506E0AA5FCA2570DD0007966C?OpenDocument>.

Noyce's early work shows an interest in alternative histories and communities. He photographed and directed a film as a student in the Interim Training Program of the newly formed Australian Film and Television School (AFTRS) in 1973 titled *Castor and Pollux*. It was his first feature film. It was a social record of the early '70s, investigating the similarities of alternative lifestyle groups through a hippie icon Adrian Rawlings, and a bikie, who are considered to be spiritual brothers. He was also the manager of the Sydney Film Co-operative.

While Noyce was not inserting archival footage into this documentary he was playing with truth and fiction and its relation to the construction of the documentary genre. *Castor and Pollux* was one of the first living camera or fly on the wall documentaries to be made in Australia, although at the time many such documentaries were being made overseas.

After finishing at AFTRS Noyce made *God Knows Why But It Works*, a documentary about the life and crusade of Dr Archie Kalokerinos. Dr Archie Kalokerinos crusaded to substantiate a theory that the injection of vitamins can save lives and lower the high rate of Aboriginal infant mortality.

Kalokerinos's approach supported the work of Linus Pauling who won several Nobel Prizes and proved the crucial role of vitamin C in maintaining health. Stratton notes that the film was well received at the Sydney Film Festival in 1976 where it supported Philippe Mora's *Mad Dog Morgan*.

97

In *God Knows Why But it Works*<sup>98</sup> the real Dr Archie Kalokerinos views the actor's performance from the wings of the set. The actor playing the Doctor, challenges the real Dr Archie Kalokerinos, 'did you really say that?' At the same time that the veracity of the events in the drama are

---

<sup>97</sup> David Stratton, op.cit, p203

<sup>98</sup> DVD 2 No *God Knows Why But It Works (Film)* 1976 Cast/Actor: Peter Cummins, Martin Harris, Robyn Nevin, Henri Szeps Cinematographer/Director of photography: Andrew Frazer, Director: Phillip Noyce / Producer: Richard Mason

questioned, the director and film equipment are all revealed within the frame breaking all fundamental rules of filmmaking in maintaining the illusion of reality. In these early works viewers can see Noyce's interest in critiquing the nature of narrative and authenticity.

Noyce's last film prior to *Newsfront* was *Backroads* (1977). *Backroads* was a controversial road movie and a bleak portrait of Australian racism and masculinity. Noyce received an experimental film grant of \$25,000 to make the film but had to make up a budget shortfall by doing some teaching at AFTRS.<sup>99</sup> The cast included Bill Hunter as Jack and Gary Foley as Gary. This is an important precursor to the *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and is an example of Noyce's long term commitment to indigenous issues. Ellick was the executive producer for *Rabbit Proof Fence*.



23 *Backroads*: Bill Hunter (Jack) stands behind Zac Martin (Joe). SSA collection title No 360544

Elflick chose Noyce and not Mora to direct the screenplay *Newsfront*. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday 28, 1978, Jill Neville asked Elflick, 'Why did you choose Phil Noyce as your director?'

---

<sup>99</sup> Urban, Edge of the Known World : The Australian Film, Television & Radio School : Impressions of the First 25 Years (, p15.

I'd seen something he did on TV about the Vitamin C cure for Aborigines. He had the ability to take a documentary subject and bring it alive.<sup>100</sup>

## **Elfick**

After his iconic surf film, *Crystal Voyager*<sup>101</sup>, Elfick was ready to expand his repertoire and wanted to make a dramatic feature. Fisher and Neville were also ready to leave the U.K *OZ magazine* behind and to return to Australia. The trio of friends decided to work together to develop a storyline. Richard Keys, now employed by the Arts Council assisted with providing a small amount of funding. Today Keys is an Emeritus Curator at the NFSA.

In 1975 Elfick and Philippe Mora were first introduced through their mutual friends Richard Neville, Michael Molloy and Michael Ramsden. Both Neville and Fisher saw the release of Elfick's *Crystal Voyager* in London and Elfick also assisted with the UK *OZ Magazine*. Elfick's choice of Bob Ellis to write the screenplay for *Newsfront* was according to Stratton a result of Elfick's positive impression of Ellis's work converting history to theatre in *The Legends of King O'Malley*<sup>102</sup> Ellis co wrote *The Legends of King O'Malley* with Michael Boddy (a playwright, actor and popular television personality at the time). Boddy was an important figure in the early establishment of the Nimrod Theatre. The play was produced by John Bell to great acclaim. Boddy also starred in the film written by David Perry *The Tribulations of Mr Dupont Nomore* made and banned in 1967.

---

<sup>100</sup> Jill Neville, 'The Road to Film Fame', Sydney Morning Herald, July 28 1978,

<sup>101</sup> DVD 2 No 12 'Crystal Voyager' (Motion Picture Film) 1973 Cast/Actor: George Greenough, Ritchie West, Robert Young, Cinematographer/Director of photography: Albert Falzon, George Greenough, Greg Weaver, Director: Albert Falzon Producer: David Elfick .

<sup>102</sup> Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, op.cit., p208



24 *Mr Dupont Nomore* Mudie, Ubu Films, p .62.

