

# **WOMENVISION**

**WOMEN AND THE MOVING IMAGE IN AUSTRALIA**

**EDITED BY LISA FRENCH**

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**Tel** 61-3-9525 5302

**Fax** 61-3-9537 2325

**Email** [damned@netspace.net.au](mailto:damned@netspace.net.au)

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**MARY ALEMANY-GALWAY** currently teaches Media Studies at Massey University in New Zealand. She is co-editor of *Peter Greenaway's Postmodern/Post-structuralist Cinema* published by Scarecrow Press in 2001 and the author of *A Postmodern Cinema: The Voice of the Other in Canadian Film*, which will be published by Scarecrow Press in 2002.

**JULIE JAMES BAILEY** has returned to making videos after a long career in media policy and teaching. She is adjunct professor at Griffith University Brisbane and author of *Reel Women: Working in Film and Television* (AFTRS 1999).

**INA BERTRAND** taught film history at La Trobe University for 25 years and is currently a Principal Fellow of the Cinema Programme at the University of Melbourne. She has published several books and numerous articles on Australian film and is also founding editor of the electronic journal *Screening the Past*.

**ROSE CAPP** is a Lecturer in Cinema Studies and a freelancer writer on film. She is currently completing her Ph.D in Cinema Studies at Monash University and is a film critic for *The Melbourne Times* and ABC Radio (774 Melbourne).

**JANE CASTLE** is an award winning cinematographer who has worked extensively in Australia and the United States as Director of Photography on feature films, documentaries and music videos. She is one of the three fully accredited women cinematographers in the Australian Cinematographer's Society. Jane is currently completing her documentary, *60,000 Barrels*.

**FELICITY COLLINS** is a Senior Lecturer in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University and has written extensively on Australian feminist filmmaking. She is the author of *The Films of Gillian Armstrong* (1999) and is currently researching Australian film and television comedy.

**JOY DAMOUSI** is an Associate Professor in the department of history at the University of Melbourne. She is author of numerous books on various aspects of gender and Australian history, the most recent being *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (1999) and *Living With the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia and Grief Post-War Australia* (2001).

**FREDA FREIBERG** is a film historian and critic. She has written widely on film, gender and ethnicity and was the co-editor of *Don't Shoot Darling: Women's Independent Film-making in Australia* (1987).

**LISA FRENCH** lectures in Cinema Studies and Communication at RMIT University; she has published on Australian film in local and international journals. She is a current board member of the Australian Film Institute and has a background in cultural activities (including three years as the Director of the St Kilda Film Festival, and serving on industry boards such as WIFT, MIFT & ATOM).

**SALLY HUSSEY** is an academic currently completing her PhD at the University of Melbourne. She has acted as the Assistant Editor of Australia's only queer academic journal *Critical Inquiries*.

**RAI JONES** is a PhD candidate in the School of Communication, Arts and Critical Enquiry at La Trobe University.

**FIONA KERR** is a 3d modeller/ animator for the Strategic Studies Group (SSG), who create CD-ROM Strategy Games for the international market. Her experience with the media is extensive, having been a vision mixer, camera operator, videotape editor and director for the ABC for 13 years. She has directed ABC-TV shows such as *Lateline* and the 7pm news.

**MARCIA LANGTON** is the foundation Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne. She is one of Australia's leading authorities on contemporary social issues in Aboriginal affairs. She has had many years experience as an anthropologist working in Indigenous affairs with Land Councils, the Queensland Government, Commissions and Universities. She has published extensively on many issues in Aboriginal affairs including gender, art, film and cultural studies.

**JANET MEREWETHER** is a film/video maker, designer and curator of film/video art who has been on selection panels for SIN's Matinaze programmes at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the AFI short film awards and the Dendy awards. Her work includes the short films *Cheap Blonde*, *Tourette's Tics* and *Contemporary Case Studies*, as well as the opening titles sequence for the feature film *The Boys*.

**VIRGINIA MURRAY** is a writer and director. She currently lectures in Screenwriting at Deakin University. She has written for television and cinema and her short films include the multi AFI award winning film, *The Lead Dress*.

**DIANNE REID** lectures in contemporary dance at Deakin University and was nominated for a Green Room Award in 1993 for her choreographic work *Betrayal*. Dianne has worked with contemporary dance companies, Outlet Dance and Danceworks, and performs and creates independent dance work for live performance and video.

**MEREDITH SEAMAN** is currently completing her Masters in the Department of Media Studies at La Trobe University. Her thesis investigates personal and autobiographical Australian documentary film.

**ANN SHENFIELD** is an animator whose films have won prizes both nationally and internationally. From 1994-2000 she worked as a lecturer in Animation at the Film & TV School at the Victorian College of the Arts where she supervised the production of over 50 films (many of which have won awards – including AFI Awards). She is currently working on an animated production, *Unravelling*, which is part of SBS' Home Movies Program.

**CATHERINE SIMPSON** was co-director of the first Australian film festival in Istanbul in 1994 and associate director of the inaugural Turkish film festival which toured Perth, Sydney and Melbourne in November 1998. Her PhD thesis, *Imagined Geographies: Women's Negotiation of Space in Contemporary Australian Cinema*, was recently passed.

**CATHERINE SUMMERHAYES** has recently submitted her doctoral thesis 'Film As Cultural Performance' at the Australian National University. She is a composer and performer of music and has lectured in Cultural Studies at the University of Canberra.

**JENI THORNLEY** is a documentary filmmaker. A founding member of Sydney Women's Film Group and active in the Filmmakers Co-op, Jeni has worked as an actress, camera assistant, script editor, film reviewer and lecturer. She was Manager of the AFC's Women's Film Fund and Documentary Development Programs. Jeni is currently a film valuer, a reader for the NSWFTO and is developing her next project.

**TERRIE WADDELL** lectures in the Department of Media Studies at La Trobe University and has written a number of articles on female spectacle and excess in the media. She originally trained as an actor and has worked in film, educational video, television, theatre and radio.



## EDITOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to dedicate *Womenvision* to our mothers, literal and founding, and in particular, to my own mother, Helen French, who gave me a work ethic, a belief in myself, and a feminist outlook.

I would like to express my gratitude to the publisher of this book, Peter Tapp, for his enthusiasm and commitment to this project; to the talented writers who, with great zeal, contributed their hard work and passion to this wonderful text; and to Mark Poole, who encouraged and supported me in this project, as he has across many endeavours- with generosity and love.

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I warmly thank and congratulate all the Australian women moving image producers for the inspiration they continue to provide. The curation and editing of *Womenvision* has been a labour of love, drawing on individual voices and reflecting on the achievements and challenges still confronting Australian women moving image producers as we enter the 21st century. It is with great pride that I offer *Womenvision* to readers.

Lisa French

2003

**WOMENVISION ABBREVIATIONS**

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>AA</b>     | Affirmative Action   |
| <b>ABC</b>    | The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (formerly the Commission)  |
| <b>AFC</b>    | The Australian Film Commission   |
| <b>AFI</b>    | The Australian Film Institute  |
| <b>AFTRS</b>  | The Australian Film, Television and Radio School   |
| <b>AFTS</b>   | The Australian Film and Television School  |
| <b>ASCO</b>   | Australian Standard Classification of Occupations  |
| <b>ASDA</b>   | The Australian Screen Directors Association  |
| <b>ATSIC</b>  | Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islands Commission  |
| <b>AWBC</b>   | Australian Women's Broadcasting Co-operative   |
| <b>AWG</b>    | Australian Writers Guild   |
| <b>BRACS</b>  | Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme   |
| <b>CAAMA</b>  | Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association  |
| <b>DVD</b>    | Digital Video Disc   |
| <b>EEO</b>    | Equal Employment Opportunity   |
| <b>FACTS</b>  | Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations  |
| <b>FFC</b>    | The Film Finance Corporation   |
| <b>IFF</b>    | Independent Film-makers Fund (Film Victoria)   |
| <b>IDI</b>    | Indigenous Drama Initiative (AFC auspiced program)   |
| <b>NISMA</b>  | National Indigenous School for New Media Art (a partner with the School of Fine Arts, Northern Territory University, Darwin) |
| <b>NSWFTO</b> | New South Wales Film and Television Office   |
| <b>PFTC</b>   | The Pacific Film and Television Commission   |
| <b>SBS</b>    | Special Broadcasting Service   |
| <b>SPAA</b>   | Screen Producers Association of Australia  |
| <b>SWFG</b>   | Sydney Women's Film Group  |
| <b>UNESCO</b> | United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization   |
| <b>MIFF</b>   | Melbourne International Film Festival  |
| <b>NIMAA</b>  | National Indigenous Media Association of Australia   |
| <b>VCA</b>    | Victorian College of the Arts  |



## PREFACE

This book takes its name from an event held in November 1973; *Womenvision* was the 'first major [national] enterprise of the women's film movement in Australia'. It was held at the Sydney Film-makers Co-op and was 'a weekend for women interested in finding out about being women'.<sup>1</sup> It has been reported<sup>2</sup> that there were five hundred women present for screenings and workshops. *Womenvision* was significant because at that time, there was barely an Australian film industry, 'nor was there a film school or tertiary institution ... there was only the ABC or Film Australia. Women's chance of getting skilled, creative work in either institution, apart from secretarial work, was remote'.<sup>3</sup> The times were in their favour with the feminist movement growing ever stronger through conferences, training, events, screenings, networking and bravado - International Women's Year was to come in 1975.

The *Womenvision* event signifies a beginning of women actively claiming a place in the Australian film industry. In taking its name from this event, this project acknowledges the importance of feminist activism for the status of women in the contemporary industry, acknowledges a need for this activism to continue (in new incarnations) and also, recognises the complexity and diversity of female experience. While there is no homogeneity in women's film-making, nor any female essence, gender continues to be significant.

*Womenvision: Women and the Moving Image in Australia* acknowledges the connection between women's lives and their work, between the work and the era in which it was produced, and articulates the visions of women in moving image industries (particularly film), with a focus from the 1970s onwards – but most particularly on the contemporary period, the last decade.

Lisa French

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Stott, 'Celluloid Maidens: All teched-up and nowhere to go', in Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed & Freda Freiberg, *Don't Shoot Darling! Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Greenhouse, Richmond, Australia, 1987, p.5. Note that Stott gives *Womenvision* as an event held in March 1974 but persons who attended tell me that it was actually November 1973. Stott herself, in a later chapter, dates *Womenvision* as 1973, see p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Grieve, 'Big Mother/Little Sister: The Women's Film Fund', *ibid.* p.69.

<sup>3</sup> Jeni Thornley, 'Sixteen Years of Women and Film Groups: A Personal Recollection', *ibid.* p.89.

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# ON THEIR OWN MERITS

## Women and the Moving Image in Australia

LISA FRENCH

**W**omen are today an increasingly significant force in Australian moving image industries, shaping and reshaping the industry, and its products and artefacts. This introduction sets the scene for the following chapters of *Womenvision* by contextualizing women's moving image production in Australia in recent times, especially film production.

Since the 1970s, each decade of women's work in the moving image in Australia can be read as a significant cultural location. The 1970s saw the emergence of feminist culture and a revival of the Australian film industry; the 1980s was known for the consolidation of feminist culture through training and access; and the 1990s saw a more assimilationist attitude taking hold.

These emerging cultures continue to feed today into a new millennium, where image-making is more pluralist than ever before, and women are working in all the incarnations of moving image production—not just



ELENA MADALIS AS ALEX (LEFT) AND DORA KAKANIS AS VICKI  
IN *ONLY THE BRAVE* (ANA KOKKINOS, 1994)

across all genres of film, television, video, and digital formats, but also as computer game designers, multimedia developers and new media artists.

## **FILM PRODUCTION: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

From the beginning of film production in Australia, women were present in key roles. Women directed and produced commercial feature (fiction) films throughout the silent and early sound periods in Australia; however, there was a decline in women's participation after that.

This was due to several factors. One was a decline in the production of Australian films generally (very few Australian feature films were produced from the 1940s through to 1969).<sup>1</sup> Another was the increasing preference by the public for Hollywood productions; this made it difficult for the local industry, which did not regain momentum until the intervention of the Commonwealth Government in the early 1970s. Additionally, the structure of the film industry changed, as more and more films were financed internationally, involving larger financial and production entities, which made it more difficult for women to secure a niche.

The introduction of sound was also problematic for women, since women have historically (particularly before the 1970s) had less access to technology (although the local industry in general wasn't equipped to compete with the Hollywood talkies). Also, the climate of work for women in traditionally male dominated areas became difficult (the post war backlash was hostile to female employment until the 1960s). An increasingly conservative environment emerged, and increasing industrialisation pushed women into unskilled sectors of the work force.<sup>2</sup>

One focus of the second wave of feminism was an insistence on rediscovering the women of history. As feminist observers of the Australian industry have noted, much of women's work had 'gone unrecorded and unmarked'; so a significant part of the modern feminist project was 'to recover our history, and write it ourselves'.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Australian film, that meant valorising women like Lottie Lyell and the McDonagh sisters—our 'founding mothers'. These women and others are discussed in the second chapter of *Womenvision*.

Beginning in the 1970s, Ina Bertrand considers our founding mothers in the light of their importance as role models in shaping women's career expectations. Bertrand's chapter considers the inception and the revival of the Australian film industry from the perspective of the impact of the achievements of women within it. She underlines the importance of history to feminist projects, to women's belief in themselves and in recognizing their place in a larger picture of women's work.

The 1970s saw numerous groups springing up to lobby for training, access and the status of women in the film industry. The lobby for training was extremely important because, as author Elizabeth Jacka has said: 'without skills and experience, and schemes like the women's film units, women remain marginal to the mainstream industry'.<sup>4</sup>

The 1970s and 1980s saw a mushrooming of women's groups involved in production and exhibition. These groups, devoted principally to the production of short films (in all genres), included The Sydney Women's Film Group (formed in 1972), The Feminist Film Workers (1970s—80s), The Melbourne Women's Film Group (established in 1973), Reel Women (1979—1983) and the Women's Film Unit (1984 in Sydney and 1984/5 in Melbourne).



MY BRILLIANT CAREER (GILLIAN ARMSTRONG, 1979)

The Australian Film Commission (AFC) set up the Women's Film Fund in 1976 (disbanded in 1988–1989) and groups such as Women in Film and Television (WIFT) have operated since the 1980s. In her chapter in *Womenvision*, Jeni Thornley gives a personal perspective not just of her own work in the 70s and 80s, but of some of these groups. Thornley reflects on more than thirty years of working in film 'on the margins': exploring feminism, sexuality, gender and the position of women. From an interior and poetic space, Thornley charts the inner thoughts of her own psyche—a woman film-maker who has been immersed in cinema since the 1940s through to the late 1990s.

From the 1970s it became possible for women to receive training, although this was no guarantee of success. As reporter, producer and journalist Barbara Alysen observed, 'having achieved training, it is now important that they enter the mainstream industry because they would be equally "ghettoised" within "women's cinema"'.<sup>5</sup> Academic Elizabeth Grosz pointed out that the creation of alternatives unrelated to mainstream cinema could have unwanted by-products such as 'the risk of marginalisation and elitism, alienating potential audience; and more significantly, the risk of leaving the mainstream traditions intact and uncriticised, able to function unchallenged'.<sup>6</sup>

While women made shorts and features in Australia before the 1970s,<sup>7</sup> it was in this era that they began to make their presence strongly felt. The favourable position for women in the Australian industry today is due largely to the combination of a number of factors. These include the revival of the industry in the 1970s, the influence of the women's movement at that time and the fact that there was not a male dominated industry that had been in place for years. In addition, the reliance of the industry on government funding meant that film production was influenced by the equal opportunity policies of government agencies. Another likely contributor is the comparatively low budget of films (in global terms) resulting in fewer controls imposed by big business structures—unlike those that operated



elsewhere, for example, in Hollywood.

The dominant image of Australia offered to Australians and the world via mainstream fiction feature films in the 1970s could be described as overwhelmingly male (masculine characters and masculine concerns). As has been well documented, there was a wave of 'Ocker' films depicting larrikin characters<sup>8</sup> followed by a wave of conservative and nationalistic period films featuring pioneers and Anzacs<sup>9</sup> and then, films such *Mad Max*<sup>10</sup> and *Crocodile Dundee*<sup>11</sup>

continued a masculinist approach. However, in the 1980s women film-makers slowly began to make their mark in feature production, following in the path of Gillian Armstrong (*My Brilliant Career*, *Starstruck*, *Last Days at Chez Nous*<sup>12</sup>). While Armstrong was often cited in the 1980s as evidence that women had 'made it' in the Australian commercial film industry, very few women were directing features in that decade.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, the importance of Armstrong's success was that she was a major role model—and other women followed.

### TRAIL BLAZERS: ANTIPODEAN WOMEN FILM-MAKERS AND THEIR INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION

Australia has reportedly<sup>14</sup> an international reputation for producing exceptional women film-makers—in particular, directors. Andrew Sarris has noted that:

*While women directors in film industries around the world are still seen as anomalous (if mainstream) or marginalised as avant-garde, the Antipodes have been home to an impressive cadre of female film-makers who negotiate and transcend such notions. Before the promising debuts of Ann Turner (Celia) and Jane Campion (Sweetie), Gillian Armstrong blazed a trail with My Brilliant Career.*<sup>15</sup>

Armstrong, who has achieved broad international recognition, has herself recalled that she is continually asked why there are 'so many talented women film-makers coming out of Australia'.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly in international contexts such as the Cannes Film Festival, Australian women have increasingly distinguished themselves in the past two decades: Jane Campion<sup>17</sup> won the Palme d'Or for Best Short Film in 1986 and then later the top prize<sup>18</sup> for her third feature *The Piano* (1993). Jocelyn Moorhouse's film *Proof* (1991) was invited as part of the Official Selection for the Directors Fortnight at Cannes (1991), Shirley Barrett won the Camera d'Or for best debut feature with *Love Serenade* (1996), Samatha Lang was the only female director in the competition at Cannes with *The Well* (1997) and Emma-Kate Croghan sold

her film, *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996), to Mirimax after an impressive showing there.

Journalist Lynden Barber has said that with the exception of France, where several women have emerged in recent times, 'Australia's record in nurturing female talent has not been replicated—certainly not in Hollywood'.<sup>19</sup> He says that 'despite a far larger population, the list of women directors in the American film industry—which includes Nora Ephron, Barbra Streisand, [and] Penny Marshall ... is not much longer than Australia's'.<sup>20</sup> Barber quotes Hollywood producer Lynda Obst (*Contact*, 1997 and *Sleepless in Seattle*, 1993) as saying that 'you can name on one hand the substantial women directors, and in fact the first women director to create—in my memory—a breakthrough on this issue was Gill Armstrong, who's Australian'.<sup>21</sup>

In areas other than directing, women have also made a substantial contribution on the international stage—for example, actors Cate Blanchett and Nicole Kidman, as well as those in other key creative roles emerging in recent times including editor Jill Bilcock, screenwriter Laura Jones and production designer Catherine Martin.