## Philippe Mora

Mora was well-established as a painter from an early age and like many Australian artists of the period set off to London in search of artistic stimulation. There he became a prominent figure in the London underground movement. His first motion picture *Trouble in Molopolis* 1970 included many prominent Australian expatriate counterculture figures including: Germaine Greer, Jenny Kee, Richard Neville and Martin Sharp. In 1973 he co-wrote and directed his famous compilation film, *Swastika*, a documentary collage of ready-mades using Eva Braun's home movies, contrasted with newsreels from the Nazi era.

In 1974 Mora completed another collage documentary feature film, *Brother Can You Spare a Dime?*

<sup>103</sup> Mora's work again included intercut archival footage to produce alternative history, juxtaposing actual documentary footage of the 1930s and Hollywood fantasy. It provides a fascinating perspective on the Great Depression and Hollywood's golden era as disparate events bound into one visual narrative.

---

<sup>103</sup> DVD 3 No 14 Philippe Mora. and "Brother Can You Spare a Dime? ," (1974 ), vol., ed. Bob Caisley and David Brady. DVD 3 No 14 Executive Producers Bob Caisley and David Brady / Directed by Philippe Mora. Golden Globe – nominated documentary , juxtaposes newsreel footage, film clips and period music in a survey of the Great Depression.

*Newsfront*'s concept of the incorporation of the ready-made was pioneered by Mora, who coming from a visual art background well understood the power of the ready-made to re-contextualize meaning.

Stratton suggest another source of inspiration for Mora was:

*Too Hot to Handle* (MGM, 1938, director Jack Conway), a film in which Clark Gable and Walter Pidgeon were rival newspaper cameramen in love with Myra Loy.

Stratton agrees that Mora at the time noted ideas for the film many of which appear in the film itself. He even had a list of titles including *Newsfront*. He states that Elfick told him he was making a documentary<sup>104</sup> A file held in the NFSA documents these ideas and includes his original notes.

In 1975 Mora began directing *Mad Dog Morgan*, from his own screenplay. The star studded cast included Graeme Blundell, John Hargraves, Denise Hopper, Bill Hunter, Frank Thring, Bruce Spence, David Gulpilil, Michael Pate and Jack Thompson. Bill Hunter was nominated as Best Supporting Actor for *Mad Dog Morgan*. Later Hunter was chosen by Elfick and Noyce to play Len Maguire in *Newsfront*. Richard Brennan was the associate producer of *Mad Dog Morgan* and the cinematographer was Mike Molloy.

Brennan was a member of the Sydney Push and has since had a successful career as a film producer. His filmography includes: *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, *The Removalists*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *The Girl Who Met Simone de Beauvoir in Paris* and *Spotswood*. Mick Molloy had previously been a famous newsreel cameraman before turning to feature film. As mentioned earlier Molloy had worked as camera operator on films such as *Performance*, *Walkabout* and *Clockwork*

---

<sup>104</sup> Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, op.cit p 208

*Orange*. Mora and Molloy were old friends. Molloy's newsreel cameraman anecdotes no doubt assisted in providing valuable texture to *Newsfront*. Mora considered Molloy to be one of the top ten cinematographers in the world and was keen to give him the opportunity to be the Director of Photography for *Mad Dog Morgan*.

Throughout the production of *Mad Dog Morgan*, Mora was also collaborating with Elfick on the development of *Newsfront*. They jointly submitted a grant for funding for *Newsfront*'s development to the Arts Council. Richard Brennan, *Newsfront*'s associate producer, had worked with Beresford on *The Devil to Pay* and later with Mora on *Swastika* and *Mad Dog Morgan*. Elfick obviously admired Mora's filmmaking as he made his own documentary about the making of *Mad Dog Morgan* titled *To Shoot a Mad Dog*. As Stratton observes this was the first non surfing film he had made and marked an entry point into the industry when the film was included as a finalist in the Sydney Film Festival Greater Union Awards.<sup>105</sup>

Following *Newsfront*'s incredibly successful release there were many bitter legal disputes in relation to the film's credits and screenplay. Mora was eventually added to the credits for *Newsfront*'s original concept.

Undoubtedly the film's success at the time was due to its unique structure, the use of ready-made film footage collaged into both fact and fiction. Today the use of ready-made film footage is an established part of mainstream contemporary cinema but its heritage is not linked to the visual art medium of the ready made.

---

<sup>105</sup> Stratton, *The Last New Wave*, op.cit.,p207.

*Newsfront* in many ways represents the artistic culmination of an Australian underground film movement and its impact on mainstream Australian cinema. Ubu and the Co-op they founded were instrumental in providing a visual and conceptual link to international avant-garde traditions and in training and motivating new generations of Australian filmmakers. Ubu's knowledge of early cinema and modernist movements was an important intellectual driver in the second wave resurgence of Australian independent cinema. Ubu followed a polyvalent art practice that recognized that mediums are channels / vehicles of communication in which ideas and messages are crafted in order to be communicated.

Ubu gave the public an opportunity to see that film could be different to commercial feature film and proved that access to personal filmmaking attracted audiences especially youth audiences.

Ultimately it was their mode of operation actively involving audiences as participants, controlling production, exhibition and distribution within a not for profit network of collective interest that most challenged the commercial industry.