The women who have been successful in the Australian film industry have been particularly lauded and applauded during the 1990s—and beyond. While it is true that many of them have worked principally in the independent sector, they have increasingly taken up opportunities to make films in the mainstream Hollywood system. Such film-makers as Gillian Armstrong, Jane Campion, Nadia Tass, Jocelyn Moorhouse, Ann Turner, Emma Kate Croghan and Samantha Lang have been highly visible. It is also true, however, that their visibility is characterised by comment on their gender; this might give the impression that women have



REBECCA FIRTH IN *LOVE SERENADE* (SHIRLEY BARRETT, 1996)

equal status and representation of women within the industry, when research has shown that across the board, representation has not been equal. In fact there have been many areas which women have found difficult to enter (such as technical areas) and there are other areas that are female ghettos (such as production managing).<sup>22</sup>

In the field of directing, for example, where women comprise a small percentage of the total,<sup>23</sup> women directors have achieved notable success. For example women have been nominated in eight of the ten years from 1990—2000 in the 'Best Director' category of the AFI Awards.

### **AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FILM-MAKERS IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD**

The 1990s was a decade of critical and commercial success for Australian films and for women film-makers. In the 1990s Australian film experienced a revival that was fuelled by overseas interest and also by the success at the domestic box office of several Australian films; many of these films, such as *Proof* (Jocelyn Moorhouse, 1991) and *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) were produced, directed and/or written by women.

In the later part of the 1990s, Australian cinema has shifted slightly and cultural nationalism has been described as having dissolved in favour of a new pluralism.<sup>24</sup> While there are still gains to be made, and the progress to date should not be overstated,<sup>25</sup> the input of women film-makers and those from culturally diverse backgrounds has generated national fictions that have finally included, and sometimes privileged women, migrants, indigenous culture and diverse sexualities that had previously been totally marginalised. Most probably, these advances have had something to do with the contemporary postmodern climate that is pluralist in its focus on multiple points of entry, viewing identity as fluid and embracing differences in class, gender, race and sexuality. Numerous contributors to *Womenvision* have addressed the gaps and silences in Australian cinema—and in so doing, they have also illustrated the role women have played in the shift to a 'new pluralism'.

Australian women film-makers have had, and continue to have, an impact on the changing positions of women in society; and, as indicated by the chapters in this book, films by women film-makers either open up space for a diversity of female representation, or consider the lack of diversity that has existed previously.

Marcia Langton, for example, outlines the special role of women in the history of indigenous production and in Australian cinema history: the narratives, core themes, artistic achievements, the exploration of identity and tradition, and their cultural activism. Langton importantly argues for the work of Aboriginal women to be considered 'intercultural' dialogues rather than a 'racial' genre. She observes that the insistence of cinema scholars on this 'racial' genre has, among other things, led to confusion as to Indigenous women's place in Australian cinema history; one that overlooks their significant artistic contributions. As Langton rightly notes, the work of these women is highly individualist, and they must be understood as distinct artists in their own right. However, in tracking the trajectory of their



production across various forms and genres, she does find commonalities, such as stories about familial relations based in life histories, and distinctive Aboriginal mythological traditions.

Tracey Moffatt is one 'highly individualist' Aboriginal artist whose contribution to the visual arts has been acknowledged internationally. Moffatt has been insistent on disclaiming the Indigenous label, although her 'Aboriginality, like her feminism is impossible to ignore'.<sup>26</sup> The chapter on short film takes up the problem of labels and their limits. Catherine Summerhayes writes of Moffatt as an artist who performs and describes her place in the world as a contemporary Australian woman artist of Aboriginal and Anglo/Celtic heritage who understands Australia to be a multicultural society. Summerhayes considers Moffatt's use and subversion of narrative, her aural and visual collage, use of movement and her theatricality. Summerhayes has said that 'in Bakhtin's sense of the word, her films possess "polyglossia", they speak with many voices and describe a society possessing many different voices'.



THE WELLS (SAMANTHA LANG, 1997)

Other writers in *Womenvision* have observed the individuality and plurality of vision of contemporary Australian women film-makers. Rai Jones writes about film-maker Clara Law (originally from Hong Kong, but now residing in Australia and making 'Australian' films). Jones problematizes the category of Australian cinema, and offers an analysis of Law's *A Floating Life* (1995) as diasporic, hybrid and transnational—engaging with spaces outside of the Australian national space. In another chapter, Rose Capp considers the oeuvre of Monica Pellizzari, a film-maker frequently labeled 'multicultural'. Considering the short and feature films of Pellizzari, Capp details the way her films deal with the specificities of the Italo-Australian migrant experience and wider issues of cultural identity, ethnicity, racism, generational issues, sexuality and feminism. Capp illustrates how Pellizzari's films have encapsulated many of the central and defining debates of Australian cinema in the 1980s and 1990s.

In their chapter surveying the shifting representations of Greek identity, Freiberg and Damousi demonstrate that 'Greekness' in the last thirty years of Australian cinema has been 'closely aligned with masculinity at the expense of Greek femininity'. As they illustrate,



representations of Greek men and women changed between the 1970s and 1990s; for example, representations of women in the 1970s depicted them as victims who suffered heavily under the oppressive yoke of a cruel and theocentric Greek patriarchy. This shifted in the 1990s as young Greek women became desiring subjects and active heroines who sought sexual satisfaction and resisted the oppressive demands of their caricatured Greek fathers. Women film-makers added to a new pluralism in representations of Greekness as can be seen in the work of film-makers such as Ana Kokkinos in the mid 1990s (e.g. *Only the Brave*, 1994 and *Head On*, 1997). With a queer twist, her films have served to raise debates about issues of representation (especially in the Greek community).

Sally Hussey's chapter on Ann Turner's features examines not just the thematic and narrative concerns of the director, but seeks to situate Turner's films within a specifically contemporary milieu that intersects with both queer and feminist theoretical concerns. Hussey explores Turner's use of national mythology—a narrative stalwart in Australian cinema—to question patriarchal values of the national, and the national's necessary erasure of difference with particular regard to the expression or representation of lesbianism in a national cinema. Hussey illustrates how Australian national cinema seeks to promote heterosexuality and exclude both female worlds and queer representations. In tracing Turner's films through interviews with the film-maker, Hussey also asks what concerns are facing feminist cinema and film-making in a 1990s post-feminist context.

Many of the chapters in *Womenvision* explore representations of particular 'types' in Australian cinema. Terrie Waddell's chapter explores the 'scrubber', a dominantly Australian fusion of the battler-trollop-mole-slut-bogan-rough-as-guts, oversexed, wild type of women



ALEX DIMITRIADES AS ARI IN HEAD ON (ANA KOKINOS, 1997) STILL PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN TSAVIS

seen in films such as *Fran* (Glenda Hambly, 1985), *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1989), *Praise* (John Curran, 1998) and *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1997). Waddell traces a line out of the past, offering the 'scrubber' as a character who has come down to us from our convict past where 'our founding mothers were regarded as no better than whores'.<sup>27</sup> Waddell's chapter enables readers to understand the vulnerability, rage and sorrow such characters reveal in a culture insulated by sexism.

Several chapters in *Womenvision* focus on genre, such as the road movie or comedy. Catherine Simpson subverts the common perception of cars and the road as an undisputed male terrain. She notes that a lot has been written concerning the connections between the road movie, the car and masculinity—albeit often a kind of crisis associated with this masculinity. However, what is of particular interest to Simpson is the importance of cars and those small, seemingly inconsequential domestic journeys between home and somewhere else which depict interaction between the driver, passenger(s) and the car, (both aesthetically and symbolically), in films which wouldn't even loosely be considered road movies. Her discussion centres specifically around women's interaction with these machines and the use of the car as an agent for exploring the dynamics of family relationships within vehicular/autospatial contexts—when women take the wheel and explore other cultured and gendered geographies.

Felicity Collins examines the centrality of comedy to Australian cinema in the 1990s and the reworking of it by female directors in 'Brazen brides, grotesque daughters, treacherous mothers ...' Collins outlines the original contribution Australian women film-makers



have made to this genre. Among her observations of a range of films, Collins contemplates how they refuse to secure characters for traditional female roles (such as *Love Serenade*, Shirley Barrett, 1996); decentre heterosexuality (*Love and Other Catastrophes*, Emma Kate Croghan, 1996); or test the way heroines are educated to accept a happy ending based on inequality (*Dating the Enemy*, Megan Simpson-Huberman, 1996).

## TELEVISION

Individuals in the contemporary industry don't necessarily work in film or television but often work in both. Numerous women are working across film and television. Kate Woods, for example, who directed the award winning<sup>28</sup> *Looking For Alibrandi* (1999) came from a successful career in television with directing credits such as the series *Wildside* (1997), the mini-series *Simone de Beauvoir's Babies* (1996) and telemovies such as *The Feds* (1995). A number of other film-makers have worked or do work in television; for example, Shirley Barrett<sup>29</sup>, Nadia Tass<sup>30</sup> and Rachel Perkins<sup>31</sup>—just to name a few.

Julie James Bailey has noted in her research that:

*[W]orking full-time in a television station is a very different experience from working freelance on a film crew. Television stations have an organisational culture that was set up in the 1950s and 1960s when a woman's place was regarded as being in the home, and there are some men in senior positions who have difficulty thinking otherwise. There is still a very male culture and there are very few women in senior management positions or on the boards of the stations or networks. ... Because film is a freelance industry, with high turn over of jobs, women have had more employment opportunities.<sup>32</sup>*

The most recent research on television in Australia<sup>33</sup> has shown that it is less accepting than the film sector and a more difficult area for women to gain access. This is particularly true in upper level management and technical areas. Just as the independent sector of film production is more accessible and accepting than other sections of the industry, there are areas of television where women have made in-roads, but these are generally in the non-commercial networks: the ABC, SBS, Imparja Television in Alice Springs and Melbourne Community Television, for example. There are always exceptions, such as Sue Masters Executive Producer TV Drama at Channel 10, but it should be noted that she had a previous string of successes at the ABC.

In the commercial sector it is still difficult for women, but as Julie James Bailey has observed, changes have been occurring due to an awareness of discrimination (and legislative regulations to maintain it) and affirmative action, as well as a growth in the industry caused by the advent of pay television. Despite this, Bailey concludes that the picture is not rosy in television; we 'have had nearly half a century of television and the very few women in technical and senior management positions has to be an indictment of everyone involved in the industry'.<sup>34</sup>

In her chapter in *Womenvision*, Bailey explores the issues of representation, affirmative action and the masculine culture (and control) prevalent in television. While it is an easier industry for women than it once was, and women are making great gains, it is still male dominated and difficult. Film-maker Solrun Hoaas has expressed the mixed feelings about affirmative action held by women in the industry generally when she said that it sets up 'this fiction that across the board, women are getting a better deal' and 'it's automatically assumed that any woman who does anything or gets anything in the industry has had her hand held by the Government'.<sup>35</sup> As in the past, many women are ambivalent about affirmative action. When at the AFC Hilary Glow explained that 'it seems that many men believe that their female colleagues are being rewarded beyond their merit. As a result, they may come to view Affirmative Action legislation as 'unfair' when it is absolutely necessary to redress the balance'.<sup>36</sup>

Expressing a slightly different view, many successful women in the Australian industry categorically deny that there were any special privileges for women, and have never sought nor received any funding designed just for women. They have functioned within the same framework as men in the industry and competed on their own merits. Film-maker Pat Lovell has said that '[w]e just had to keep proving that we were highly responsible and highly creative people'.<sup>37</sup> Writer-director Jackie McKimmie has said that she never received funding from the AFC's Women's Film Fund 'because you never felt you were handicapped as a woman just going through the normal streams at the AFC'.<sup>38</sup>

## OTHER AREAS OF THE MOVING IMAGE

In terms of form, women in Australia have contributed to every incarnation of moving image production. In the documentary area, female producers seem to have made their mark particularly strongly in the past decade, winning six out of 10 AFI Awards for 'Best Documentary' between 1990 and 2000.<sup>39</sup> Present, but less strongly have been women documentary directors. In *Womenvision*, Meredith Seaman considers the unique contribution of three women directors to the documentary form via aspects of their personal histories (Corrine Cantrill, Merilee Bennett and Anna Kannava). Seaman considers how they have self-consciously performed and constructed identities through an exploration of the physical evidence of their lives through film footage and photographs. These films are powerful examples of women seeking to author their own on-screen visions of 'self'. The film-makers represent themselves physically on screen in their dual role as film-maker and filmic subject. Seaman observes that this 'dual role' enables a unique process of self-analysis as well as the possibility of constructing a unified self, however temporary or fictive this 'unified self' may

be. Seaman observes that while the films outwardly remind the spectator of the fluid and alienated nature of self, on a deeper level they celebrate the therapeutic aspects of constructing coherent identity, through filmic processes and autobiographical narrative.

*Womenvision* acknowledges the diversity of 'film forms' across which women have worked. Dianne Reid tracks a path between dance and the dance film from her personal experience as a contemporary dance artist. Reid's analysis illustrates some of the issues arising from the shift from choreographer to film-maker, and details the dance film form. My own chapter on the short film describes the prolific and diverse output of women working in this mode as well as the special characteristics of the form itself. Animator Ann Shenfield looks closely at the animation genre in terms of the specific contribution women have made to all manifestations of the form—from techniques to aspects of style and approach (often, for example, displaying emotional content and analysis of the 'self'). Shenfield also considers issues for animators—such as animating as a career path for women.

Fiona Kerr gives her own experiences as a computer game designer, examining her own role creating the 'cyberbabe', a busty, 'high kicking, monster crunching female', a woman 'without tears, without kids, [and] without bonds'. Kerr is aware of her own complicity in developing sexualized cybernetic entities for the male gamer and also, she considers the styles of computer game that women do engage with and the relationship of women to the form (one widely perceived as 'not for women').

While this book does not focus on the contribution of women outside of production areas, it should be noted that women in Australia work across a range of administrative/bureaucratic, curatorial, exhibition, marketing and distribution sectors.

## **NEW MEDIA**

*Is it a brave new world or just a version of the real one?*<sup>24</sup>

Brisbane's Digitarts (quoted above), who aim to support emerging women artists within the new media sphere, ask an important and interesting question and in so doing, reveal how gender themes have currency—even in cyberspace. As digital media artist Jen Seevinck has pointed out: '[d]igital technologies are not neutral but subjective tools created by humanity. They exhibit the same biases as their authors and potentially influence daily communication in the same way as language ...'<sup>41</sup>

The very existence of groups formed specifically for women to work in new media and create digital media art indicates an awareness that, despite the contemporary disenchantment with feminism, feminist activism is still required. Themes around gender are still among those that interest contemporary women; women who have had the benefits of access, training, computer literacy and advances directly attributable to the feminist movement. It should be stated however that gender issues are among many, and creative women obviously explore an eclectic and diverse range of issues, themes and aesthetic approaches and



GOGZI GIRLS OWN GIRLS, GILLIAN MORRISON AND MOIRA GORBY (1999)

make work in a range of contexts. As with other moving image production in the current climate, in general, women's practice in digital media art is well integrated within the mainstream, rather than being separate from it.

However, some women working in new media are exploring feminist themes. Among them are contemporary Australian cyberfeminists VNS Matrix,<sup>42</sup> a group well known internationally. They have been interested in questions of power in cyberspace and the potential of it for social impact. The impetus of the group has been to 'investigate and decipher the narratives of domination and control which surround high technological culture, and explore the construction of social space, identity and sexuality in cyberspace'.<sup>43</sup> Jen Seevinck describes this group as having been at the 'forefront in articulating new relationships between women and technology'.<sup>44</sup> With reference to the group's web site, she explains:

*Haraway's catchcry "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" is echoed in the 1991 VNS Matrix Bitch Mutant Manifesto<sup>45</sup> which uses explicit corporeal language bordering on the pornographic to locate the (female) body within digital technology. Their work utilizes specific narratives and metaphors to investigate relationships between women and technology and address the potential alienation of women from digital technology.<sup>46</sup>*

Seevinck has observed that 'new media practice has tended to shift emphasis away from the singular product towards process, experience, the generation of multiple solutions and patterns'. She offers artists such as VNS Matrix and Linda Dement, 'spatially subversive naviga-

tional and interactive structures to subvert predominant goal-driven interactive structures by metaphor'. I have alluded to Lucy Lippard's arguments in my chapter on short film production in this book, where she suggests that 'women's art making can be distinguished from men's because of qualities found more often in the work of women than that of men: 'central focus (often 'empty', often circular or oval), parabolic bag-like forms, obsessive line and detail, veiled strata, tactile or sensuous surfaces and forms, associative fragmentation, autobiographical emphasis'.<sup>47</sup> If the work of women more often has these characteristics, then it would follow that the 'non-linear structures' that 'distinguish digital hypermedia'<sup>48</sup> are likely to suit women new media artists making installations, internet pieces and digital hypermedia. Seevinck explains that:

*A hypermedia work gives audiences the opportunity to diverge along different routes, moving sideways or backwards as well as forwards. Images, texts, movies, sounds or information are to varying degrees and through means from directing attention to clicking a button, prioritized by the spectator. The audience forms chains of association and to some extent constructs meanings: a qualitatively different experience to that of reading a book or watching a film from start to finish.<sup>49</sup>*

A number of digital artists have been interested to explore the female body. Linda Dement's 'Cyberflesh Girlmonster', which like VNS Matrix, addresses the perceived schism between the body and technology, addresses the female body as a common site for improvement. Seevinck says of them that utilizing 'scanned images of body parts from contributing women ... [the] images are combined into highly evocative and disturbing animations or other graphic elements. The composition and the accompanying text all serve to convey a rich corporeal environment of taboo body spaces: the 'Cyberflesh Girlmonster'. The user wanders through a 'body space'—a labyrinth of sounds, animations, videos, images and words—to construct an almost physical understanding of a highly personal, internal, virtual place'. Other Australian digital artists working in a similar vein are Gillian Morrison, Moira Corby and Emma Myers who made a work titled 'GOGZI Girls Own Girls'. It is an interactive cultural anatomy of the female body which invites women who interact with it to build their ideal female self—but they do this while exploring the way history, mythology and media have structured the representation of women.

While this book is unable to comprehensively cover the contribution of the many women working in digital screen arts in Australia, Janet Merewether traces the link from early innovations and low budget forms (such as Super 8) to interactive media and the internet. She briefly outlines a number of artists making an impact on the contemporary scene, and observes the strong pressure away from traditional and towards digital forms (caused by funding agendas being pro 'new' digital media rather than interested in experimental film and video). Merewether notes many of the thematic concerns of practitioners, such as the computer/human interface (including relationships between computers, the body and gender), artificial intelligence, fusions with popular culture, creation of virtual worlds and sensory experiences, explorations of identity and also, the convergence of art, science and technology.



## GENDER

Writer Leslie Felperin has said that being a woman in the film industry today could be seen as a kind of power rather than a handicap, explaining it this way: ‘only women could have got away with making a film as explicit as *Romance*, as mocking of male and female vanity as *Holy Smoke* or even, with Ramsay’s *Ratcatcher*, as defiant of film-school rules of conduct’.<sup>50</sup> As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>51</sup> this is an emancipating reflection on the importance of gender, sexual politics and feminism, which picks up on the question (one which has been unpopular) of whether women can in fact make a contribution that is informed by their gender. Felperin’s point is an important one, that women might be able to ‘get away’ with something that male film-makers can’t; that they both might want to, and be able to explore content that would not otherwise get an airing. As already stated, the impact of gender on art production has not been at the forefront but from my own perspective this is still an intensely interesting question; I don’t believe the fear of essentialism should block such a question, given that it can be reflected upon in a plural sense.

Contemporary positions have refocused since the 1970s and 1980s when, as Felperin says, the difference between male and female artists was hotly contested; as was the politics of gender in regard to whether it was empowering or essentialist to argue that women might have different strategies, or visions to men. Labels are always rejected by those who find themselves wearing them: ‘woman director’, ‘Australian woman director’, ‘Australian, Aboriginal, woman director’ etcetera all find a place in the descriptions given to women working in the Australian industry. Those who find themselves having these labels understandably want to shake them. The current climate finds women film-makers want to be seen as creative people rather than a particular type of creative woman. The diversity of women’s work can be seen in last section of *Womenvision*, where there is a focus on selected contemporary Australian women film-makers (Monica Pellizzari, Clara Law, Tracey Moffatt, Jane Campion, Ann Turner, Jeni Thornley and the Gecko team: Sue Brooks, Sue Maslin and Alison Tilson). The diversity of work is the more common focus in contemporary times and it is true that in many quarters, there is a general distancing from gender. Many women film-makers have wanted to be seen as ‘film-makers first and women film-makers second or not at all’.<sup>52</sup> Gillian Armstrong has said ‘we will never achieve true equality until people drop the label “woman” before “director”’.<sup>53</sup>

## FEMINISM IN A POST-FEMINIST ERA

Feminism has been seen as passé in some quarters, as if the need for activism has passed. Some, including myself, perceive this view with alarm. Patricia Mellencamp, for example, states she does not agree with quiescence and she refuses to accept the boredom that has come from repeating the same weary thoughts.

*I want to ascertain where we’ve been, what has changed, and what needs to be done ... The twenty-five year rediscoveries of the women’s movement in the twentieth century (i.e., 1915, 1940,*

1965, 1990) make one thing clear: women cannot afford to rest on their laurels (which are significant).<sup>54</sup>

As outlined in the preface, this book takes its name from a feminist event in 1973, and is as committed to feminisms as its namesake. One of the driving agendas of *Womenvision* can be summed up by this quote from Lynn Fieldman Miller:

*I do not know if the evidence supports the existence of women's imagery of a particular female iconography or a specifically female approach to film-making that is not accessible to men ... The one thing I do know is that there is such a thing in this culture as a women's life as it is lived in a woman's body even though not all women have the same experiences in their lives or in their bodies ... there is a women's culture ... women film-makers and video producers do have identifiable methods, approaches and visions.*<sup>55</sup>

Within *Womenvision*, writers have illustrated that the need for feminist activism has indeed not passed. For example, cinematographer Jane Castle is able to make a link from the present to the past by utilising the experiences of her mother, Liliás Fraser, a pioneer writer, director and editor of documentaries since the 1950s. Castle offers both a narrative of how women experience a 'shoot' and a personal account of what it 'feels' like behind the lens of the camera. As a cinematographer, Castle asks what it means when the eye of the camera is located in the body of a woman. She also asks how the cinematographer reconciles her contribution to the gendering of filmic reality with the resulting oppressions that her input helps to create.

Castle uses narrative stories and reflective analysis based on her experience as a cinematographer working at the top end of the Australian and US film industries. Castle sets out in this piece to explore core issues for women in her field; such as how women negotiate a space for themselves, both economically and ethically, within a system that persists in telling, almost exclusively, men's stories. She reflects on whether it is possible for women technicians to contribute in a positive way from within this system and also asks why, despite decades of positive discrimination in the technical areas of the film industry, have so few women cinematographers have 'made it' into the mainstream.

In the 1992 AFC survey, women nominated three reasons almost equally when asked what barriers they saw to their progress: conditions in the industry, lack of opportunities in the company or work area, and sexism. These responses suggest that it is not primarily social and family responsibilities which inhibit women's progress in the industry. It should be noted, however, that the nature of work in the industry presents difficulties in combining paid work and family responsibilities. When she was a television presenter, Mary Delahunty (now in the Victorian government) said that she was perceived by other staff at *The 7.30 Report* as being 'aloof' but she explains that 'the men go to lunch; we race out to get the groceries and ring the nannie'.<sup>56</sup> Childcare is an issue for the industry generally (given that a significant section of it is made up of freelance workers) but most prominently it affects women in their careers. Among many other issues, Virginia Murray takes up the issue of

childcare in her chapter, 'When Worlds Collide: Working Mothers in the Post-production Industry'. She asks what the key effects are of having children. Using case studies of real picture editors (who've elected to give pseudonyms), Murray outlines key issues for the contemporary period, issues that have been there throughout the industry's history—balancing work and life.

Feminism has evolved into postfeminism, and while this does not mean that feminist projects are over or redundant, it does mean that there are new ways of thinking about identity, gender roles and representation. Felicity Collins, for example, considers postfeminist plots in comedy, and I consider examples of postfeminism as found in contemporary short films. As I have argued in my chapter on short films, the evolution of feminism into postfeminism is a natural evolution process of a movement that has always engaged in self-criticism and change—and in this way, it remains continually relevant.

## CONCLUSION

The pages that follow are a testament to the fact that women's moving image production in Australia has spanned the whole spectrum. Women's output has been richly diverse and constantly evolving. Moreover, there is no homogeneity in the way women film-makers (or other moving image producers) have operated; they have been working in a wide variety of ways and styles, with a wide array of intentions. As Hannie Rayson has observed, 'women don't exist as a single distinctive group but are subject to individual problems due to other factors such as class, race, ethnic origin, access to employment etc'.<sup>57</sup>

*Womenvision* seeks to rejoice in the diversity and plurality of women moving image producers and also, in the pages that follow, to celebrate not just this individual output, but the commonalities, the shared elements that might be found in the work of women—such as an interest in stories about women, power relations in society, families, and multicultural perspectives or 'other' voices and visions. Importantly, the success of women in Australian moving image industries is attributable to hard work and talent; they have done it on their own merits—which are considerable.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Women were, however, making work in this period. During 2000, The Melbourne Cinémathèque, AFI National Cinémathèque and ScreenSound Australia screened a season of films called 'Work Never Done—Australian Woman filmworkers between the 1930s and the 70s.' Included in the program was a tribute to the life and work of Joan Long: producer,

screenwriter, director, researcher and activist for the right of Australian women film workers to participate creatively in their own industry. Also presented were the neglected and rarely seen films of Rhonda Small, Lillias Fraser, Jennie Boddington, Elsa Chauvel and others—all made in the decades between the McDonagh's *The Cheaters* and Gillian Armstrong's

*My Brilliant Career*. (Between 1930 when Paulette McDonagh made *Two Minutes Silence* and 1979 when Gillian Armstrong made *My Brilliant Career*, there weren't any feature films directed by women—in a 49 year period.)

<sup>2</sup> Some of the material here has been taken from my research: *Do Contemporary Australian Women Film-makers share a feminist perspective in their*

- work, La Trobe University MA thesis, 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed & Freda Freiberg, *Don't Shoot Darling! Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Greenhouse, Richmond, Australia, 1987, p.'Preface'.
- <sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Jacka quoted in Annette Blonski, Deb Verhoeven & Sophie Cunningham, 'Funds, funds, funds. - The phasing out of the Women's Film Fund and repercussions for women in the film industry', *Cinema Papers*, no. 67, Jan 1988, p.31.
- <sup>5</sup> Barbara Alysen, 'Australian Women In Film', *An Australian Film Reader*, 1985, p. 309.
- <sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, 'Writing our way into the picture: Women in the technological arts', *Refractory Girl*, no. 31-32, May 1989, p. 19.
- <sup>7</sup> For a brief overview of production in the 1960s and 1970s, see Jocelyn Robson & Beverley Zalcock, op. cit. pp.30-39.
- <sup>8</sup> Such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Bruce Beresford, 1972).
- <sup>9</sup> Such as *Breaker Morant* (Bruce Beresford, 1980).
- <sup>10</sup> George Miller, 1979.
- <sup>11</sup> Peter Faiman, 1986.
- <sup>12</sup> 1978/9, 1982, 1992 respectively.
- <sup>13</sup> My 1995 survey revealed that only 24 features were directed by women in the entire decade: See French, (1995), op. cit., Appendix 3: *Australian (Fiction) Feature Films Written, Directed and Produced by Women 1970 - 1995*.
- <sup>14</sup> See for example Julie James Bailey, *Reel Women: Working in Film and Television*, AFTRS, Sydney, 1999, p.199. Bailey offers that 'Australia leads the world in the number and quality of its women film directors', but although she notes this as significant progress, she also noted that only 17% of features between 1990-1997 were directed by women.
- <sup>15</sup> Andrew Sarris, St James Film Encyclopedia, quoted in Lynden Barber, 'Reel Women', *The Australian (Review)*, April 25-26, 1998, p. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Gillian Armstrong quoted in Lynden Barber, *ibid*.
- <sup>17</sup> Campion is from New Zealand but is claimed as Australian given she trained, lives and has made the majority of her films in Australia.
- <sup>18</sup> Palme d'Or, Best Feature, 1993.
- <sup>19</sup> Lynden Barber, op.cit. p. 5.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>22</sup> See, for example, AFC & the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, "*What do I wear for a Hurricane*": *Women In Australian Film, Television, Video & Radio Industries*, AFC, Sydney, 1992.
- <sup>23</sup> The 2001 Encore Directory (Reed Business, Sydney, 2001, pp. 1158-1206) lists film production since 1970 and lists only two of eleven as directed by women in 2000 and only five of thirty-seven directed by women in 1999 (acknowledging that there were films made that do not appear in these lists, it does illustrate the significantly lower number of women than men directing features).
- <sup>24</sup> See Ian Craven (ed.), *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, Frank Cass, 2001, pp.5-6.
- <sup>25</sup> In 1992 it was noted by Gil Appleton that the industry is characterized by 'an overall lack of diversity in background and languages spoken, and in the representation of minority groups such as people with disabilities, among its workers'. (See Gil Appleton, *Women in Australian Film, Video, Radio & Television Industries Survey Summary*, Australian Film Commission, 1992. p.1). In 1992 the percentage of film-makers in the industry with non-anglo backgrounds was 13 per cent (below the level in the general community) and although the 1992 AFC survey didn't reveal how many of the 13 per cent were women, it is likely to be lower than half given the under-representation of women in the industry generally. Thus in 1992 Australian films didn't reflect Australia's multi-cultural society and in particular, were not offering the voices and experiences of ethnic women.
- <sup>26</sup> Jane Mills 'A (filmic) space between black & white', *Reel Time*, August-September, 2001, no.44, p. 17.
- <sup>27</sup> George Miller, (writer/director), *White fellas dreaming: a century of Australian Cinema*, [videorecording] Australian Film Finance Corporation, Kennedy Miller Movies, Sydney, 1996.
- <sup>28</sup> In 2000, it won five AFI Awards: 'Best Film', 'Best Actress' in Leading & Supporting Roles (Pia Miranda and Greta Scacchi), 'Best Adapted Screenplay' (Melina Marchetta) and 'Best Achievement in Editing' (Martin Connor).
- <sup>29</sup> She directed the feature *Love Serenade* (1996) and numerous series' such as *Heartbreak High* (1994), *Police Rescue* (1994) and *A Country Practice* (192/93).
- <sup>30</sup> Tass directed the mini-series *Stark* (1992) between her features *Pure Luck* (1990) and *Mr Reliable* (1996).
- <sup>31</sup> Perkins directed the television series *Songlines* (1997) and several documentaries for television.
- <sup>32</sup> Julie James Bailey (1999), op. cit. p.239.
- <sup>33</sup> See for example Julie James Bailey, op. cit.; Annette Blonski, *Shared Visions: Women in Television*, AFC, Sydney, 1999; and AFC & the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, op.cit.
- <sup>34</sup> Final sentence of Bailey's chapter in *Womenvision*.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with Solrun Hoas in French, (1995) op.cit. Attachment 1, p.93.
- <sup>36</sup> Hilary Glow quoted in : Fincina Hoggood, 'What Do I Wear For A Hurricane? Women In Australian, Film, Television, Video And Radio Industries; A Report: Researched And Written By Eva Cox And Sharon Laura', *Cinema Papers*, no.92, April 1993, p.26.
- <sup>37</sup> Pat Lovell quoted in Lynden Barber, op.cit. p. 6.
- <sup>38</sup> Jackie McKimmie quoted in *ibid*.
- <sup>39</sup> In 1990 *Handmaidens And Battleaxes from Producer/Director—Rosalind Gillespie; Black Harvest* (Robin Anderson with Bob Connolly-winners in 1991 as well as in 2001 for *Facing the Music*); *50 Years Of Silence* (Carol Ruff with Ned Lander winners in 1994); *The Good Looker—Claire Jager* (winner in 1995); *Not Fourteen Again*, Gillian Armstrong

- (winner in 1996); *The Dragons Of Galapagos*, Elizabeth Parer-Cook (with David Parer, winners in 1998); *The Diplomat* (Sally Browning with Wilson da Silva, winners in 2000)). And other notable producers featuring in the nominations included Shirley Barrett (nominated for *Chainsaw* in 1991) and *Pat Fiske* (nomination: *For All The World To See* in 1993).
- <sup>40</sup> Digitarts web site: <http://digitarts.va.com.au> [accessed 30/10/01].
- <sup>41</sup> Unpublished notes written and supplied by Jen Seevinck to Lisa French 13/3/01. All quotes attributed to her come from this source.
- <sup>42</sup> Josephine Starrs, Francesca Di Rimini, Julianne Pierce and Virginia Barratt (until 1996 when she left the group).
- <sup>43</sup> VNS Matrix, <http://sysx.org/vns/> [Accessed March 12, 200]
- <sup>44</sup> Seevinck op.cit.
- <sup>45</sup> VNS Matrix, *VNS Matrix Bitch Mutant Manifesto* <http://sysx.org/vns/manifesto.html> [Accessed March 12, 2001]
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- <sup>48</sup> Seevinck op. cit.
- <sup>49</sup> *ibid.*
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- <sup>53</sup> Gillian Armstrong quoted in Felicity Collins, *The Films Of Gillian Armstrong*, ATOM, 1999, p. 9.
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- <sup>56</sup> Sally Loane, 'Network 99; The powerful force within the ABC', *The Guide*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June, 1995, p.7.
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# OUR FOUNDING MOTHERS

## looking back—and looking back further still

INA BERTRAND

In a marginalised and colonised film culture like Australia's in the 1970s, internecine squabbles and jealousies are not surprising: British commentator Jan Dawson called this 'a national passion for shadow-boxing' and pointed out in her 1976 report to the Australian Film Institute that 'Fragmented activity takes more time, to less effect, than concerted effort'.<sup>1</sup> Being a woman film-maker in such a culture was to be doubly marginalised. The first book on Australia's women film-makers described how, in the 1970s, women were:

*... denied access to training, funding, theatres for exhibition of their films, child care, space in the journals, a knowledge of women's film-making history in Australia, access to women's films from overseas, jobs in the film industry ...<sup>2</sup>*

But exclusion from the boys' clubs that had for so long dominated all aspects of film in Australia had one lasting benefit: it drew the women together, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and interests,



LOTTIE LYLELL AND RAYMOND LONGFORD  
ON THE SET OF THEIR FILM THE BLUE  
MOUNTAINS MYSTERY, 1921



as ‘women had to create their own film community ... [confronting] the fact that they had no voice, no place, no roots’.<sup>3</sup> Part of creating that new community, finding a voice and roots, was to learn about other women film-makers—through printed sources, but even more importantly through the films themselves, viewed in festivals and special seasons. In a funding submission to the Film & TV Board of the Australia Council for the Arts in August 1974, the first Women’s Film Festival was justi-

fied as a way not only ‘to explore our own creativity through film’, but also ‘to provide an historical and cultural context of women’s cinema’.<sup>4</sup>

It was a time when women all over the world were searching for their roots—and not just in film. One major concern of the second wave of feminism was to place women in history—both to acknowledge the role of women within a traditional history that had excluded their contribution from consideration, and to write new histories centred around women. Some of the second wave feminist texts started with the politics and found they needed to refer back to the history: Kate Millett,<sup>5</sup> or Susan Brownmiller,<sup>6</sup> or, in the Australian context, Anne Summers.<sup>7</sup> Some started with the history and ended up embroiled in contemporary politics: Marian Ramelson,<sup>8</sup> or Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner,<sup>9</sup> or—again in the Australian context—Beverley Kingston.<sup>10</sup>

So it has been with women in film—both internationally and within Australia. Just as film became a form of expression for feminists of that second wave—a way to both document and challenge oppression—so the women who made the films sought to recover knowledge about earlier women film-makers. The first heroines for the new generation came out of Hollywood, partly because Hollywood history was more thoroughly documented, and partly because it remained an icon, symbolic of the power of the patriarchy at its most absolute. One of the first books of the feminist film movement was Claire Johnston’s small monograph on Dorothy Arzner.<sup>11</sup> Arzner had managed to master the technology of film at a time when women were considered to be inadequate for such work, so she was a role model for those who wanted to enter the all-male fields of direction and cinematography. But her films were also discovered to be full of feisty heroines who subverted patriarchal ideology in subtle ways made apparent by the new techniques of film analysis being pioneered within feminist film theory.

Her work was included in that first Australian Women’s Film Festival, along with the films of Agnes Varda and Mai Zetterling. Two seasons of films by Chantal Akerman and Jutte Bruckner were the most successful of the National Film Theatre of Australia’s screenings for that



year,<sup>12</sup> and some women film-makers and film theorists visited Australia, including Helma Sanders, Jutte Bruckner, Sally Potter, Bette Gordon and Mandy Merck.