Skoller correctly observes avant-garde art practice and countercultures as synonymous with one another. Avant-garde artist and countercultures share a search for utopian ideals driven by a passion for social, political and artistic change. They question, the relationship between art, aesthetics, politics and social oppression. Common identifiers for avant-garde practice include: a search for autonomy through resistance and withdrawal from mainstream culture, an experimental attitude to the making process that is playful and innovative and without a sense of preciousness for the end



product, and the use of aesthetics to intervene in and disrupt dominant political and social parameters.

The cooperative control of all aspects including production and distribution gave independent film its credibility as a form of popular culture that provided expression beyond the market driven dictates of mass produced culture. It is this distinctive autonomous space from both art and mass culture industries that current avant-garde practice seeks to fill today.

As Skoller rightly notes, it is one of avant-garde film's great strengths that it has not been married to academia, the visual arts or the film industries but interlinks all of them to cultural action transforming each. Avant-garde film intersects and stretches the boundaries of all of these fields opening them up to one another and to their combined possibilities. He also comments that the search for a political cinema that experiments with radical aesthetics was an integral part of both European and North American modernist cinema in the 1960s and 1970s. It continues to be a focus informing media cultures directions today.

As Philippe Dubois maintains in his chapter 'Photography and Mise-en-Film Autobiographical Histories and Psychic Apparatus' in *Fugitive Images from Photography to Video* visual media can most effectively be interpreted in inter-related terms:

On a theoretical level, I think it is no longer useful or even pertinent to treat photography as a thing in itself, or cinema as an ontology, or video as a specific medium. Though I have already begun to explore various interconnections among film, photography and video, I think we have never been in a better position to approach a given visual medium by imagining it in the light of another, through another, in another, by another, or like another.

Such an oblique, off center vision can frequently offer a better opening onto what lies at the heart of a system.<sup>106</sup>

The current emergence of social software such as *flickr.com*, an online photo album, and *myspace*, a music creative common, or *Youtube*, a video common, are interesting recent phenomena. They evoke in a part the ideology of the Film Co-operatives' alternative systems for collective debate, distribution and exhibition of cultural product. In that sense the copyleft movement and these new social softwares of the 21<sup>st</sup> century might suggest a future technological counterculture movement in the form of online communities. It is also a return to the auteur and the democratization of the media that were central interests of the 1960s counterculture. They like independent film present a challenge to the dominance of the mass media industry and move individuals from spectators to active participants.

*Newsfront* is an important outcome of the Ubu network and the counterculture. The character of Len is akin to the heroes of Truffaut, a self effacing born loser in life and love. A commercial film, it signalled the confidence of a re-emerging mainstream Australian film industry and challenged the Australian public to value and control its own culture as uniquely independent.

---

<sup>106</sup> Petro, ed., Fugitive Images from Photography to Video, op.cit , p45

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions

Ubu's most important initiatives were the founding of the Sydney Film Cooperative and the handmade films and lightshows. Both were manifestations of a key Ubu principle —access to filmmaking for all as a political and social right. Forty years on independent cinema and their exhibition houses have all but vanished from Australia's media landscape.

The Co-op's work changed the way people viewed films and created an audience demand that previously did not exist by presenting an alternative to narrative mainstream cinema. Their exhibition policy for distributing profits amongst the artists stimulated production in an environment devoid of any other support. Not only was Ubu ground breaking in promoting new and diverse film forms, its influences flowed on to later generations of independent filmmakers using Super 8 formats. They achieved their goals through creative collaborative action.

Their emphasis on happenings, lightshows and music festivals was about connecting art and life as one continuous experience. Ubu's lightshows and film distribution provided an economic lifecycle that sustained one of its overarching principles '*involvement without impediment*'. Their focus was not an object, or necessarily even an outcome but the process of the happening itself and its active engagement with the public. It was their mode of operation actively involving audiences as participants, controlling production, exhibition and distribution within a not for profit network of collective interest that most challenged the commercial industry. The fact that these independent films existed at all posits the case that alternative forms of film viewing were possible and viable. The sheer existence of an alternative independent avant-garde film critically usurps the utopian metanarratives distributed by the mass entertainment industries.

It is the connection to youth audience that is perhaps the starkest difference between Australian film today and the experimental movement of the 1960s. Ubu gave the public an opportunity to see that film could be different to commercial feature film and proved that access to personal filmmaking attracted audiences especially youth audiences.

The fact that experimental film is so ephemeral and remains the most undocumented art form in the country makes the argument to preserve and interpret the work of Ubu and other Australian experimenters all the more compelling. Technological changes in film formats have created a critical knowledge management issue as the historical and cultural importance of these innovators and their relevance to contemporary art practice becomes increasingly inaccessible. The digital age has brought the tools of production exhibition and distribution within the reach of everyone. Yet digital archival preservation presents many vexing issues for collecting institutions.

The migration of moving images from cinema to theatre to galleries, to personal computers as a result of digital media and a returning interest to performance and visual spectacle have created a similar environment to the one that Ubu created in the 1960s, that is an arts practice unfettered by issues of media specificity or cultural institutionalisation. Today's post medium practice, media integration, media contribution via Web 2.0 and emphasis on media personalization can be seen as a return to essential aspects of Ubu's democratization of the arts. The current open source, online community is proving that utopian ideals and passion for social, political and artistic change is continuing on the internet. Like all counter cultures it is challenging the status quo and attempting to free up culture for access, distribution and debate. The advent of the Creative Commons license is a

subset of this movement and is again asking borderline questions about our right to be able to engage, play and utilize our own culture as a readymade?