Australian women film-makers were becoming part of a world-wide community who were increasingly familiar with the work of British, American and European women both in front of and behind the camera, both contemporary and historical. And in this process, different streams became apparent. There was a great respect for the achievements of mainstream commercial film-makers such as Alice Guy Blache in the early silent period, Dorothy Arzner in the 1930s, or Mae West more recently. But in that male-dominated and marginalised Australian film culture already described, the value of such women as role models was limited. Most Australian women film-makers of that period saw their film-making as a political act, requiring an oppositional stance, closer to the European art-film tradition represented by Agnes Varda or Mai Zetterling or Jutte Bruckner, or to the avant-garde and experimental work of Maya Deren, Germaine Dulac, Chantal Akerman, Yvonne Rainer or Sally Potter.

These Australian women moved into the vanguard of independent film. Annette Blonski explains that:

*Common to all independent filmmakers, and perhaps most crucial to any notion of independence and an oppositional practice, is a self-reflexivity, a self-consciousness about the nature of the work they do and the way it is made.*<sup>13</sup>

And Liz Stoney comments that, in Australia:

*The women's film was seen as the feminine instance within a tradition of struggle on the outskirts of film language: a stance pioneered by filmmakers Germaine Dulac and Maya Deren, and more recently enhanced by Chantal Akerman, Yvonne Rainer, Bette Gordon and Sally Potter.*<sup>14</sup>

The journal *Filmnews* enthusiastically endorsed a season of films in the 1970s from the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op which were thought to follow in this tradition, and which included *Maidens, Behind Closed Doors, On Guard* and *Serious Undertakings*.<sup>15</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, complex lines of influence had developed between the contemporary and the historical, the mainstream and the oppositional, women in front of and behind the camera, imported models and earlier Australian examples. For, while the women were discovering other women film-makers, Australian film history more broadly was also being discovered, and women were found within that, too.

At the beginning of the silent era, the only women connected with film were in exhibition rather than in production. Before First World War, Cozens Spencer advertised his wife, Senora Spencer, as 'the only lady projectionist in the world',<sup>16</sup> and after that war quite a few women continued to run the family cinema business after their husband had died. But these women were not appropriate role models for the women of the second wave who saw film as a means of expression rather than as a business, and who wanted to enter it in their



own right, rather than on the coat-tails of men.

It was to women in film production that the women of the early 1970s looked for models. There had been no oppositional practice to speak of in Australia to that time, so there were no Australian equivalents of a Germaine Dulac or a Maya Deren. But from the early 1920s onwards there had always been women in commercial film production, so, despite the fact that the women who ran the women's film

festivals and seasons and support groups all favoured films with an oppositional political stance and adventurous filmic qualities, it was to the commercial feature film industry that they turned for their Australian heroines.

They were aware of the women of the immediate past, some of whom were still active in commercial film production, and of the generation before that, working from the 1930s into the 1940s. The contribution of these women was described in the *Cinema Papers* articles surveying women in film production,<sup>17</sup> and they were respected for their undoubted technical expertise, as well as for their capacity for survival in a hostile culture, but their names did not become household words. There were several contributing factors to this. Some had worked on the margins of commercial film-making, in documentaries and state-sponsored short films (Lilias Castle, Jennie Boddington). Some had left Australia to pursue a career overseas (Catherine Duncan, Rhonda Small, or the early careers of Maureen Walsh and Joy Cavill). Some had worked in partnership with men, often sharing the work more equally than they shared the acclaim (Elsa Chauvel with Charles Chauvel, Kitty Gelhor with Noel Monkman, Gwen Oakley with Mervyn Murphy, Lilias Castle with Norman Fraser, Dahl Collings with Geoffrey Collings). Some struggled to keep afloat independently (Maureen Walsh in her later career).

Few exhibited any sense of feminist common purpose, which may have been what the women of the 1970s were looking for. Or perhaps these women were just too close—rather like elder sisters. Indeed, to call any women 'founding mothers' would once have been to throw down a gauntlet, as motherhood was one of the problematic concepts within 1970s feminism. Julia Kristeva noted, in words that Helen Grace quotes and uses as the title of her own film:

*I have the impression (some feminists) are relying too much on an existentialist concept of women, a concept that attaches a guilt complex to the maternal function. Either one has children, but that means one is not good for anything else, or one does not, and then it becomes possible to devote oneself to serious undertakings.*<sup>18</sup>

But family relationships were still dominating how women thought of themselves, encapsulated in the term that became so central to feminism—the sisterhood. If we think of ourselves as part of a vast family, older sisters can function as role models, in the spirit that, if they could do it, then so can we. But anyone who has siblings knows that the mutual support provided by sisters is also tinged with rivalry, perhaps even jealousy. The parent/child bond is different: it suggests the nurturing of the child by the parent, and the love and respect of the child for the parent, but also the outgrowing of dependence. It is akin to Harold Bloom's concept of the precursor, the strong poet, who is both a role model and an inhibiting factor—shaping and limiting anyone not strong enough to override the influence.<sup>19</sup>

So, for the women film-makers of the second wave of feminism, their contemporaries—and even those of the immediately preceding generation—were more likely to be considered as sisters, while those of the 1920s and early 1930s were closer to mothers—to be admired and respected and learned from, but also eventually to be left behind.

At the end of the silent era and into the early years of sound, there were two main routes into film production for women. Some had established reputations in the entertainment world, and moved sideways into producing film: this included actors like Louise Lovely

or Lottie Lyell, the writer/producer Kate Howarde, and the swimmer and entertainer Annette Kellerman. Others were women of independent means, such as the McDonagh sisters, Mary Mallon or Juliette de la Ruze, who could choose to spend their own money on producing films: as always, the ability to raise finance was a vital key. Independent women (like other independent producers) required the success of one film to underpin the finances of the next, so if their first film failed (like Lovely's or Howarde's), they could make no more. Women in partnerships often remained in the man's shadow, like Lyell with Longford, or Bess Meredyth with Wilfred Lucas. This may have been because they preferred to stay within the boundaries of acceptable feminine behaviour, on the sidelines where they could wield influence rather than power. For, despite seeming to be unaware of feminism, all were acutely aware that what they were doing was outside the norms of

LOTTIE LYELL





their time, as Louise Lovely demonstrated in her evidence to the 1927–8 Royal Commission into the Moving Picture Industry.

In the 1970s, though the films of all these women were recognised in the new histories of Australian film, only the most successful of them became really well-known among Australian women film-makers. Kellerman was recognised more as a swimmer than for her films, but the McDonaghs were heroised very early. Suzanne Spinner, in recounting the story of the 1975 Women's Film Festival, comments:

*In Melbourne, the Festival was officially opened by Joan Long (then writing her first feature film, Caddie) who introduced The Cheaters, a 1930 film by Paulette McDonagh, at that time one of the few women to have directed an Australian feature film. Seeing the work of the indomitable McDonagh sisters for the first time was one of the high points of the Festival, not so much for the work itself, but because, all that time ago, it had been made at all. As the film was silent, we organised a pianist to play during the screening. Phyllis McDonagh wrote to us and suggested playing 'Always': 'one of the hits of the 1930s, during the romantic scenes'. In the same letter she spoke of 'the interest that is now accumulating around our picture work'.<sup>20</sup>*

This encapsulates beautifully the relationship between the women rising into the commercial industry in the 1970s and those who had been there so much earlier. For, until Gillian Armstrong directed *My Brilliant Career* in 1979, Paulette McDonagh had been the last woman to direct a commercial feature film in Australia—in 1933! She made her first film in 1926, starting straight into features—the melodrama *Those Who Love*. She was self-trained, spending hours at the cinema watching Hollywood films for their technique rather than for an excuse to dream.

She employed P.J. Ramster to direct that first film, but soon realised that she knew more than he did, and took over direction herself. Another sister (Isabel, under her stage name of Marie Lorraine) starred in the films, and a third (Phyllis) acted as production manager and art director. The three sisters were well-educated and well-connected through their father, who was physician for the theatrical giant J. C. Williamson. Their own home was available for use as a sumptuous setting for society melodramas and their social position made finance easier to obtain. None of this is intended to detract from their achievement, but it does make them in some ways a surprising choice of role model for the politically-active, cinematically adventurous women of the second wave.<sup>21</sup> However, Paulette McDonagh was unusual for her time in that she claimed—and was granted by the trade—full credit for her work on the four feature films and several shorts she made in the period 1926 to 1934. This was a record of achievement not matched by any other Australian woman (and few enough overseas).



LOTTIE LYELL AND ARTHUR TAUCHERT IN 'THE SENTIMENTAL BLOKE', DIRECTED BY RAYMOND LONGFORD, 1919

Lottie Lyell, born Lottie Cox in 1890, went on the stage in 1909, touring under the guidance of fellow-actor and family friend Raymond Longford, with whom she soon developed a strong personal bond. Longford was married, and his Catholic wife refused him a divorce, but the professional standing of the lovers was so high that their relationship did not damage their reputations. Lottie became the most highly-praised actor of her generation while Longford became the leading indigenous director. Both were ahead of their time, demonstrating a mastery of filmic technique that has kept their surviving films from becoming dated across the years. Longford has been heroised not only for these professional standards but also for his persistent efforts on behalf of a *local* film industry, for instance, his forthright testimony before the 1927–8 Royal Commission into the Moving Picture Industry. Lottie has been spoken of in glowing terms both by her contemporaries



and later commentators, 'She is celebrated today as an actor, scriptwriter, producer, director, editor, and art director; a pioneer film-maker, and an enigmatic woman'.<sup>22</sup> Andree Wright stops just short of declaring her the true author of Longford's films.<sup>23</sup> What qualified her for the admiration of the women of the second wave was both her extensive list of screen credits, and her quiet persistence. She did what she wanted to do in her chosen profession, stepping outside the moral certitudes of the day but still demanding respect for her professional and personal qualities.

Louise Lovely was yet another different case. Like Lyell, she was an actor from an early age but she chose to try her luck in Hollywood and became a minor star there, acting in more than 40 films in the years 1915–1921, and touring all round the country for several

years with a stage act ('A Day in the Studio'). She returned to Australia with high hopes of establishing a film production industry along Hollywood lines using the experience she had gained, not only in acting but also in producing and directing others in her 'studio act'. But on her return to Australia, she was treated with distrust by bank managers and with some disdain by others in the film industry. She made only one film—*Jewelled Nights* (1925)—and retired when that failed to return its costs. She blamed the absence of studios and other technical facilities, and the high costs of producing outside a studio system, but part of the reason was her own conviction that cost-cutting would result in an inferior product. Like McDonagh and Lyell, she had high professional standards which she refused to compromise and—also like them—she put her reputation and her financial security on the line in insisting on her right to enter a male industry.

These three conservative women of the teens to the 1930s, who would most probably have balked at the label 'feminist', became the main focus for those who were eager to establish that there was a continuous history of women in Australian film. And, now that we can look back at the 1970s as historical time with some distance, we can even find similarities and parallels between the two periods.

For film production, the 1920s was a period of relatively stable technology. Before then, film technology was changing rapidly, and only people (i.e. men) with a technological background could handle both the technology itself and the speed of its progress. Most men who entered the industry already had related experience—photographers became cinematographers, electricians became projectionists, theatre managers became cinema managers, and so on.

Women, who by and large had no comparable technological or entrepreneurial experience, had to start from scratch, and this only became possible when the technology itself became stable. So, the McDonaghs could learn from Hollywood films and Louise Lovely could learn on the job in Hollywood itself. This stability was disturbed again at the end of the 1920s by the arrival of sound, making it once again more difficult for the women. Similarly, there was a period of rapid technological change in the 1950s, with the introduction of television, and the film response to this of becoming either more intimate (hand-held light-weight cameras) or more impressive (improvements to film colour and sound technologies, and widescreen formats such as cinemascope). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, film and television technology were again relatively stable, providing another window of opportunity for the less technologically sophisticated (including women), before the new technologies arrived to again complicate the picture. In both periods, then, it was possible for women to overcome technological barriers by learning on the job.



LOUISE LOVELY ON LOCATION AT SAVAGE RIVER, TASMANIA DURING THE FILMING OF JEWELLED NIGHTS 1925

Films cannot be made without money, and for most of the twentieth century it was notoriously difficult for women to raise finance for any business venture. But both the periods under consideration here (the 1920s and early 1930s, and the late 1960s and early 1970s) provided some availability of finance to women, however limited and temporary. Australian production in the 1920s was still a cottage industry, with feature film budgets far below those of comparable imported films. There were no large studios in the 1920s. It was

not till the 1930s that Cinesound (in Sydney) and Efftee (in Melbourne) were engaged in relatively continuous production. While smaller budgets were acceptable, smaller operators (including women) had more chance. Even then, despite their independent means, the McDonaghs needed their family name to establish credibility with the banks, as Louise Lovely needed her Hollywood reputation. Once sound arrived to increase costs enormously, production became both more expensive and more centralised, squeezing out the smaller, independent producers, including the women. In the 1970s it was government financial support of the industry that began to open doors to women, at first in the funding of smaller, independent productions through the Experimental Film Fund and later the Women's Film Fund, and then in providing training opportunities both informally and later through the Australian Film and Television School.

Finally, there is common ground in the attitudes of the women themselves. Both these periods saw a strong upsurge of feminism, leading women to move into careers not formerly open to them. Sally Speed describes the 1920s as 'a time when women began to define what roles they could, and would, take up in an urban society'.<sup>24</sup> At this time, women moved into offices and public employment, though they were also limited by post-war 'employment of women' policies, for instance those which prevented women working as teachers after marriage. They were also more inclined to adopt a form of feminism which stressed the need for women to express their individuality through their art or profession.<sup>25</sup> The 'starving artist in the garret' was a model for women as well as men, and women were expected to compete against each other as well as against men for the spotlight as well as for the financial rewards of success. Joan Long pointed out how fortunate the second wave feminists were:

*There are the women's liberationists of today, fortunate indeed to have the comfort of a movement around them; and there are the women who have had to live liberation as best they could without a movement.*<sup>26</sup>

In the 1970s, those 'women's liberationists' were working together in militant campaigns around issues of health, employment opportunities, pay rates, support services such as child care and women's refuges. And, for the first time, they were publicly promoting film production as a legitimate area of work which should be as open to women as to men.

All this we can see with hindsight. In the 1970s, the interest in those earlier women was much more instinctive and emotional. If these women had done it, then so could we! Role models are still important, as is acknowledged in the Women in Television project: 'Case study material focusing on how individual women had achieved was also thought to assist others to move ahead'.<sup>27</sup>

Now we are far enough away from the 1970s to look back at that period too, and to see how much has changed. There are now more women in formerly all-male areas of the industry—camera, sound, editing, directing as well as writing and acting. There are still male/female partnerships—like the earlier ones, but much less hierarchical (for instance, Nadia Tass and



David Parker, or P.J. Hogan and Jocelyn Moorhouse). Though raising finance is still the hardest part of film production, it is now possible for women to get funding in their own right. Women who move sideways in the industry, say from acting to directing (like Robyn Nevin or more recently Elyse McCredie), are treated with as much respect as men who do the same. But women still need to believe in themselves, and this is easier if they can recognise their place in a larger picture—of other women who have been there and done that, from as far back as we can remember, back to our ‘founding mothers’ ...

## Endnotes

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# GROUNDED AND GENDERED

## Aboriginal Women in Australian Cinema

MARCIA LANGTON

Aboriginal women film-makers have played a special role in the history of Indigenous cinematic and video production. Only four feature films by Aboriginal directors (distributed beyond premiere showings) have been catalogued in the accounts of that history: Tracey Moffatt's *Bedevil* (1993) and Rachel Perkins' *Radiance* (1998) and *One Night The Moon* (2001, short feature) and Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds* (2002). *Radiance* was voted



CRESSY (RACHEL MAZAI), NONA (DEBORAH MALIMAN), AND MAE (TRISH MORTON-THOMAS) IN *RADIANCE*

the most popular audience award at both the Melbourne and Sydney Film Festivals in 1998 and Deborah Mailman, in the key role, won the 1998 AFI Award for 'Best Actress In A Leading Role'. Thus the first Aboriginal film-makers to graduate from the short film to the feature film project, with all the attendant fund-raising and production issues, were women.

The significance of this is less a cause of feminist celebration than the history of Indigenous cinema production suggests. In the first place, each of the few Aboriginal women film and video makers, Tracey Moffatt, Rachel Perkins, Sally Riley, Darlene Johnson, Erica Glynn and Frances Peterss, to name the most honoured, must be understood as an individual, as an artist in her own right, with her own life trajectory and cultural reading of history and the present. Despite this cautionary point, some critical points can be made about the growing body of work by Indigenous women. The contribution of Aboriginal women film-makers lies especially in their distinctive narratives of the familial tensions of their lives, grounded and gendered in their postcolonial Aboriginal identities, their ability to transform Aboriginal traditions, such as the mythological tropes and orality into cinematic forms, in their duty as cultural activists and in their exemplary artistic and aesthetic gifts.

The remaining body of work by Indigenous people forms a substantial and important part of Australian film-making for a number of reasons. The first media productions involving Aboriginal people behind the camera, and as directors, were in the documentary genre. This is an historically telling point about the nature of that genre as a means for realist expressions of the type that Aboriginal cultural activists were driven to make. Faye Ginsberg's study of Indigenous media<sup>1</sup> production highlights the role that cultural activists played in pioneering a place for Indigenous media workers:

*From their own life experiences, these cultural activists recognize that social change cannot simply be legislated, but requires a long struggle against racism that is pervasive in the dominant culture in multiple arenas. Activists of all ages have recognized the impact of negative stereotypes and the invisibility of Aboriginal people, cultures and languages in the mass media; many younger people began to resist directly through the creation of counter-images that circulate both in home communities and in the surrounding dominant culture.*

Hughes, writing on documentaries by Aboriginal film-makers or with the involvement of Aboriginal communities, notes that for the last 20 years 'documentaries have provided one vital and critical site of debate and reflection on a range of questions about just what is distinctively Australian about our culture'. He further notes that:

*A large number of works have sought to re-examine Australian history, social conditions and their development, and the changing place of women and Aborigines in Australian culture and society. ... The European-centered view of Australian identity has been challenged by a range of films made by Aborigines or with the involvement of Aboriginal Communities such as Two Laws, (Borroloola Aboriginal Community, 1981), My Life As I Live It (Coffey, Ansara, Guyatt, 1993), Moodeitj Yorgas: Solid Women (Moffatt, 1988); and Exile and the Kingdom (Injibarndi, Ngarluma, Banjima and Gurrama People, and Rijavec, 1993)), as well as by many films about Aborigines by non-Aborigines: Black*

Man's Houses (Thomas, 1992), How the West Was Lost (Noakes, 1987), Land Bilong Islanders (Connolly & Graham, 1989), and Aeroplane Dance (Graham, 1994).<sup>2</sup>

To complicate matters, Hughes counts Moffatt's *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), as a women's documentary rather than an Aboriginal documentary:

*Women have also challenged the masculinist conception of Australianness, particularly in the re-examination of history in films such as Ladies Rooms (Gibson, Lambert, 1977), Age Before Beauty (Gibson, Lambert, 1980), For Love or Money: Women and Work in Australia (McMurchy, Nash, Thornley & Oliver, 1983), Thanks Girls and Goodbye (Hardisty & Maslin, 1984), High Heels (Brooks, 1985), the sadly underrated Landslides (Gibson, Lambert, 1986), and Nice Coloured Girls (Moffatt, 1987).<sup>3</sup>*

Thus we find Aboriginal women, such as the late Essie Coffey and Tracey Moffatt, represented as among the first women documentary makers in Australian cinematic history. The documentaries by Aboriginal people of this period were, as Faye Ginsberg points out, the works of 'a cohort of people born in the 1950s and 1960s, who see their work as part of their community's struggle for visibility on their own terms'.<sup>4</sup> Ginsberg further notes that:

*Of those coming from more traditional backgrounds, most are well-versed in ritual and sacred knowledge, fluent in native languages, and leaders in their communities or tied to leadership through kin ties. At the same time, many of these activists have had access to education in dominant culture and are comfortable dealing with western languages and technologies, bureaucracies, and venues for showing media work, all of which have been key elements in successful Indigenous media projects. Many of these people came to consciousness in the movements for Indigenous rights that were developing in different sites during the 1960s and 1970s. As a result of those activities, and policy responses to them, many also had access to scholarships and training programs that gave them skills and knowledge, enabling them to enter into new areas of cultural work. Examples span the planet, from the establishment of the Aboriginal Programs Unit at the ABC, Australia's national broadcaster, to the development of Inuit Broadcasting Corporation in Canada's Arctic that provided the training.<sup>5</sup>*

This generation, Ginsberg rightly argues, is also one that is uniquely bicultural, and able to build bridges between domains because of their cultural abilities in different settings.