In Ubu's era the question of access to an international community to share artistic ideas meant the necessity of overcoming the oppressive censorship laws of the time. In a new millennium the Web 2.0 and the Creative Commons movement is challenging the restrictions of corporate content owners and providing a grassroots mechanism to enable collaboration and artistic growth, akin to Ubu's aims to expand independent production, distribution and debate of cultural product.

Experimental films provide an essential anti history in contrast to traditional narrative films and historical narratives that saturate the mass media. Both *Newsfront* and *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* question fundamental givens such as Australia's dependency on foreign imperial powers for defence, oppressive censorship and cultural ideologies of sexual and political control. Both films propose alternate outcomes and in doing so both question what is generally perceived as authentic in telling history. They combine narrative and structuralism, still and moving images and found object film to explore the passage of time. This blurring of fact with fiction and consideration of possible other virtual outcomes is another of the important but unrecognised impacts of experimental film on mainstream cinema.

Australian film culture's dismissal of experimental film as marginal in the 1970s as a result of a singular notion that art and film were somehow separate entities is now revealed as yet another missed opportunity to create a unique national cinema. The exhibition from the *Centre Pompidou*

*Video Art 1965- 2005* that toured Australia in 2007 highlights the fact that a major historical survey exhibition of experimental film or video made in Australia is yet to be undertaken.

## Appendix A Timeline

### 1895

Lumiere's first public screening of the Cinematograph in Paris in December 1895

**1897** *The Hens Convention* Australia's earliest surviving sound recording by Thomas Rome of his friend J.J Viller's impersonating of a chicken.

### 1896

Alfred Jarry play *Ubu Roi* first staged in Paris

### 1900

The earliest example of mark making directly on film I have been able to find is a U.K example from 1900 by Cecil Hepworth (a major producer of silent film) in 1914 in his novelty film *How It Feels to be Run Over*

### 1916

*Cabaret Voltaire* in Zurich

### 1920s

Paris based Dada and Surrealist periods created cinema that provoked outrage and suspicion

### 1935

Lye's film *Colour Box* begins the spread of the genre of abstract film-making



## 1962

Thoms returns to Sydney University to study for MA in theatre

## 1963

Beresford and Thoms collaborate on the film *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*. Experimental theatre and film combine in Australia for first time

## 1964

Editors of *OZ magazine* are charged in Sydney under obscenity laws. In a separate action Sharp's student newspaper *Tharunka* is also prosecuted for depravity.

## 1965

Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) stage *The Theatre of Cruelty*. Ubu members first converge

Martin Sharp's first exhibition at Clune's Galleries

## 1966

Ubu's first screening program Union theatre and then Australian National University Canberra

Ubu begins film distribution

Beresford takes up position at BFI in U.K as Manager of the Experimental Film Fund

London Filmmakers Cooperative formed

## 1967

*Rita and Dundi, The Tribulations of Mr Dupoint Nomore* banned by censors.

Ubu's members sign Handmade Film Manifesto written by Thoms

## 1968

Ubu initiates Lightshow business to support film production costs

Ubu's *Liquid Light* show at St Aloysius College and the *Trip without Glue* at the Briar's club is the first time that warm oils and jumbo strobes were used in Australia specifically at

Thoms quits ABC to work full time on *Marinetti*

PM John Gorton calls for report on a Film and Television School

## 1969

Sydney Film Cooperative founded 17 July 1969 by Ubu members

Noyce arrested for distributing an indecent item *Ubu NEWS* No 12

Thoms's film *Marinetti* savagely received at Sydney Film Festival

*The Yellow House* opens in Maclay Street Sydney

Film committee Peter Coleman, Phillip Adams, Barry Jones, begin tour of international film schools

PM John Gorton accepts the recommendations of the Film Committee

Gorton announced the slow phasing out of Australian troops involvement in Vietnam.

## 1970

Ubu ceases as an active social group and as a trading partner.

Sydney Film Cooperative takes over Ubu's distribution under Phillip Noyce's management.

Don Chipp introduces R rating and censorship laws reviewed.

Australia Council for Art begins funding both art and film. Thoms receives grant for *Sunshine City* from the Experimental Film Funds

*OZ magazine* editors: Neville, Anderson and Dennis charged in London for the *School Kids issue* of *OZ magazine*.

Germaine Greer publishes *The Female Eunuch*, which sells 5,000 copies in 3 days and Greer becomes a media sensation.

Ubu ends

## 1971

Thoms returns to Australia and starts the Filmmakers cinema and the Ginger Meggs School of Art in *The Yellow House*

Melbourne Film Cooperative founded 5 July 1971

## 1972

*The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie* is the first film funded by the new Australia Council for the Arts. Directed by Bruce Beresford.

*The Yellow House* opens in Maclay Street Sydney

### **1973**

Mora directs *Swastika*

Elflick produces *Crystal Voyager*

Phillip Noyce age 21 was one of the first students through the interim film school along with Gillian Armstrong.

### **1974**

Mora directs *Brother Can You Spare a Dime?*

Noyce directs *Castor and Pollux: A Tale of Two Spiritual Brothers*

### **1975**

Australian Film Commission (AFC) takes over film funding from the Australia Council. The Australian Film and Television School (AFTRS) opens.

### **1976**

Mora directs *Mad Dog Morgan*

Noyce directs *God Knows Why, But It Works*

### **1978**

*Newsfront* is released

**2003**

*Larrikins in London* Exhibition Ivan Dougherty Exhibition Gallery Sydney

## **Appendix B DVD 1, 2, 3 Viewing Menu**

### **DVD 1 Viewing Menu**

**1. *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*** (16mm film) 1963 Dir: Albie Thoms and Bruce Beresford

**7 *The Film*** (16mm film) 1966

An improvised happening filmed with four cameras, 16mm, B/W, 12mins, prod – Garry Shead; dir / phot - John Clark, Michael Pearce, David Perry, Garry Shead, David Stiven, Albie Thoms, Roger Whittaker; edit- Michael Pearce, David Stiven, Garry Shead; cast – John Clark, John Firth Smith, Judy Firth-Smith, Susan Howe, Rosemary Jaynes, Michael Nessler, Michael Pearce, David Perry, Garry Shead, David Stiven, Albie Thoms, and Roger Wittaker.

**8 *David Perry*** (16mm film) 1968

Dir: Albie Thoms, a handmade film created as a tribute to David Perry, 16mm, colour, sound 4 mins  
prod / dir / edit / music - Albie Thoms; narr –David Perry; snd rec- Bob Kummerfeld.

**4 *Poem 25*** (16mm film) 1965 DVD 1 No 4

A handmade film animating Schwitters's poem. Originally silent film, it was first projected over Leventhal on stage while he read Schwitters's poem during the Theatre of Cruelty – it exists now with the voice on the optical soundtrack. 16mm B/W, sound, 1.5mins. prod /dir – Albie Thoms; anim – David Perry; poem – Kurt Schwitters; voice – Harry Leventhal.

**2. *Spurt of Blood*** (16mm film) 1965

The difficulties of young love and the absurdity of religion, seen in a medieval setting. 16mm, B/W, sound, 6.5 mins. prod / dir - Albie Thoms; dir phot / anim /edit – David Perry; costumes / masks – Michael Day; snd rec - Lex Watson; Wr – Antonin Artaud; cast – Geoff Borny, Tricia Callagan, Harry Leventhal, Dick May, Ralph Goldstein, Paul Thom, Mary Patterson, Libby Smith and Susan Howe.

*5 Blunderball* (16mm film) 1966

A burlesque of the James Bond films – a blundering – 007 battles against the master criminals Dr Yes and Ernst Stravo Blowfly. Prod / dir / wr / - Albie Thoms; art dir / phot / edit – David Perry; cam op – John Clark: prod mgr – Aggy Read; music, Python Lee Jackson, Id; narr -Clive Graham; wardrobe – Susan Howe; cast: Terence McMullen, Cam Perry, Brian Millis, George Brandt, Chris Hill, Darcy Waters, and Mary Patterson.

*6 Man and His World* (16mm film) 1967

A depiction of the contemporary world in which a one second image is stretched to fifty seconds and overlayed with rapidly changing split – screen images. 16mm, colour, sound, prod / dir / wr – Albie Thoms; phot / edit –David Perry; cam op –John Clark, Keith Hutchison; prod mgr – Aggy Read; music -Mick Liber.

**DVD 2 Viewing Menu**

*10 Newsfront* Promo (Motion Picture Film) 1978

Dir: Phillip Noyce, cast: Bryan Brown, Chris Haywood, Wendy Hughes,Bill Hunter, Gerard Kennedy; cinematographer/director of photography Vincent Monton; producer: David Elflick,

production company: Palm Beach Pictures. A fictional story using actual newsreel footage which records the rivalry between two newsreel companies from 1949 to 1956 while focussing on major news items of the time. 'They covered the action and shared the excitement.' *Newsfront* is the story of the loves and loyalties of a group of Australians whose work was to capture, on screen, the historic moments of two turbulent decades.

**11 AFI Awards** (Television) 1978: Souvenir Programme Subjects: Actors and actresses, Awards, Film producers and directors, *Newsfront* (Moving Picture), Frank Thring, Bill Hunter, Robert Helpmann, Jacki Weaver, Jack Thompson, Paul Stott, David Elfick, Bob Ellis, Noel Ferrier, Phillip Noyce

**13 God Knows Why But It Works** (Film) 1976 Cast/Actor: Peter Cummins, Martin Harris, Robyn Nevin, Henri Szeps Cinematographer/Director of photography: Andrew Frazer  
Director: Phillip Noyce / Producer: Richard Mason

**12 Crystal Voyager** (Motion Picture Film) 1973 Cast/Actor: George Greenough, Ritchie West, Robert Young, Cinematographer/Director of photography: Albert Falzon, George Greenough, Greg Weaver, Director: Albert Falzon Producer: David Elfick . A surf documentary about American surfer-cameraman George Greenough. His voice-overs explain his surfing philosophy and these were accompanied by original music from Mick Liber from Python Lee Jackson. *Crystal Voyager* was one of Australia's most successful surfmovies.

### **DVD 3 Viewing Menu**

**14 Brother can you spare a dime?** 1974

Executive Producers Bob Caisley and David Brady / Directed by Philippe Mora.



Golden Globe –nominated documentary , juxtaposes newsreel footage, film clips and period music in a survey of the Great Depression.