However, as Ginsberg, who placed her studies in the context of a global Indigenous movement was keenly aware, simple categorisation of works by gender and 'race' by film critics in the 1970s and 1980s provided an unstable and unsatisfactory framework for their inclusion in Australian cinematic history.

Indigenous film-making occupies an unsettled place in the robust Australian national cinema industry, the subject of much discussion in cultural studies concerned largely with the nature of this medium sized, marginal, English Antipodean cinema in the global Hollywood market. Australian cinematic studies concentrate on the social questions that engage Australian audiences,

'namely, those that cluster around the axis of social differentiation concerned with class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and national identity'.<sup>6</sup> The difficulty with which cinema studies scholars and critics accounted for Aboriginal involvement with media production was the subject of my work for the Australian Film Commission,<sup>7</sup> and revitalised critical consideration of Aboriginal works as 'intercultural' dialogues, rather than 'racial' genre. Even though critical cultural considerations of Aboriginal cinematic production have progressed theoretically and historiographically beyond the small section or footnote on Aboriginal involvement in media and cinematic works, the role and contribution of Aboriginal women in this field remains poorly understood.

Contexts of film-making when the makers of the film can be on any side of the camera create situations where image making and dissemination involve keen imaginative engagement with a range of art forms that quickly dissolve the conventional boundaries of film-making, and draw on deep reservoirs of cultural resources that have more often than not been sheltered from the inquisitive gaze of cultural outsiders. Margaret Burns writes that ephemerality and nuance 'conspire to suggest realms of significance rather than to spell out perceived facts in the linear pedantic style of much earlier European-inspired documentary narrative'<sup>8</sup> and that:

*At last a multifaceted medium like film can do some measure of justice to the multidimensional realities of Aboriginal science and philosophy. Film is a medium which opens up possibilities for a more rounded exploration of Aboriginal realities . . . In this, the medium helps to give voice to some of the immense, suffocating silences of a past laden with injustice.<sup>9</sup>*

Yet it is the insistent emphasis by cinema scholars on the racial classification of Aboriginal film and video auteurs that has mired their works in a confused critique as to their place in Australian cinema history.

The Indigenous contribution to cinematography and video-making has been as much artistic as documentary. Yet, the question of what we perceive in watching these 'Indigenous' film and video *oeuvres*, is as puzzling as Aboriginal identity itself. Does the content become 'Aboriginal' by handing the camera over to the Aboriginal person? Questions such as this have been the subject of much argument in film studies, as the vexed relationships between Subject, Object, the unfathomable 'Other', the Machine and the Gaze have been teased out. It is a futile exercise to attribute the authorship of these shadow plays and bioscopes to a race, or even to a single person. Each production involves not only the person behind the camera and the camera or machine itself, but also, those being recorded: sound technicians, editors and many others, and not least, the audience.

This question of 'the gaze' is a core theme of this history of Indigenous involvement in film and video-making because of the troubled effect on Aboriginal audiences of the scientific and ethnographic authorship that dominated the cinematic productions concerning Aboriginal life since the last century. In Australia, from the 1970s onwards, Aboriginal people began to make films and videos in their own right, as directors and experimental film-makers, as participants in community productions, and as collaborators with other film-makers. They demanded the

right to represent their own vision, and have produced a cinematic legacy of critical importance to the Australian film industry, to Australian artists and intellectuals, and to their community. As an anthropologist of media use and production by Indigenous peoples, Ginsberg's work highlights the dilemma of groups encapsulated by settler states, misrepresented by others and, until the 1970s, unable to turn the tide of misrepresentation. She notes that, globally, Indigenous people 'recognize the power of visual media not only for their own communities, but also for changing the consciousness of the nations that encompass them'.<sup>10</sup>

In Australia, Aboriginal media workers 'insist that Indigenous perspectives be increasingly heard and seen in an Australian polity that is finally beginning to take account of the rights of its Aboriginal citizens, not least of all the right to represent themselves'.<sup>11</sup> A cultural future was envisioned by these Indigenous media and cultural activists and their access to the then new media technologies enabled them to represent themselves with a power and range of aesthetic and technological devices previously unavailable to them, as Ginsberg notes:

*In this case, the correspondence between the political and the figural meanings of self-representation are totally appropriate. Indigenous media productions acknowledge the traumas of contact history and the contradictions of life in the present and, most importantly, take these stories as a means to envision a cultural future for Indigenous people both locally and as part of larger social formations. Thus, these productions are both about and part of the construction of contemporary Indigenous identities. Their productions are another dimension of efforts to establish their voices and visions on their own local terms, as part of Australia's past and present, and in relation to a transnational network of Indigenous people.*<sup>12</sup>

### **MY MOTHER, MY FILM: ABORIGINAL WOMEN AND THE FAMILIAL NARRATIVE**

Kinship and familial relations underpin much of Aboriginal sociality and, as in any human society, it is in this social domain more than any other that Aboriginal women find their life experiences that inform their artistic, literary, religious and aesthetic visions. The complexity of Aboriginal social organisation, both in the more traditional societies and in those with a history of intimate contact with the settler society, provides a rich storehouse of story, legend and narrative based in life histories and the distinctive Aboriginal mythological traditions.

In this regard, Aboriginal women film-makers have excelled in transforming life history, mythological tropes from their own traditions, and the saga of familial tensions both as a result of family traumas and the impact of colonial practices such as child-stealing, into cinematic works of great beauty.

Tracey Moffatt—artist, photographer, and cinema director, now based in New York—has accomplished what no other Australian artist has been able to: global standing as an artist of high rank in the world of fine postmodernist art, an enthusiastic international audience for her hyper-real, anti-narrative productions (whether cinematic or photographic), and a prolific artistic output. Her retrospective at the Dia Gallery in New York in 1999 established her as a critically important artist, while back home in Australia, the settler readings remained trapped

in postcolonial guilt and bickering over whether it is possible to be Aboriginal and universal, or cosmopolitan.

Tom O'Regan's interpretation of Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1990) is typical of the new sensitive settler accommodation of the startlingly different aesthetic values and content that avant garde film-makers such as Moffatt have mustered to present very personal, but nevertheless culturally disquieting, readings of the Aboriginal experience:

*But ambiguities, hesitations and decidedly unsimple moral equations are also the domain of the work of Aboriginal filmmaker Tracey Moffatt . . . In these films, Moffatt insists on this interrelatedness while Aboriginalizing the viewing perspective . . . Moffatt invites a more personal reading by telling her interviewer that the story became 'more about me and my white foster mother'. So, the filmmaker not only imagines her mother's death, she is also admitting to matricidal feelings about her—and these feelings are crossed by an inter-racial history and politics of black exploitation particularly as domestic servants in rural Australia. . . . We are made complicit in the middle aged daughter's anger, frustration, bitterness and bad temper directed at her aged, decrepit, wheel-chair stricken white mother. This anger can stand for wider Aboriginal anger towards the white society that usurped their land and marginalized them into servitude.*<sup>13</sup>

For Scott Murray 'the Old Mother's incontinence' suggests 'a white society clogged by its own cancers'.<sup>14</sup> In this logic the mother's death frees the daughter but there is nothing upbeat about her death—for how can a daughter gloat over her mother's death? Instead she is stricken. While displacing the non-Aboriginal mainstream by Aboriginal presence and agency, Moffatt's films speak of implication and mutual history.

Carol Laseur tackles this problem of the indeterminacy of categories such as 'Aboriginal', 'race' and 'gender' by drawing on the poststructuralist theoreticians whose works are typically cited in textual critiques and readings:

*Each story in this trilogy begins from the premise of an 'always already' manifestation of representation. That is, Aboriginality is everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. And it is here that I will draw on de Lauretis' deconstructionist theories of gender to suggest that her ideas can (and are) equally valid when applied to race. Both gender and race are a series of historical constructions or discursive formations, whereby attempts at representation are prefigured by ways of thinking that subsume notions of race as identification within a paradigm which has come to signify that which is 'always already represented'. It is precisely these notions, these pre-ordained ways of thinking, that beDevil sets out to deconstruct in challenging and confronting ways.*<sup>15</sup>

What these critics fail to see is the distinctive way in which Aboriginal women have crossed the borders throughout colonial and postcolonial Australian history, acting as brokers in situations from the most dire economic forms of slavery to situations of intimacy and complicity with the colonial project. I have explained elsewhere<sup>16</sup> how Aboriginal women's ingenuity has been remarkable in this way.



The traditional role of Aboriginal women in ensuring the economic viability of the family unit has been expanded in Aboriginal contact with white society. From the time of the first British settlement, Indigenous women have crossed the cultural barriers more easily than their menfolk (indeed the first Aboriginal female in the settlement at Port Jackson was a little girl adopted by an officer's family) and similarly women have been able to more effectively cross the economic divide. It has also been documented that Aboriginal women were regarded, by some at least, in settler society as the conduit to economic intelligence concerning the resources of the land, locations for economic use and the potential of Aboriginal society to provide labour. In this role, Aboriginal women were able to engage with settler society in a close, even intimate, way through their functions as child-carers, sexual partners and domestic labourers, and as well, critically, as pastoral and agricultural labourers in their own right.



Marcia Langton and Agnes Hardwick in *Nightmares*

This in part is due to the peculiar advantage of the feminine gender in matters of male-female relationships in Australia. That is, to non-Indigenous people acting in their positions of power and status, Indigenous women seem less threatening to traditional ways of doing business with 'the natives' than do Indigenous men. Throughout Australian history, this peculiar advantage has provided a great many opportunities for women to bring about change economically and socially for themselves and their own kinfolk and communities, in the face of enormous adversity. This has been no less the case in cultural representations.

Tracey Moffatt's non-documentary, *Nice Coloured Girls*, established its non-narrative approach to the sisterly practice of 'getting a captain' or patron, set in a club scene, in this tradition of cross-cultural ingenuity, with a dreamlike account of Aboriginal girls encountering the men of

the First Fleet. History tells us that once the ships were unloaded at Port Jackson in 1788, construction of the settlement commenced with the destruction of the forest and the harvesting of the food resources proceeding at an unsustainable rate for the eleven hundred settlers and the Indigenous population of perhaps four or five hundred. The traditional owners realised that there was a very great likelihood that these strangers would not leave. While this realisation marked the beginning of ongoing conflict between the Indigenous population and the

NICE COLOURED GIRLS



settlers, interaction between them also occurred.

Throughout the first year of settlement, the local women acquainted themselves with the British officers, climbing aboard the ships at night, encountering them as they canoed fishing while the officers explored the coastline and, as the progeny a year later gave evidence of, in some more intimate ways. Aboriginal women who formed liaisons with white men—and married ones often with the knowledge of their Aboriginal husbands—were able to obtain food, alcohol and tobacco from the whites.

The solidarity of Aboriginal women in sisterly relations, a profoundly important aspect of female Aboriginal sociality, was represented by Moffatt in *Nice Coloured Girls* in starkly anti-colonial and subversive terms, while at the same time, dealing frankly with the complicity in the colonial project that sisterly practices necessarily entail. The historiographical point was precisely to destabilise the politically correct vision of the 1980s Aboriginal woman as the neo-

romantic heroine of the peoples' struggles, and to deal with her ribaldry, sexuality and economic ingenuity in theatrical attention to historical accuracies. To call this work a documentary, as Hughes did, is both a disservice to Moffatt, to the genre, and to the work itself.

We find repeatedly in Moffatt's cinematic works this playful, hyper-realist rendering of sisterly and familial, especially parent-daughter relations, in various forms of horror and irony. Especially



beDEVIL

in *beDevil*, as Laseur has observed, the difficulty of Moffatt's non-narrative approach confounded its audiences, precisely because of her intention to destabilise conventions:

*beDevil signals itself as a text that sets out to disrupt normative reading practices: to confound, muddle or spoil is to enact bedevilment. What needs to be asked here is: who is bedevilled? The film's title, I'd suggest, functions dialectically in addressing content and reading positions simultaneously. On the surface the stories are expressions of bedevilment: a missing GI, a ghost train and the mystery lovers. Yet on another level the stories are an ongoing interventionist practice into a destabilising of white Australian history as a master narrative. More than simply evoking a different (or 'new') set of voices, beDevil suggests the vital and ongoing processes of cultural definition and redefinition. Each story embodies the transformation of specific historical moments.<sup>17</sup>*

Laseur is most astute in her understanding of Moffatt's transformation of the Aboriginal tradition of orality in cinematic form:

*It is important, too, to account for the workings of internal logic (as opposed to an overt narrative structuration) in the beDevil stories as a process of translating orality. A striking instance of this bypassing of internal logic (often mistaken for textual logic) can be seen in the way critics swiftly move to place beDevil alongside pre-existing discourses of Art History<sup>18</sup>... The presentation of cultural difference is absorbed and assimilated into existing canons. Commentators and critics have made much of the film's use of cinematic form at the level of sophisticated visual and aural stylisation.<sup>19</sup> ... The technologies of visual reproduction (photography, cinema, video, and other visual art media) have become the benchmark by which Moffatt's work is recognised and received. In fact, it is the 'painterly' dimensions of this auteur which most often incite critical attention. References to Drysdale, Namatjira and Smart are seen as important cultural intertexts or icons of referentiality. Given that beDevil is such a visually stunning piece of cinema, it is easy to overlook the oral tradition/culture that (in)forms it. The mediums of the oral and the visual are fused in beDevil and should not be regarded as separate moments for analysis. Moffatt is not trying to represent anything in a formal sense and this is where mainstream critical judgement is problematic. An over-stressing of the technical merits of the film detracts from its strong message or what Laleen Jayamanne has termed the aesthetic of assimilation.<sup>20</sup>*

In April 1989, Ginsberg documented number of Aboriginal media activists who worked with the Special Broadcast Service (SBS) to develop a 13-part TV series devoted to Aboriginal issues, called **First In Line**, the first prime time current affairs show in Australia to be hosted by two Aboriginal people.<sup>21</sup> The producers and crew were primarily Aboriginal, and consulted with communities throughout Australia for items stressing the positive achievements of Aborigines.<sup>22</sup> Yet, in time, this series was discontinued. An Aboriginal unit was established with Rachel Perkins, a young Aboriginal woman, at its head. Perkins trained in Central Australia at the Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA).

Rachel Perkins graduated from programming work from regional and local Aboriginal Media Associations for national television to film-making proper. In 1992-93, she commissioned **Blood Brothers**, a series she co-produced with film-maker Ned Lander. Broadcast in 1993, the series of four one-hour documentaries each covered different aspects of Aboriginal history and culture. One was the award-winning documentary directed, written and produced by Rachel herself: **Freedom Ride**, a program about her father, the late Kwementyaye [Charles] Perkins, who in 1965, as one of the first Aboriginal students at Sydney University, organised 'freedom rides' to challenge the racist conditions under which Aboriginal people lived in rural towns in New South Wales at that time. In discussing the film, Ginsburg notes its significance as it retraces the history of this initial stage of the Aboriginal civil rights movement through the retrospective accounts by Perkins and his fellow protesters, both black and white, as they revisit the places where they had carried out civil disobedience over twenty-five years ago. Using archival footage, recreations of historical scenes, mixed with oral histories, and contemporary verité footage, the documentary is powerful testimony to how political consciousness was created in everyday experiences of discrimination, and transformed through direct action.<sup>24</sup>

Perkins' feature film, **Radiance** (1998), based on a script by playwright Louis Nowra performed in Australian theatres, follows the traumatic reunion of three sisters for their mother's funeral

and discovery of each other's painful remembering of their childhood experiences. Melodramatic and redolent with its theatrical origins, the film provides a stage for the dramatic skills of three remarkable Indigenous actresses, including the award-winning Deborah Mailman.<sup>23</sup>

The familial narrative is of importance to numerous other Aboriginal woman film-makers. Among them is the promising Erica Glynn whose works, *My Bed Your Bed* (1998) and *Redreaming the Dark* (1998), were supported by the Indigenous Drama Initiative (IDI) of the Australian Film Commission (AFC). *My Bed Your Bed* (1998)<sup>24</sup> was written and directed by Glynn and photographed by her brother Warwick Thornton. It is a contemporary story about betrothal and the arrangement of marriage in Aboriginal society.

*Fly Peewee Fly!* (1995) was the first short film by the outstanding Sally Riley. Her latest film, *Confessions of a Headhunter* (2000), was enthusiastically received by audiences. Several travelling film festivals of young Indigenous film-makers funded by the AFC's IDI program have been organised by the Australian Film Institute: *From Sand to Celluloid*, *Shifting Sands*, *Crossing Tracks* and *On Wheels* (which included Riley's *Headhunter*).<sup>25</sup> *Round Up* (1995) and *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1999), both directed by Rima Tamou, must also be given a special place in the history of Aboriginal women film-makers.

Darlene Johnson's first short film was the marvellous *Two Bob Mermaid*<sup>26</sup> (1996). Johnson was honoured<sup>27</sup> for her documentary, *Stolen Generations*, written and directed by Johnson, and produced by Tom Zubrycki. Screened by SBS, it details the history of the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents, and draws together personal testimony of suffering and resistance, stories of the experiences endured by survivors of Australia's 'stolen generations'. The practice became commonplace and, in fact, government policy. *Stolen Generations* tells stories of mothers who smeared their children with black clay, or held them over a fire to try to darken their skin, or hid them in hollow logs, to avoid 'welfare' workers taking their children. It looks at the perspectives of welfare officers charged with government policy implementation on the practices of church and state. Archival footage, from newsreels and Film Australia documentaries as well as other sources, is used. Johnson narrates the film, and her first hand experience, and that of her family's shame flowing from these policies over generations, illustrates how widespread the practice of child removal had become: barely an Aboriginal family was spared the effect of these policies.