## **Appendix C – List of Illustrations**

### **Chapter 2**

1&2 It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain, Sydney Underground Movies UBU FILMS 1965-1970, Mudie Peter, UNSW Press, 1997, p27.

3 Vogel Amos Film as Subversive Art, still from Andalusian Dog p 63

4 ‘Alfred Jarry’, newdrama,16 /1 2005, <http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc2.htm>

5 Ubu Roi, Dover Publications, 16/1/2005, Ubu print by Alfred Jarry  
<http://store.doverpublications.com/0486426874.html>

6 ‘Artaud’, Sydney Underground Movies UBU FILMS 1965-1970, Peter, Mudie, UNSW Press 1997, p.23.

7 Ubu founding members’, Mudie op.cit, p.267

8. Mudie, op.cit., p.254.

9 Oz Magazine No. 28 seized 18 June 1970 <http://www.richardneville.com.au/>

### **Chapter 3**

10 Mudie, op.cit, p 54

11 Handmade film kit, Mudie, op.cit, p.90.

12 Booklet front cover, Mudie, op.cit p 124.

13 Underground Dance Paddington Town Hall, December 13 1968, Mudie, op.cit., p 157

14 *Spurt of Blood*, Mudie op.cit p.24.

15 Toni Rendall and Read working in the Ubu office (from Marinetti) Mudie, op.cit.,p 125.

16 Mudie op.cit p198

17 *Bolero*, Mudie, op.cit, p.82

18 Thoms, Howe, Read, Perry, and Nick Casey, preparing to shoot *Bolero* (photo Matt Carol)  
Mudie, op.cit. p82

19 <http://www.bondsupp.freemove.co.uk/movie/tball.htm>

20 *Blunderball*, Mudie, op.cit, p.33

#### **Chapter 4**

21 Bill Hunter (Len McGuire) in *Newsfront* SSA Collection

22 Phil Noyce at Barker College (photo – William Noyce) , Mudie, p.142

23 *Backroads*: Bill Hunter (Jack) stands behind Zac Martin (Joe). SSA collection title No 360544

24 *Mr Dupont Nomore*, Mudie, op.cit, p .62.

## Bibliography

Australian Film Commission, "Top Films, What Australians Are Watching, Get the Picture". January 2002. Australian Government, 14 May 2006, <[http: www.afc.gov.au/gtp/index.html](http://www.afc.gov.au/gtp/index.html)>.

(AFTRS), The Australian Film Television and Radio School. "Phillip Noyce to Receive 2005 Ken G Hall Award", 16 June 2006, AFTRS. <<http://www.aftrs.edu.au/index.cfm?objectID=0D93AFED-2A54-23A3-6A179B8F6A02CEB1>>.

Archive, National Film and Sound. "2005 Ken G Hall Recipient, Phillip Noyce ".Canberra, 2005. NFSA., 10 August 2006, <<http://www.screensound.gov.au/ScreenSound/ScreenSound.nsf/AllDocs/785895C506E0AA5FCA2570DD0007966C?OpenDocument>>.

Barthes, Roland Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography / Roland Barthes Trans. Richard Howard: New York : Hill and Wang, 1981, 1982.

Baxter, John. The Australian Cinema, Sydney: Pacific Books, 1970.

Beaumont, Keith. Alfred Jarry a Critical and Biographical Study. Leicester University Press, 1984.

Binns, Vivenne. "Vivenne Binns Curriculum Vitae". Sutton Gallery. 12 January 2007. <[www.suttongallery.com.au/downloadfile.php?filename=files/downloads/Binns%20CV%20SG%202006.pdf](http://www.suttongallery.com.au/downloadfile.php?filename=files/downloads/Binns%20CV%20SG%202006.pdf) ->.

Bordwell, David "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." Film Criticism Fall 4:1 (1979): 56-64.

[Cantrill, Arthur] "Arthur Cantrill". University of Melbourne, Arts, Faculty, 2004, 12 January 2007, <<http://www.sca.unimelb.edu.au/staff/arthur/>>.

Cantrill, Arthur. "A Milestone in Australian Filmmaking?" Broadside (1969).

Cantrill, Arthur & Corinne. Cantrill's Filmnotes. Melbourne, Vic: A. Cantrill, 1971.

"Cantrill Arthur & Corinne ", Melbourne Independent Filmmakers, 2003, 1 Dec 2006. <<http://www.innersense.com.au/mif/cantrill.html>>.

Chaw, Walter "Noyce Guys Finish First". 2002. Film Freak Central, 2006 14 October 2006 <<http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/diff/pnoyceinterview.htm>>.

Clare, John, and Gail Brennan. Bodgie Dada & the Cult of Cool. Kensington, N.S.W.: UNSW Press, 1995.

Coleman, Peter. Bruce Beresford: Instincts of the Heart. Imprint Lives. Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1992.

Collins, Ina Bertrand & Diane. 'Government and Film in Australia' Australian Screen. Ed. Australian Film Institute, Carlton South, Vic.: Currency Press, 1981.

Coombs, Anne. Sex and Anarchy : The Life and Death of the Sydney Push. Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1996.

Cooper, Andrew Pike & Ross. Australian Film, 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1980.

Creed, Barbara, Annette Blonski, and Freda Freiberg, eds, Don't Shoot Darling! : Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia. Richmond, Vic.: Greenhouse, 1987.

Curtis, David. Experimental Cinema a Fifty Year Evolution. Studio Vista, London, 1971.

Doherty, Brian. "The Ubu Scene and the Emergence of Underground Film in Australia 1965 -1970 Discourse, Practice, Heterogenesis " Long essay. University of Sydney, 1996.

Evanhoe. "Australia in the Korean War 1950 - 1953". <<http://www.korean-war.com/australia.html>>.

"Et Dieu... Créa La Femme ". Internet Movie Database. 17 January 2006. <<http://www.imdb.com/find?s=all&q=God+created+woman>>.

Ferguson, Russell. "The 'Other Cinema' American Avant-Garde Film of the 1960s." Hall of Mirrors : Art and Film since 1945. eds. Kerry Brougher, Jonathan Crary and Museum of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles Calif.). Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996.

[fluxus] com, fluxus 'at' artnotart 'dot'. "Fluxus Debris!" 2003. @ Art / not Art, 12 January 2007, <<http://www.artnotart.com/fluxus/>>.

Fogg, Mr. Last Newsletter 23 December 2006.

Franklin, Andrew, Pike. "The History of an Australian Film Production Company: Cinesound 1932-1970." MA. ANU, 1972.

Free, Dr David. "Australians in Hollywood " <<http://www.portrait.gov.au/content/exhibit/hollywood/content/b30.htm>>. 17 June 2007.

French, Lisa. Womenvision : Women and the Moving Image in Australia. Melbourne: Damned Publishing, 2003.

Garlick, Mia. 'Opening up a Creative Dialogue' 2005. Filter. Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT). 6 December 2006. <[http://www.anat.org.au/pages/forumspubs/FilterArchive/Filter61\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.anat.org.au/pages/forumspubs/FilterArchive/Filter61_WEB.pdf)>.

Giannetti, Louis D. Understanding Movies. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.,: Prentice-Hall, 1972.

- Hall, James & Sandra. Australian Censorship : The Xyz of Love. Sydney: Jack de Lissa, 1970.
- Hall, Sandra. "Rethink or Run " The Bulletin June 14 1969.
- Harrison, G.B, ed. The Penguin Shakespere. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1937.
- Harvey, Michael. "Selling Newsfront." Cinema Papers No 22.July / August, (1979).
- Hasluck, Paul, The government and the people, Australia in the war of 1939-1945, vol.II (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1970): pp. 711-717. "The Brisbane Line". Australian War Memorial. <[http://www.awm.gov.au/Encyclopedia/homefront/brisbane\\_line.htm](http://www.awm.gov.au/Encyclopedia/homefront/brisbane_line.htm)>.
- Horne, Donald. The Lucky Country : Australia in the Sixties. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1966.
- Horne, Donald, Time of Hope Australia 1966-1972. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980.
- Horrocks, Roger, and Len Lye. Len Lye : A Biography. Auckland, N.Z.: Auckland University Press, 2001.
- Jolly, Martyn. "Australian First World War Photography." History of Photography Vol. 23.No. 2 (1999).
- [Juno Gemes] Owen, Will. "Portraits from the Movement 1978 - 2003". 2006.  
Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection, February 28 - April 29, 2006, Juno Gemes at the Kluge-Ruhe. This piece first appeared in the author's blog,. Aboriginal Art & Culture: an American eye 12 January 2007. <<http://www.junogemes.com/exhibitions/proof/klugerule.htm>>
- Le Grice, Malcolm. Abstract Film and Beyond. 1st U.S. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977.
- Lyotard, Jean Francois. "The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge." Theory and history of literature; v. 10 (1984)
- MacDonald, Stott. A Critical Cinema : Interviews with Independent Filmmakers. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Marsh, Anne. "Art History in a Post-Medium Age." Artlink Contemporary Art Quarterly 26 no 1 (2006).
- Marsh, Anne, Body and Self: an Analysis of Performance Art in Australia, 1969-1992. Melbourne: Artmoves Inc., 1996.
- Martin, Adrian. "Indefinite Objects: Independent Film and Video." Australian Screen. Penguin. Ed. Tom Regan Albert Moran, 1989.

Martin, Bill. Politics in the Impasse : Explorations in Postsecular Social Theory. Suny Series in Radical Social and Political Theory. New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Matthews, John. "Marinetti." Cinematics, (1970).

Mayer, Geoff. "Screening the Past Lee Robinson (1923 – 2003) ". La Trobe University, Australia. . <[http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepastfirstrelease/fr\\_16/gmfr16.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepastfirstrelease/fr_16/gmfr16.html)>.

McFarlane, Brian, Geoff Mayer, and Ina Bertrand. The Oxford Companion to Australian Film. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999.

McIntyre, Arthur, ed. Contemporary Australian Collage and Its Origins Craftsman House, Roseville, NSW 1990.

McIntyre, Iain. Tomorrow Is Today : Australia in the Psychedelic Era, 1966-1970. Kent Town, S. Aust.: Wakefield Press, 2006.

Mellencamp, Patricia. "An Emprical Avant-Garde' Laleen Jayamanne and Tracey Moffat, Fugitive Images from Photography to Video." Theories of Contemporary Culture, eds Patrice Petro, ed. Vol. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Mendelssohn, Joanna. "Borderlining and Sedition". 2005. New Matilda.com. (Wednesday 14 December,): p 2 <<http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetail.asp?ArticleID=1221>

Mendelssohn, Joanna, The Yellow House, Exhibition catalogue 1970-72. AGNSW, Sydney: s.n., 1990.