## THE SETTLER STATE AND THE ABORIGINAL WOMAN'S EYE

For all of the critical analysis of cultural dynamics, Australia's history remains that of a white settler state, and the nature of its modern descendant hotly disputed: frontier or post-frontier society? Liberal democracy or demotic autocracy of 'ugliness and ordinariness'.<sup>28</sup> Tom O'Regan is seduced by the traditional conflict between town and bush: 'This joyful parading of the gauche can be seen as the celebration of frontier identity and manners flagrantly thrown in the face of cosmopolitan sophistication'.<sup>29</sup> While Australian films vicariously stage the cultural cringe of the settler state to international audiences through 'Bazza' McKenzie and Crocodile Dundee films (and, arguably, *Strictly Ballroom*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

and others), Australian audiences dream of themselves in colonial grandeur served by well-behaved 'darkies'. In a survey of Australian 'everyday cultures', Benner, Emmison and Frow make some disturbing findings:

*... overwhelming majorities from each [age] cohort nominate American films as their favourites. Two films out of the top 30 command an extraordinary amount of allegiance from the oldest cohort: MGM's production of Gone with the Wind which alone receives nearly 40 per cent of their total preferences, and Twentieth Century Fox's Sound of Music which attracts 20 per cent. Gone with the Wind is also the most popular film for the two middle-aged cohorts, where it commands 17 and 11 per cent of their top 30 film preference allocation respectively. The significance which the older cohorts attribute to it marks it as the most popular film for the whole sample.<sup>30</sup>*

Indigenous film does not and cannot compete with the global film industry of which these two films are exemplary standards of the Hollywood imaginary. Against the fantastic locations of mansions and manicured landscapes of the southern plantation and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the saccharine female characters disproving or proving their moral and feminine place in their disintegrating aristocratic class milieu, Indigenous film-makers confront the Antipodean frontier and the allocation of its rewards and punishments meted out in posthistorical temporalities to its descendants.

Indigenous film and video production, rather, has taken up the task, formerly literary, of challenging the hegemonic representation of Aboriginal people according to the stereotypes and tropes of the frontier; colonial and neo-colonial Australian imagination: the Empire talks back.<sup>31</sup> Bryson, Burns and Langton have suggested that film as much as literature 'has



FLY PEEWEE FLY

rendered its Aboriginal characters in particular formulaic ways in the national imagination to satisfy the ceaseless demands of national identity construction and nationalistic differentiation in the international arena'.<sup>32</sup> The tropes of the savage, noble or otherwise, the faithful companion, the criminal, the mendicant, the victim are typically cast against the valorous hero of the outback, and other landscape and location stereotypes that are thought to typify the Australian experience. These racist conventions contrast starkly with the reality lived by the overwhelmingly urban, Anglo-Australian middle class population. Filmic reflections of the Australian

national imaginary have bolstered a nostalgic cultural mythology, only occasionally contradicting the colonial and national narratives.

We cannot find easy pathways to understanding the works of these women artists who have been first in their field as Aboriginal film-makers. Their works are complex and mysterious, unamenable to conventional analysis. Each of their works must be read in its own right as an artistic work, drawing on all of our sociological and textual skills. I turn again to Laseur's incisive essay on Moffatt's *beDevil* to conclude:

*... part of its strategy of transforming cultural meanings, (which appears to have been missed by the critics) beDevil is a film that foregrounds aspects of race and gender. There is a continuing attempt to rework previous stereotypical images that have come to signify difference as all-pervasive. The move away from futile questions concerning a positive/negative value of image is not what is at stake here. beDevil ignores simple binary oppositions. Moffatt is not antagonistic to black/white relations of power and dispossession in the binary sense, rather she is interested in a utilization of the power of memory to reconstruct not an idyllic past, but a past that is strangely entangled and caught up with present debates on what it is to be in the intersubjective sense of experience. Her concerns are with the way in which the construction of race, identity, subjectivity and image are interconnected through memory, place and story. The site of story and formation of subject are inseparable in beDevil. A lack of recognition of this connectedness in the social world continues to impede implementations, strategies and measures of Aboriginal policy making by delegated non-Aboriginals.<sup>33</sup>*

Art is required to bedevil those of us in the audience who seek to understand human experiences by turning to stories so cleverly told by Tracey Moffatt, Rachel Perkins, Sally Riley, Darlene Johnson and Erica Glynn, and other sisters of the Aboriginal nations. We find, nevertheless, commonalities in their work: disturbing readings of colonial history, stark accounts of familial trauma and connectedness, sometimes ironic sometimes gothic in their horror; and sometimes both; transformations of orality and storytelling devices into cinematic forms; and throughout, highly individualistic renderings of the cinematic technologies to represent their Aboriginal stories as complex human encounters, as beguiling and distressing as any told.

## Endnotes

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- 1 Faye Ginsburg, *Mediating Culture: Aboriginal Media and Social Transformations of Identity*, 1996, <http://www.usc.edu.au/dept/ancntr/pdcomm/ginsburg.html>, p. 5.
- 2 Peter Hughes, 'Documentary in the "Creative Nation"', Documentary Box, Yamagata Documentary Festival, 1995, at [http://www.city.yamagata.jp/yi\\_dff/docbox/6/box6-3-e.html](http://www.city.yamagata.jp/yi_dff/docbox/6/box6-3-e.html)
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Faye Ginsburg, *op. cit.* p. 5.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 See Desmond Bell, 'Centre and Periphery Down Under: Australian National Cinema and the Global Information Order', (review of Tom O'Regan's *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1996), in Meaghan Morris & Stephen Muecke (eds.), 'Other Stories', *The UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, vol. 5. no.2, November, 1999, pp. 197-203.
- 7 Marcia Langton, *Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television... an essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things*, Australian Film Commission, North Sydney, NSW, 1993.
- \* See also: Ian Bryson, Margaret Burns, and Marcia Langton, 'Painting with Light: Australian Indigenous Cinema' in Kleinart, Sylvia and Neale, Margo (General Des.), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2000, pp. 297-305.
- 8 Margaret Burns, 1999, unpublished paper, p. 3.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 Faye Ginsburg, *op. cit.* pp. 5-6.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Tom O'Regan, 'Beyond "Australian Film"? Australian Cinema in the 1990s', <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/Reading-Room/film/1990s.html>
- 14 Scott Murray, 'Tracey Moffatt: "Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy"', *Cinema Papers*, no.79, May, 1990, p.18.
- 15 Carol Laseur, 'beDevil: Colonial Images, Aboriginal Memories', in *Span: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies*, no.37, December 1993, <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/Reading-Room/film/1990s.html>. Later published in the journal edited by Anne Brewster, Marion Campbell, Amm McGuire and Kathryn Trees, *Yorga Wangi: Postcolonialism and Feminism*, p. 76-88.
- 16 See Kristen Barry and Marcia Langton, *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 3-11.
- 17 Carol Laseur, *op. cit.*
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 See Ginsburg, *op. cit.* pp. 14-16.
- 22 Molnar, as cited in Ginsburg, 1989, pp. 38-39.
- 23 Mailman played Nona. The other actresses are Rachael Maza (Cressy) and Trisha Morton-Thomas (Mae).
- 24 Chillli Films with Angkerle-Irengé Aboriginal Corporation.
- 25 These packages of films are available on video from the Australian Film Institute.
- 26 It won 'Best Short Dramatic Film' at the 41st Asia-Pacific Film Festival (1996) and 'Best Short Australian Film' at the 1997 Australian Critics Circle Awards. It was also featured in numerous European film festivals.
- 27 It won the 'Golden Gate Award' in the Film & Video History category of the San Francisco International Film Festival and was nominated for an International Emmy in the documentary category.
- 28 O'Regan, quoted in Desmond Bell, *op. cit.* p. 202.
- 29 *ibid.* p. 202.
- 30 Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison & John Frow, *Accounting for Tastes; Australian Everyday Cultures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.215.
- 31 See Bryson, Burns & Langton, *op. cit.*
- 32 *ibid.* p. 305.
- 33 Carol Laseur, *op. cit.*



# WHEN GIRLS GROW UP TO BE CAMERAMEN

JANE CASTLE

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*It's late. The cast and crew have been working for sixteen hours and the producer's hovering around in the background with overtime rates running through her head like a virus. In front of the camera is a key scene: the lead actress is about to reveal her character's vulnerable side, a side until now well hidden. The camera operator knows she has to get it right. She checks the frame one last time before the clapper-board cracks shut and twenty-six eyes are drawn, along with the camera, towards the delicate spectacle that quivers beside the bed in the artificial moonlight. As the camera drifts steadily through the shadows a calm descends on the set. The focus is holding sharp, no microphones disturb the clean lines of the frame and the actress is pulling out emotions she never thought she had. The camera is halfway there when the operator feels something in her ear. It's wet and impossible. It's the grip's tongue. In her ear. Nauseated, she shoves him away with one leg, trying to save the crucial shot as the film marches oblivious through the gate. From the corner of the eye that's not still glued to the viewfinder she sees him beaming a message of victory to his boys. Everything is once more as it should be despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that this is a 'women's' film.*

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**I**n 1957 my mother, Lili Fraser, wanted to be a cinematographer. She had already made two films when she went to the head of the Commonwealth Film Unit to ask for a job. Despite applauding her for her exceptional cinematography she was told to go back to university; she wouldn't be strong enough to carry the cameras. While things have undoubtedly changed since

then, it is clear that there is still overwhelming gender inequality in the field of cinematography. In the latest *Encore* directory, out of 263 Directors of Photography, 16 are women.<sup>1</sup> In the Australian Cinematographers Society women make up only three of 267 fully accredited members.<sup>2</sup> The absence is so enduring that it has become almost ordinary. Just as a new crop of women make the painstaking leap from camera assistant or film school to cinematographer at least the same amount give up trying and the numbers stay low in a pattern of cyclical monotony. In the circumstances, one cannot help but ask what is it about a practice that goes to such lengths to maintain a 'liberal arts' image that engenders such a conspicuously acceptable exclusion?

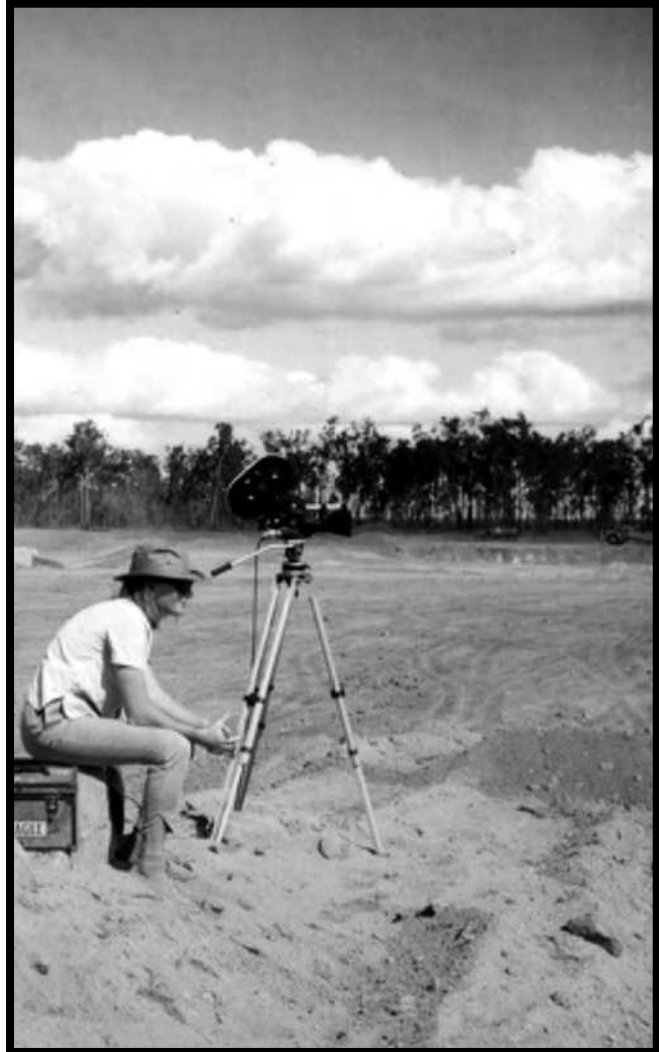
Holding the cool, metallic weight of a motion picture camera can be intoxicating. There's a feeling of having in your hands the means with which to express the way you see the world as the film set falls into line behind you, mutating in the wake of your gaze. But feelings can be misleading. It took me a long time to realise that the machine in my hands was really a phantom belonging to someone else, somewhere else. Far from the neutral tool of observation that it is often made out to be, the motion picture camera is an environment in which the exclusion of women is constantly elaborated. Embedded in its design are agendas unequivocally geared towards the satisfaction of stereotypical masculinist desires; the desire to know and the desire to control.

It is no surprise that the major advances in motion picture technology were made by men seeking to define the physical world. The desire to know through the act of definition has been central to Western, masculinist sciences, philosophies and histories since Plato. That this vision has been central to those endeavours makes the camera merely a logical extension of that trajectory. The problem with such a powerful system of knowledge production being in the hands of one group of people to the exclusion of others cannot be underestimated. These knowledges form the foundations of our values and our belief systems; they underscore every action we take as human beings in the world. While they appear to be universal and value free they represent, unequivocally, the interests of the white, straight, capitalist, male body. With the appearance of gender neutrality these fictions weave themselves into the social fabric and in the process women's experiences are distorted and dismissed. Meanwhile, those knowledges remain unavailable for contestation; they resist being called into account.

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*The short, black pop-star is transfixed by his own image as he stares into the monitor. Next to him is a Puerto Rican teenager dressed as an Egyptian princess. She is practicing her belly dancing moves. She's really thin because she's bulimic. The focus puller arches away from her as she draws the tape measure to her face so she doesn't have to smell her rancid vomit-breath. The music starts up. The camera operator and the camera assistant bend their knees so that the singer can look a bit taller than he really is. The not-so-short-any-more pop-star's face fills the screen as he sings, fixing the audience with that trademark sexy-bad-boy gaze. His manager, who is standing beside the camera, nods his head in approval. This song just might make him a rich man. Not far into the first chorus the singer makes his fingers into the shape of a gun which he points directly down the lens. The camera assistant adeptly pulls focus to them. It looks really good. The manager notices that the belly dancer's breasts are looking particularly good as they bounce around in that skimpy Egyptian bikini top. Enthused, he tells the cin-*

ematographer to tilt down to them but she pretends that she can't hear him above the blaring music. She keeps the camera tight on the singer's face. It doesn't matter, the breasts will be seen soon enough. Knowing the camera must follow him as he sings, the pop-star takes the audience on a tour of the belly dancing woman's body. He curves down past her taut stomach, hovers close to her crotch, then moves slowly up towards her breasts where he lingers with the camera throughout the rest of the chorus. Halfway through the last verse he once more makes his hand into a gun. This time he points it towards the head of the belly dancer, directing her downwards. With great skill she gyrates towards the floor until finally her mouth is just about in line with and facing his groin. She appears disinterested as he thrusts in time to the music; his gun still pointed at her head. As the song draws to a close the singer removes his gun from her head and she moves back up to his level. His gun turns back into a hand that reaches out to hold the belly dancer's hand. United, they turn away from the camera and disappear into the cloud of smoke that puffs in from the fog machine in the distance.



Cameras are not eyes. Nor are they extensions of them. There are subtle but significant differences between the two. While both eyes and cameras receive and distort visual messages, the control of the camera by only a few and its ability to project its images towards a potentially infinite audience makes it clear that cinematography is not about a kind of passive vision. That the camera is shaped and often used like another nomadic instrument of control, the gun, is no accident and the recent appearance on the market of the weapon that records an image of its victims while shooting them with real ammunition is testament to the complicity between the two.<sup>3</sup> Both technologies are about arresting the flow of events, about making a mark, about controlling subjects. Which may also explain why cin-

ematography is commonly described as 'shooting', rather than 'taking' or 'receiving'. When something is shot, its complex and delicate truths are obliterated as it is wrenched from its context by the frame that is placed around it. With cameras, cinematographers unmake real-world relatedness in order to push other agendas. As mobile, invisible knowledge creation machines they facilitate the ongoing division of the world according to traditional binaries; the world in front of the lens becomes natural, female, and passive; the world behind it, cultural, male, and active.

With its connotations of ejaculatory domination, shooting ultimately brings up questions about the relationship of cinematography to masculinist (hetero)sexuality. Both motion picture technology and sexuality are sites where the stereotypical versions of masculinist domination and control can be acted out through the denial of mutual consent and reciprocity. The synchronicity with which the birth of the camera coincided with the ascendancy of European colonisation is telling. Just as the desire for economic control motivated the expansion of European industries and culture geographically, so too the desire for control of representational reality was expressed through the production of cinematic space. That the two continue in relationships of such energetic symbiosis merely signifies their potency.

While in retrospect the development of the motion picture camera towards these ends seems natural, it is important to remember that this machine was developed towards the realisation of very particular objectives. Is it inconceivable that, instead of a unidirectional system of definition geared towards the empowerment of those behind the lens, the camera might have been designed to facilitate more mutual and reciprocating forms of communication? Certainly, as Sadie Plant has argued, the development of digital technology and cyberspace shows that technologies are not fundamentally linear, definitive or oppressive in nature.<sup>4</sup> Neither are they intrinsically masculinist. They usually, however, work to maintain and strengthen the status quo rather than challenge it and the motion picture camera is no exception.

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*The skinny, bright, young girl is the clapper-loader and she's doing really well, especially considering this is her first film. In fact she's been perfect until the moment when she thought she had a minute to catch up on her camera sheets and is a quarter of a second too slow. Suddenly, everyone's barking quick come on step on it mark it hurry up. The words hit her like a slap in the face. Someone sighs. Money-time is running out and the space of Supreme Importance, the space in front of the lens, is waiting. The clapper-loader snaps into her body like an elastic band and gallops towards the camera. On the way, her foot catches on the edge of a metal box that is six inches out of place and her body slams hard against the concrete. Everyone hears her elbow crunch. They all watch as a lens plops out of the box and rolls insidiously along the ground. As the girl collects her trembling limbs the production manager wonders how much the excess will be if the fragile glass inside the lens is shattered. The woman doing continuity goes over to help the girl but she doesn't need help thanks but no thanks I'm ok. She is sober and her eyes are filled with hate. These are the people she will despise until she is hard enough to be one of them. This is a women's film and this is how we train women so they can work on real films.*

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There is little room for human error on a film set. As I moved from camera assistant to director of photography I saw myself become part of a system that was happy to run roughshod over anyone or anything that got in the way. I found myself demanding that I turn myself and others into ruthless machines of speed and precision, not because I was a born dictator but because that is simply what the system demands of its component parts, human or otherwise. My initial presumption of a reasonable, humane working environment was simply one of the many notions that I had to give up in order to become part of the film-making machine.