Michaud, Philippe - Alain. "The Movement of Images." The Movement of Images. Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2006.

Milliken, Rod. "Marinetti Lives " Tharunka (1969).

Moore, Dr Nicole. "Secrets of the Censors: Obscenity in the Archives". 2006. New Matilda.com. (1 November 2005 - 7 January). <[http://www.naa.gov.au/about\\_us/\\_nicolemoore.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/about_us/_nicolemoore.html)>.

Moran, Albert and Tom O'Regan. An Australian Film Reader. Australian Screen. Sydney: Currency Press, 1985.

Moran, Albert and Tom O'Regan The Australian Screen. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1989.

Mudie, Peter. Ubu Films : Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970. Sydney: UNSW Press, 1997.

Neville, Richard. Hippie, Hippie, Shake : The Dreams, the Trips, the Trials, the Love-Ins, the Screw Ups -- the Sixties. Port Melbourne: William Heinemann Australia, 1995

Neville, Richard, Play Power. London: Paladin, 1971.

Parsons, Philip, and Victoria Chance. Eds, Companion to Theatre in Australia. Sydney: Currency Press in association with Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[Phillip Noyce]"National Film and Sound Archive's Ken G Hall Award ", 10 September 2005, <<http://www.screensound.gov.au/Screensound/Screenso.nsf/HeadingPagesDisplayAbout+UsTributeKen+G+Hall+Award?OpenDocument>>.

Parkinson, David History of Film. London: Thames and Hudson 1995.

Petro, Patrice, ed. Fugitive Images from Photography to Video, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995.

Petzke, Ingo. Phillip Noyce : Backroads to Hollywood. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2004.

Pike, Andrew. "The History of an Australian Film Production Company: Cinesound 1932-1970." MA. ANU, 1972.

Pike, Andrew, and Ross Cooper. Australian Film, 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production. Melbourne: Oxford University Press in association with the Australian Film Institute, 1981.

Rodowick, David Giles Deleuze' s Time Machine. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1997.

[Sentimental Bloke] NFSA. "'the Bloke' Is Found ". <[http://www.screensound.gov.au/Screensound/Screenso.nsf/HeadingPagesDisplayPreservationProjectsSentimental+Bloke%22The+Bloke%22+is+found?Open Document](http://www.screensound.gov.au/Screensound/Screenso.nsf/HeadingPagesDisplayPreservationProjectsSentimental+Bloke%22The+Bloke%22+is+found?OpenDocument)>.

Sitney, P.Adams. Visionary Film the American Avant-Garde. New York, Oxford University Press, 1974.

Sitney, P. Adams. Film Culture Reader. New York, Cooper Square Press, 2000.

Skoller, Jeffrey. Making History in Avant-Garde Film Shadows, Specters, Shards University Minnesota Press, 2005.

Stratton, David. The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980.

[Television History] 10, Network. "The History of Australian Television". 14 February 2000. <<http://televisionau.siv.net.au/seventies.htm#1975>>.

Thoms, Albie. 'The Australian Avant-Garde', Australian Film Reader. eds by Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan eds: Currency Press, Sydney, 1985

Thoms, Albie. Polemics for a New Cinema. Sydney: Wild & Woolley, 1978.

Thoms, Albie : Interviewed by Richard Keys, 2003 : Oral History. National Film and Sound Archive.

Totaro, Donato "Gilles Deleuze's Bergsonian Film Project". 1999. Ed. Off Screen. 19 January 2007. <[www.horschamp.qc.ca/9903/offscreen\\_essays\\_deleuze2.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/9903/offscreen_essays_deleuze2.html) >.

Toulet, Emmanuelle. Cinema Is 100 Years Old. London: Thames and Hudson, 1995.

Urban, Andrew L, Quinn, Meredith. Edge of the Known World : The Australian Film, Television & Radio School : Impressions of the First 25 Years. North Ryde, NSW: Australian Film Television & Radio School, 1998.

Vogel, Amos. Film as a Subversive Art. ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2005.

[Walzing Matilda] "Who'll Come a Walzing Matilda with Me?" Macpherson, Christina, Transcription of ' Waltzing Matilda ', c.1895, MS 9065 National Library of Australia, 8 May 2005, <[http://www.nla.gov.au/epubs/waltzingmatilda\\_1-Orig-Christina.html](http://www.nla.gov.au/epubs/waltzingmatilda_1-Orig-Christina.html)>.

Weight, Greg. "Australian Artist Magazine". 2005. 16 April 2006. <<http://www.greenplanet.com.au/gallery/msharp/workin.htm>>.

Wollen, Peter. 'the Two Avant-Gardes' , Readings and Writing: Semiotics Counter-Strategies. London: Verso, 1984.

York, Barry. "Looking Back at Oz Magazine." National Library of Australia News 11.May (2001): 10 -12.

Zion, Lawrie. "The Picture." Weekend Australian July2-3 2005: p. R5.

Zuvela, Danni "The Ubu Movement an Interview with Albie Thoms". 2003. Senses of Cinema. 13 January 2006 2007. <[www.sensesofcinema.com/03/27/albie\\_thoms.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/03/27/albie_thoms.html)>.