Like any other investment enterprise, it is the economic bottom-line that strips the system of its tolerance, no matter what the budget. The huge costs involved make the time-money equation the premise from which decisions are made, and the container in which production is carried out. Out of apparent necessity, working relationships on a film set are modeled on the archetypal military unit and power is distributed pyramidally. As it is largely men who sit at the top of the corporations that finance, distribute and exhibit commercial release films, these systems become, quite literally, patriarchal. Filtering down through the ranks are the values of the men who themselves have learnt the hard way how to climb to the top of equally hierarchical corporate systems. Eventually these values find expression in the real, human relationships on a film set.

One of the unspoken rules that helps to keep these hierarchies in place is that the higher one gets, the more one must pledge allegiance to the (usually male) bodies and ideologies at the top. This means that a woman or a man moving up through the system, rather than being able to change that system, gets caught in the trap of having to support it, whether knowingly or not. It is for this reason that an agenda that pushes only for equal numbers, without taking into account the systemic changes needed to make that very goal attainable, is bound to fall short. Unless women (and men) are able and willing to 'become like men' in the most narrow sense of the term, that is, operate according to masculinist paradigms of domination, then they cannot help but be disbarred from sites of power on a film set, of which the camera is one.

The irony, of course, is that despite all this apparent rigidity, the official pecking order has a habit of becoming surprisingly flexible when subject to other, more powerful hierarchies. This dynamic becomes particularly apparent when women reach positions of power on a film set only to find that, somehow, 'the boys' are still in control.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, another hierarchy is in operation. Impinging on the artificial realignments of the film crew are the ubiquitous, unequal relations between women and men that are played out in so many other realms. What makes their effect so potent on a film shoot is that the core muscular and technical power, without which the production could not steam ahead, still resides squarely in the grip and gaffer departments that, in Australia, remain almost one hundred per cent male. For a film shoot to continue unhindered these departments must be kept happy with whatever it takes, from wrap beers to cajolery, the usual means by which those with contingent power get what they need from those whose power is more comprehensive.

Despite these conditions, the notion that film-making is a process of artistic collaboration remains very attractive and lends weight to the currently popular idea that media images are like a mutating virus controlled not by a monolithic, patriarchal power but through the myriad connections they make when they come into contact with the world.<sup>6</sup> The particular problem with seeing the media in this way, however, is that it minimises the way in which power expresses itself through representation and, in turn, how images are stripped of their political content when appropriated by media-makers. Most importantly, it ignores the link between media images and the financial interests that make possible their existence in the first place.

One might be forgiven for assuming that the film-making process nurtures a benign, interactive transmission of images and ideas; in their dual identities as both audience and maker, film workers labour at the very point of 'infection' with their hands-on input into the end product. It is on the set of a film, however, that hierarchical relations rule out the possibility of any truly viral process. The only sort of personal politics that can exist on a shoot are the interpersonal gestures incidental to the dominant lines of power that hold a film set together. Any other sort of collaboration is far too unpredictable and time-consuming and can only ever operate as an unequal exchange that flows ever upward as crew members offer 'up' creative or technical (but never political, ethical or process oriented) suggestions to their superiors, who may accept or reject them according to the ultimate goals of the film. If my input threatens to destabilise the system, the only direction in which I can move is downwards and out.

In such an environment there is little opportunity for one to take responsibility for the long term cultural and political effects of one's labour, if those effects can be seen at all. How, within this machine, does one reclaim the right to be a fully conscious, locatable human being with a sense of personal integrity? It is here that the issue of authorial absence arises once more. To enter the machine that labours so vigorously to remain behind the screen one must become anonymous behind the wallpaper credits that play to empty theatres in the wake of a film. The net result is a productive process that is loath to be held accountable for the material effects of its productions.

As with the motion picture camera, the production system appears both natural and inevitable, yet both technologies have embedded within them agendas geared towards the fulfillment of very particular goals. Like the camera, the productive process has evolved to prioritise historically masculinist desires over the needs and desires of women. It is not by chance that the film industry calls upon cinematographers to decide between choosing to be a mother and choosing a career in film. When a cinematographer commits herself to a film she is at the mercy of a machine which, despite the discipline it requires of its workers, is more often than not unwieldy, if not out of control when it comes to its own needs. Its inability to cope with or acknowledge a woman's capacity and/or desire to have children, the most 'unproductive' of progeny, is the ultimate disincentive. Unless she is lucky enough to find a partner who will take on a large part of her child's upbringing, a cinematographer who is also a mother will find her career severely compromised.

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They have filmed the model walking. Now they will film her running. Generic girl stuff that will be cut in with the boy stuff later. What will she wear? A few outfits are tried but nothing seems to work. She looks a bit silly, all dressed up in that run-down street. Hang on, let's have a look at her in a man's shirt, says the stylist. A big, white one, says the cinematographer. Everyone scrambles for a big, white shirt, which is finally wrenched off the back of the production assistant and given to the model. Now, says the cinematographer, let's see how she looks in just the shirt and her underpants. Bare-foot, adds the director. There is an almost pause before another scramble takes place. The record company man looks on doubtfully from where he's standing with the performer, who's smiling because he's getting the chance to look at a half-dressed, pretty girl. If he plays his cards right, maybe he can fuck her later. Oh god thinks the director, seeing the record company man looking doubtful, I hope we can make this scene work. She goes over to the refreshment table for a diet-coke. The caffeine helps her think. When she comes back a look has begun to emerge. Now, what if we have her running down the street, says the director. Knowing that running always looks good in slow-motion, the cinematographer says, in slow-motion! As if slow-motion running was something that hadn't been done a thousand times before, but anyway, she's really saying it for the benefit of the record company man who now just looks annoyed. The make-up woman looks sceptical and studies the surface of the side-walk. She spots a piece of broken glass, which she picks up and waves forebodingly in the air. She points out that the model might cut her feet if she's forced to run bare-foot down the street. The director groans and rolls her eyes. The cinematographer, not to be daunted in the making of great art, curtly asks the first assistant director to get someone to sweep the side-walk. Without having to be told, the props guy goes off to get his broom with tired professionalism. Maybe he should have stuck to painting after all, he thinks, as he sweeps the debris into the gutter. The camera assistant raises his seen-this-too-many-times-before eyebrows and perfunctorily flicks the speed control from 25fps to 50fps. He is slowly getting the shits, but reminds himself that speaking up is not worth his while. He looks at his watch. In two hours he will be going into overtime.

They are ready for a take. Most of the crew have made themselves comfortable in the back of the camera vehicle which drives alongside the woman as she runs down the street. The shot is looking good. The white shirt is flapping in the wind, sometimes revealing the model's smooth, flat stomach. But the director is not happy. She whispers something to the cinematographer, then yells at the woman to look over her shoulder every so often. In fear, shouts the cinematographer, not really knowing why. In panic, she corrects, feeling that panic would look even better than fear, but still not knowing why. At last the scene is working. It's working because it's a new version of an old story. She is beautiful and she is damned. And rape is in the air. As the camera rolls and the record company man smiles his approval, the cinematographer has the funny feeling that while she's seen this before, she's also just made something new. Or something. It's almost as if the images are moving through her without her knowledge. Who knows what else is down there? Or somewhere.

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There have been countless situations in which I have found myself contributing to stereotypical and distorted images of women; images that crept up on me while I wasn't paying attention, images that are everywhere and anywhere no matter where you work. Whether I wanted to or not, whether I knew I was doing it or not, it was almost impossible to resist the constant cycling of phallogocentric imagery whenever I worked in the mainstream.

Inevitably, the reality remains that cinematographers are both consumers and producers of cultural imagery; sure enough, the virus is alive and well but rather than mutating, it is stuck in a cycle of self-reproduction.

Had I refused to take part in the creation of these images there is no question that my career would have been limited and I never would have seen what it was really like at the 'top-end' of production. Just my luck those images have not let me sleep. As I rode the endless flow of choices between lenses, filters, lights, compositions and apertures, there was constant tension between the woman I was creating for the screen and the woman with her eye to the viewfinder; between the woman rearranged to fit acceptable narrative formulas and the woman at the mercy of very real social relations. The unspoken rules that determine how the world should be seen, particularly in the mainstream, belong to a set of formulas that are not hard to get the hang of, especially when one is constantly brought to task for ignoring them. One of those formulas dictates how all 'good' women should look: beautiful, weightless, their skins unblemished. How, in such a system, does one remain faithful to some barely articulated ideal of how a woman might be seen, one that declares difference while avoiding the minefield of female stereotypes? To what extent must one become male, white and straight in order to gain entry into the sanctified realm of the camera? Is this what it takes for girls to become cameramen?

The energetic relation that continues to drive these issues away from rather than toward resolution is, of course, the dynamic interdependence of phallocentrism and the flow of capital; the age old alliance that with the help of corporatised communication networks has only recently achieved new heights of global influence. In this context, it is interesting to note that until the early 1920s the motion picture camera was, to a limited extent, accessible to women and a range of politically diverse others.<sup>7</sup> In America, film-makers such as Dorothy Arzner, Alice Guy Blache and Lois Weber were for a short period amongst the most prolific film-makers in Hollywood.<sup>8</sup> Less than two decades on, however, the space around the camera had begun to contract. As the investment potential of the cinema was seen, the motion picture camera moved into the hands of businessmen with the capital to create and maintain oligarchies, and vertically integrated production, distribution and exhibition machines began to take hold. Gone was a decentralised, low cost industry with the flexibility to exhibit a range of ideological positions; in its place came a closed and conservative system geared towards the interests of capital accumulation.

It is no surprise that women have been increasingly excluded as the film and television industries have become more firmly intertwined with the capitalist dynamic; the economic realm is just one of many sites of power from which women's exclusion continues to be endemic. Even the energetic intervention that feminists made into the mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s has by and large been absorbed into the juggernaut. Subjected to claims that they had achieved their goals, programmes designed to support and train women so they could create their own, authentic cinema were terminated well before their time.<sup>9</sup> Feminism, appropriately distorted, is now merely sold back to us as just another fashion accessory.



The cost of assimilation has been great. At one end of the spectrum are the women excluded from access to funding because they are not content to acquiesce to a paradigm that remains overwhelmingly phallogentric. At the other are the film-makers who persevere in the mainstream on the condition that they refrain from challenging its orthodoxy. Too few are the handful of sophisticated and resourceful film-makers who have managed to negotiate the production and exhibition of an authentic cinema despite these constraints. To some extent, the barren terrain explains the plethora of awkward and ambiguous compromises that women directors, writers and producers continue to make as they attempt to squeeze a few truths into what are largely formulaic offerings towards the masculinist gaze.

For the handful of women cinematographers who, like myself, have been inspired enough by the medium to attempt a career in the mainstream industry, there is little to celebrate.

More than anything, the problem is one of perception. The trouble starts in the darkness when you are taken away and transformed by the truly revolutionary power of cinema in its purest form. When you emerge squinting into the sunlight it is almost impossible to comprehend that the wonderful dream you just had could be subject to such primitive constraints as free-market capitalism and a patriarchy so out of fashion that there are no acceptable words left with which to describe it. The problem becomes truly life-threatening when, so enlivened, you charge towards the film industry convinced that film-making is an environment for real expression and creativity of thought. Ultimately, it's not so much about the constraints of the industry but about not being able to see it for what it is.



JANE CASTLE ON THE SET OF JUST DESSERTS

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*Her legs are spread wide open. Underneath her are the words: 'Eat Bitch'. She's on the front of the best-boy's sleeveless t-shirt. The second assistant director feels the anger burn her insides as it flashes past her again and again. How dare he, she thinks, but the fear in her throat keeps sending the anger back down. Sometime during the morning's work the anger gets the better of the fear and she decides she's going to tell him to take it off. She couldn't live with herself if she didn't. He's over at the catering table getting a second helping of dessert when she goes to ask him, then tell him, to take it off. He smiles at her with calm disgust before informing her that no-one, especially not an uppity 2nd AD, is going to tell him what he can and cannot wear. As the lump in her throat threatens to choke her and the hotness rises behind her eyes she tries to explain how the shirt makes her feel, what it means to women, and finally, how she will go higher if he doesn't take it off. But her words fumble over each other in frustration and loss and he walks off while she is still talking. He goes to the back of the truck where the rest of the boys are hanging out. She can hear their laughter bouncing off the walls of the set as she pretends to catch up on her notes. She will not cry. Will not. After lunch the best-boy returns to set with the same shirt on, only now it has a small piece of gaffer tape over the woman's cunt. He has made his statement and it is about censorship. Censorship is bad, everyone knows that. And anyway, he will not be ordered around by some rabid dyke feminist. Bitch. The men don't talk to her for the rest of the shoot, which makes her job kind of difficult, almost impossible really. The women don't completely ignore her but walk around her, avoid eye contact and get really busy whenever she comes over. The latest joke on set is about her: 'I'd have to have a sex change to fuck her'. She feels like she's been cut in half, dissected. She feels like she has no mouth, for every word she utters is seen and not heard. She decides that she will never, ever do that again. The film set is not a place for personal politics. It's a place for making movies, sweetheart. In the coming years she will learn how not to see that sort of thing, how to get on with the job. Soon she will spend her evenings lining her nose with cocaine in the back of the truck with the boys after work. It won't be long before it's her own laughter that bounces around the set in search of foolish young women who think they can change the world. Eventually, she will find herself in a place with a little more control and a little more respect. When she gets there, she might still have to stop herself from saying what she thinks but by then she'll have forgotten what it was she thought until, eventually, she may not even think it any more.*

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The issue that these dynamics constantly point towards is silence. The fact that women work in the film industry is no guarantee that they are no longer being silenced—or silencing themselves in order to remain within that industry. In this context it may be of value to read women's under-representation in the critical areas of the film industry not simply as an imposed condition to which they are subject but as a communication, as a sign that many women are simply not prepared to make the political, ethical and life-style compromises necessary to advance towards what can only ever be superficial positions of creative, technical and occupational power. Their absence indicates that a uni-directional career path in the film industry is not the most important or desirable thing that many women want in life. It is no news that working in the film industry involves severe sacrifices when it comes to one's time, one's body and one's head space. While these losses are compensated to a certain degree by high wages they are not things that can be bought back with dollars at the end of the day. Nor are they in any way comparable in material terms to such amor-

phous and historically gendered practices centered around the act of 'caring' that continue to be undervalued in both monetary and cultural terms.

In the beginning I just wanted to be a cinematographer. Mesmerised, I wanted to make images that would challenge and transform. When I first felt that buzz of fear and excitement that comes from being at the heart of the seeing machine I had no idea that to remain within that center I would have to forget how to see the world through my own eyes and learn to see it, instead, through the eyes of another. Over the years, I became aware of my gender, of my difference and of my exclusion. Now, despite the limitations, I realise that the question is not whether women should work inside or outside the system, but how to register an authentic presence despite it.

## Notes

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Thanks also to Alison Bernasconi, Madge Szoeko, Lili Fraser and Diana Carr.

## Endnotes

- 1 Brenda McLean (ed.) *Encore Directory 2000*, Reed Publications, Sydney, 2000, pp.: 268 - 302.
- 2 The ACS website can be found at: [www.acs.asn.au](http://www.acs.asn.au)
- 3 Channel 10 News, 22.12.1999. Also making clear the connection between cameras and guns is the 'Passive Millimeter Wave Imager', a kind of 'x-ray gun' that allows police to see through clothing from as far as 30 feet away, ostensibly in the search for weapons and drugs. In 'X-Ray Gun Looms As Powerful Tool For Cops' in The American Civil Liberties Union Freedom Network, 18.8.1996. [www.aclu.org/news/w081896b.html](http://www.aclu.org/news/w081896b.html)
- 4 Sadie Plant, *Zeroes and Ones*, Fourth Estate, London, 1997, p. 38.
- 5 There are, of course, many non-sexist male crew members who work in the film industry, some of whom I have had the pleasure to work with. This, however, does not take away from the persistence and strength of the exclusions that permeate the film industry.
- 6 Catherine Lumby, *Bad Girls*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997, p. xxii - xxiv. Lumby's criticism of pro-censorship feminism is an important contribution to both feminist criticism and the censorship debates. Her unwillingness, however, to factor in the systemic damage caused by a male-owned, profit-driven representational machine is a lack. Her approach is symptomatic of universalising, 'postmodern' accounts of culture that render of little consequence the very real oppressions and exclusions that continue to operate in the world.
- 7 Steven, J. Ross, 'Beyond the Screen: History, Class and the Movies' in David E. James and Rick Berg, (eds.) *The Hidden Foundation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pp. 26-55.
- 8 Anthony Slide, *Early Women Directors*, A.S. Barnes and Co., New Jersey, 1977.
- 9 For a detailed analysis of programmes such as the Women's Film Fund and the Women's Film Unit, see Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed, and Freda Freiberg, (eds.) *Don't Shoot Darling!* Greenhouse, Richmond, Vic., 1987.

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# WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

## working mothers in the post-production industry

VIRGINIA MURRAY

**T**he purpose of this chapter is to examine some of the effects of motherhood for women working in the film industry. 'Devastating', is the most familiar description of the effect of what these days has become a normal expectation: to have a child and maintain a career. What happens to these women? How do they cope? What are their hopes and aspirations? This study seeks to examine the complex and changing relationship between work and life through the subjective experiences of three women with children and their efforts to maintain careers in the film industry.

The women were interviewed separately in their homes in November 1999. Though fairly unstructured, the interviews covered a similar range of questions. All the women were living with



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their partners, two of whom also worked in the film industry, and all had two children with ages ranging between 3 and 10.

Clare, Kristin and Jane work in post-production, mainly as picture editors but editing sound also. Post-production was chosen for several reasons. Editing is traditionally the most common entry point into the non-production side of the film industry for women,<sup>1</sup> and while it can be seen as a microcosm of the film industry, the introduction of non-linear editing systems over the last 10 years means it has been subject to considerable technological change. Change is a constant feature in many workplaces outside the film industry, so these women's responses are useful in contextualizing their life and work experiences with those of the wider community.

The Australian Film Commission's 1987 *Report on Women in Australian Film, Video and Television Production* asked their sample of 386 women why they had entered the film industry. Over 70 per cent of the respondents gave their primary motivations as the desire to do something creative and the need for an interesting job.<sup>2</sup> The women I spoke to fitted this pattern. They came into the film industry in order to be creative and wanted to do interesting, exciting work. All had postgraduate qualifications, two had fine art backgrounds and one, Kristin, had wanted to get into film for years. They gravitated towards the 'hands on' nature of editing.

The women entered the film industry in the early to mid 1980s. At that time, editing hadn't really changed much since the early days of motion pictures. It was very much a tactile craft. Film was handled and cut on Steenbecks and the apprenticeship system of watching an editor work was the way editing was learnt. Within two years all the women were cutting small shows, some of them their own material, and experiencing the creative satisfaction they had been looking for. All voiced similar sentiments to Kristin who said, 'After assisting, it [editing] was just fabulous. It was just wonderful, a bit of a responsibility ... '. Having found this satisfaction was possible, they identified with their occupations to the point where it was obvious that their sense of self-esteem was tightly bound up with their achievements as editors.

There are only a small number of occupations and professions capable of generating a huge personal commitment and more than a few of these are in the film industry. The freelance, project-based nature of the industry, where employment is based on reputation and ability to get the job done, lends itself to extremely long hours. Fifty to sixty hours per week is standard on film shoots, but in post-production where time (and money) is running out, 100 hour weeks or higher are common. In the very masculine culture of sound post-production<sup>3</sup> the ability to cope with these hours is a source of pride, similar to the industrial shop floor (and many film shoots), where the ability to work in difficult, dangerous conditions is 'the material for a crude pride, for the mythology of masculine reputation—to be strong and be *known* for it'.<sup>4</sup> There are frequent boasts of the number of hours worked at a stretch. In Melbourne during the 1980s one sound post-production house used to proudly claim, 'We never close', and indeed they didn't until everyone's marriages started

falling apart. In order to succeed in this competitive culture, one not only accepts the conditions but if possible works even harder than one's fellow workers. The easiest quantifier of commitment is the number of hours worked, which of course becomes part of the self-perpetuating cycle. In this situation it's easy for one's social life to revolve around work. Jane found it hard to maintain a life outside.

*The hours were long and there really wasn't any time to have a break ... I rarely took a lunch break and I also had a life outside of work and it was sort of expected in some ways you didn't ... the male assistant would get there at eight in the morning and stay till whenever, because he really didn't have a lot going on in his life, but I had a relationship and I wanted to go home ... If there was something to be done [you'd be expected to stay back] and then even if there wasn't, it was often like, have a drink in the office, which sometimes I enjoyed but I just didn't want to do that on a regular basis.*

Long hours aside, Jane enjoyed the freelance lifestyle. 'You can work for blocks of time and very hard work and then you have time with no income and you sort of make up for it and you travel ... which is great before children'.

Kristin, Jane and Clare all had their first child in their early to mid 30s, in keeping with the trend for career-minded women to start their families later. By then they had all been working in post-production for six to nine years and were beginning to reap the career benefits of long-term professionals. As Clare says, 'I was seeing it as a career. The jobs were getting bigger and I was trying to advance myself ... and I had become interested in being a director ... I thought I could be an editor as well'.

While their pregnancies weren't planned, they had all expected they would have children at some point, and it was here they diverged sharply from the normal pattern for women working in the film industry. The three Australian Film Commission surveys on women in the film industry (1983, 1987, 1992) show 76–83 per cent of women working in the film industry do not have responsibility for children.<sup>5</sup> In a culture with such a high level of female childlessness it is not surprising that children are not publicly acknowledged and their existence more or less denied. Jane felt it strongly.

*I was very self-conscious about the baby. Very. And I was also very self-conscious about being pregnant. 'Cause I worked through both of my pregnancies and I would never make an issue of the fact that I was pregnant, because I just felt that being in that industry, it is fairly male dominant, you have high expectations about performing and for me to be walking around feeling tired or being pregnant just didn't seem appropriate ... I'd still carry all the film up the stairs to the point where I got very pregnant and it was silly. It was difficult ... I just felt it was better to keep those things to yourself really. Why make an issue of it?*

The women interviewed became parents with the idea that it would affect their working lives to some degree, but as Kristin said, 'You get absolutely shocked at how full on it is, how your life completely changes'. Clare was on a career roll—she had edited a feature

and just made a prize winning short film—but there were no visible role models on how freelance editing and motherhood could be combined. Now, suddenly she felt completely dislocated.

*I didn't have any idea how I'd ever manage again. I thought I don't know how to do it ... because I couldn't justify the hours ... I just was really confused ... I couldn't go and look for a feature film editing job now because I couldn't commit to six months, 12 months of a 100 plus hours a week with a baby.*

Moreover, Clare was completely unprepared for how others in the film industry now saw her. She had stopped working, but to her mind she was still an editor and film-maker 'on hold'. The presumption that she was no longer a participant in the industry because she had a baby hit hard.

*They would just talk to me about the baby and they would ask me if I was pregnant again and I'd say no, are you? ... but it's really crushing ... and they've got their dicks out talking about their own ideas and you're not allowed to get your dick out ... (they think) that you can't have a child and still have a brain ... these people thought ... I was an airhead ... I was just a breeding machine now ... you just want to shoot them basically.*

**VM** - *Were they interested in your future projects?*

*No, not at all, not at all, not at all. I was now somebody to tell.*

**Kristin felt she couldn't compete as an editor any longer.**

*I think it really affected my confidence as far as getting film work, I just thought I'm never going to get [work] ... Somehow you've got to drive through all of that traffic to get to the creche ... you've got to do all that ... get there by five-thirty, six o'clock at the very latest, and I just thought, no one's going to give me an editing job where I leave at four-thirty.*

Kristin and Clare both have husbands in the film industry working the same long hours they had done before they had children. The long hours meant that one parent was going to have to stay with the children and by now both husbands were doing better financially than their wives. 'And it seems likely that as long as men continue to earn more than women, pragmatic considerations will continue to keep the man at his job and the women with the young children'.<sup>6</sup> While both Clare and Kristin continue to work whenever they can, Clare describes the current situation.

*There's that thing that my work ... [my husband] says it's not true ... but my work is more sporadic and I'm not the major breadwinner, so it is true that it's on a lower level of value, so I have to down tools to fit in with the children's needs ... that's the thing that's hard, that you've got to do everything.*



This pattern is very common across all occupations with working parents, and the cycle is self-perpetuating. While the women have primary responsibility for the children it is unlikely they will ever earn more than their husbands, so they will continue to be the ones whose work takes lower priority.

Jane, Clare and Kristin have spent the majority of their working lives in the film industry as freelancers. This accords with the 1992 AFC survey showing freelancers as the biggest employment classification.<sup>7</sup> The nature of freelance employment means there is always pressure to accept a job whenever it is offered. Personal circumstances must be worked around the job and not discussed publicly. Of course this affects men as well as women, but as women have primary responsibility for family matters, they bear the brunt of this attitude. Any intrusion from outside life into the 'real' world of film labels that person as unable to cope and a probable liability for future employment. Jane's narrative below shows the stress inherent in trying to maintain this ideal.

*I did take a job two months after my first baby was born. I had an editing machine at home and that would seem like a good situation, but with a young baby I still was trying to put in an 8 or 10 hour day on that machine. It was quite difficult. I was working with women but these were women without children ... even though there was a tolerance, there wasn't a lot of room to move around the child and I was quite strictly trying to work my hours around those women ... and (to) have someone trying to be in the house with the baby because there was no way I could work with the baby anywhere near me and feed and express at lunch time ... When you had clients or had people you were working with and the baby was crying, there was no way you felt comfortable to go to that baby. I had a meeting with Film Victoria once, and there were all the heads who were coming to look at the film, and that particular day my mother was away, and my husband was somewhere else, and I was at the point where I was running around to the neighbours trying to find somebody to hold the baby while I had this meeting.*

**Clare now finds that with children the once enjoyable on/off pattern of freelance work is a major drawback.**

*You might work blocks and manage, but the time down is not really a holiday, it's more worrying where the next job is going to be and I don't see that as a very satisfactory sort of existence. I can't plan anything around my kids on a regular basis because one week I'm working and the next week I'm not.*

**Kristin comments on how even a short job is a major upheaval. 'If you had a permanent job, instead of being a freelancer, you could employ someone two days a week to bring them [the children] home, so that at least they are coming home straight after school, but when you're doing a month here and there ... '.**

The quest for regular hours means the women have had to rethink their careers. Jane is editing corporate documentaries so that she doesn't have to travel to location but she finds them unsatisfying. 'I'm looking at other alternatives at the moment, like producing, like

maybe teaching ... just looking at other ways of having more stability and regular hours in my life. Regularity is the key thing'. Both Kristin and Clare see writing as a possibility. Kristin is doing a script course and Clare is writing projects to develop as a director with her husband, a producer. Having children has forced her to develop new skills.

*I think [since the kids] I'm better than ever because it's just about negotiation isn't it, and raising children teaches you all manner of getting out of tricky situations in terms of negotiation. You have to get them through all these tantrums, and you think actors are easy compared to this, and in a lot of ways they are.*

Over the last 10 years the post-production industry has gone through a technological revolution. For Kristin, Jane and Clare the timing was unfortunate. Jane's first child was still a baby and she was overseas with her husband around the time that non-linear editing systems started to take over. 'I really missed the boat being two years away from all that. And once you've had a child you sort of do get into that mode of ... [it's] not as though you're incompetent ... your energies are so much elsewhere, that it was challenging to get back in'. Kristin, now starting to go for jobs as an editor after a break of eight years, sees the new technologies as a barrier.

*It immediately makes me feel less confident. I'm competing with people who have been working in the last few years at least and so they've been dealing with the technology that's around at the moment ... like DVC cameras for example. I can't really on-line as an editor on an Avid. I don't know how to use Media 100s yet ... it does actually colour the way you approach them (potential employers).*

The rapid turnover of new technology and the constant unfamiliarity with new systems adds another layer of stress and insecurity to freelance work. Jane is always having to learn on the job.

*Every day I go to work and there's always something new that I have to know that I don't know ... like Photoshop that I don't know and I need to know for work, I need to know all this extra scanning stuff ... there is always that thing of 'Will I perform? Will I be able to do this?'*

The presence of children means the women have a different set of priorities. Time is a precious commodity belonging to the children whenever possible. The women are aware this cuts sharply against the dominant mode of thinking in the film industry, which assumes that one's work is one's life. The attitude towards new technology is a good example of the way the freelance industry functions. It is generally accepted that workers learn new systems in their own time just as most job networking is done having a drink after work hours. Everyone understands a freelance industry is predicated on competitive advantage. If someone chooses not to do this, that is their choice, so the thinking goes. But for these women such strategies are out of the question. Most women working with dependent children are in a no-win position, squeezed from both sides. There is no choice about looking after their children; they must do it. Child care centres close at six pm sharp and there are fines and

heavy penalties for late parents,<sup>8</sup> not to mention the guilt of facing a distraught child. At the same time there is the constant anxiety of not being able to put in the perceived necessary hours at work, in addition to the stress of trying to meet performance expectations while flying blind on new equipment. Understandably a sense of being unable to perform at the expected level, whether real or imaginary, leads to feelings of inadequacy and a consequent loss of self-esteem. Clare, Jane and Kristin's narratives all reveal a common theme—severe loss of self-confidence in their work since the birth of their children. And in the film industry, confidence is everything.

It is no surprise then that their attitude towards the film industry has changed. Kristin feels more ambivalent towards it.

*Since having children I've sort of regretted entering the film industry because it's so incompatible with having children, but since going back and working in film again I've started to develop a bit more of that ambition that I had before. I think when you're out of it for a while you sort of lose it, but I don't feel as obsessed with it as a lot of people are.*

The Australian Film Commission's 1983 survey of women in the film industry contained an interesting section on women who saw themselves as no longer working in film. This group was 28 per cent of the total sample, and 20 per cent of them gave 'responsibility for children' as their reason for leaving. 36 per cent of them had children in care—a much higher percentage than among the women currently working in film (22 per cent). Most of these women were employed at the time of the survey in related areas such as media teaching, and 84 per cent of them wanted to return to film in the future.<sup>9</sup>

Although Kristin, Jane and Clare fit this profile—they have all spent time unable to pursue their careers in editing because of responsibility for children—none of them think of themselves as having left the industry. Even Kristin, who had the longest gap between editing jobs (nine years) during which time she obtained a Dip. Ed. and taught, sees her absence as only temporary. Perhaps it is because new careers are difficult to establish and editing doesn't automatically open a lot of doors. Or perhaps it's because of the time already invested. As Clare said, 'I came to the conclusion around the time of having children that editing was really my trade ... and I'd actually put a lot of time into it'. Or even, despite the difficulties, there's still satisfaction to be gained. As Kristin put it, 'It'd be great to get to a position where I felt, even if other people didn't recognise it, at least if I thought I was a really good editor that would make me feel like I'd developed that skill'.

The 1987 and 1992 surveys didn't follow up on women who had left the industry, presumably because they were more concerned with women's experience in the industry rather than outside it. But the seeming ease with which the absence, even temporary, of these often highly skilled women from the film industry is accepted by the 1987 and 1992 surveys is disturbing. The 1992 survey commented that the low percentage of women in the industry with responsibility for children (24 per cent) suggested 'that there are real problems

for women in the industry combining family and domestic responsibilities with paid work. Careers seem to be an alternative for women to coupled and parental relationships'.<sup>10</sup>

As long as the decision (or not) to have children and the subsequent career consequences continue to be seen as a woman's individual choice rather than an equity issue, nothing much will change. The 1987 and 1992 surveys place a lot of emphasis on discrimination, training and experience, but important as these issues are, it seems counterproductive to concentrate on developing highly trained professionals only to deny them the right to work (or allow them to operate only in a severely restricted capacity) if they choose to have a family. Here the difference between men's and women's experiences could not be starker. Men very rarely have to make this choice. It is a right they take for granted. At the time of writing, film industry participation rates for males and females with dependent children were unavailable, but the 1992 survey noted that 70 per cent of women with dependent children said they were 'limited by family responsibilities' compared to 24 per cent of the men.<sup>11</sup> As Clare said, 'Someone said last night on the AFI awards that the film industry had been very kind and he'd felt nurtured ... I don't feel that at all'.

The future for women working in the film industry, and particularly women with families, doesn't look encouraging. The 1992 survey revealed the female sample was ageing: 47 per cent<sup>12</sup> of women had been in the industry more than eight years, compared with 25 per cent<sup>13</sup> in 1983. The 1983 survey found that of the women who left the industry (28 per cent), only one-third of them had been in the industry more than four years but of those women over half gave responsibility for children as the reason for stopping.<sup>14</sup> If the ageing trend continues we might expect to see a higher percentage of experienced women leaving because of responsibility for children. But the drop in the number of women entering the industry is even more alarming. In 1983, 36.3 per cent of women had been in the industry 0–2 years<sup>15</sup> compared to only 5 per cent in 1992.<sup>16</sup> At present the total percentage of women in the industry has dipped only slightly (38 per cent in 1996 compared to 42 per cent in 1986<sup>17</sup>) because most of these older women are still working. For women remaining in the industry with dependent children the implications are not good. Fewer women generally and fewer women with children specifically means that family needs are less visible and less likely to be taken into account than they already are.

The recommendations of the 1987 and 1992 reports did suggest that the availability of and access to child care be improved.<sup>18</sup> In 1994, the Australian Film Commission undertook a child care feasibility study to examine the impact of childcare responsibilities on women working in the film and television industries. This chapter echoes many of the findings of that report. The study's focus group participants were in general agreement that raised consciousness regarding work and family issues was fundamental if there was to be any real change.<sup>19</sup> The study suggested that the most effective action the AFC could take was to establish a pool of approved carers willing to work odd hours; it was also suggested that the AFC make the issues of work and family much more visible and provide information about different child care models that might be relevant.

One of the women I interviewed for this paper was part of the focus group interviewed for that study. Clare noted that since the study there has been some change but not much. She was unable to access the carers because she lived too far away, but there is now provision for child care in Australian Film Commission budgets. In 1998 she worked on a small Australian Film Commission funded project which asked for and received child care monies as part of the budget. Since then however there has been a significant downturn in Australian film and television production, with 40 per cent of Australian features made in 1999 relying on self-funding and cast and crew deferrals to shoot.<sup>20</sup> Budgets are now so tight Clare doubted that the people at her producer husband's work would even consider allowing for child care. At the other end of the spectrum, Sue Marriott from the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) said that there is a push on for longer hours, with 12-hour shooting days instead of 10, and location work on Sundays becoming standardised for Fox and Village Roadshow off-shore productions.<sup>21</sup> Longer days on set flow through to longer post-production days, as post-production crews don't have the industrial muscle of those on set.

In the future it seems there will be less research done on the position of women in the film industry. Government funding is shrinking and there is a general perception that women have achieved equity and it's the turn of other disadvantaged groups now. The Women's Program at the Australian Film Commission has been wound up and its activities are being integrated into the mainstream body. It was the Women's Program (from 1989) and its predecessor, the Women's Film Fund (1976-1988/89) that commissioned the three surveys discussed. The AFC 'intends to maintain its commitment to the area of women's participation in the film and television industry'<sup>22</sup> though there will be no more large surveys.<sup>23</sup> The only AFC statistics on gender differences to be maintained will be those showing grant applications and the overall employment breakdown in *Get the Picture*.

Obviously, it is important for the future of women in the industry that their working lives continue to be researched, the changing relationship between work and life scrutinised and their needs recognised. Recent work on social justice issues increasingly prefers narrative over argument to give minorities equal voice.<sup>24</sup> The narratives of Clare, Kristin and Jane are important not only in validating their experience, but in validating the *differences* in our experience. In this way they make a vital contribution to the 'collective social wisdom'<sup>25</sup> that enables equity issues to be addressed and attitudes challenged.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Endnotes

- 1 Chris Pip and Marion Marsh, *Report on Women in Australian Film, Video & Television Production*, Australian Film Commission 1987, p. 32.
- 2 *ibid.* p. 45.
- 3 *ibid.* p. 9. 1985-6 feature film production, 92.3% of sound editors were male, 7.7% female
- 4 Paul E. Willis, 'Human Experience and Material Production: The Culture of the Shop Floor.' *The Experience of Work*, Richard Johnson et al., *Working-Papers-In-Cultural Studies*, vol.9, Spring 1976, p. 155.
- 5 Penny Ryan, Margaret Eliot & Gil Appleton, *Women in Australian Film Production*, Women's Film Fund of the Australian Film Commission, the Research and Survey Unit, Australian Film and Television School, November 1983, p.17. See also, Eva Cox & Sharon Laura, 'What Do I Wear For a Hurricane?' *Women in Australian Film, Television, Video and Radio Industries*, Australian Film Commission/National Working Party, 1992, p.16.
- 6 Belinda Robert with Fiona McDonald, *The Work Generation: Work and Identity in the Nineties*, Brotherhood of St Lawrence Future of Work Project, Brotherhood of St Lawrence, Melbourne 1996, p. 23.
- 7 Cox & Laura, *op.cit.* p. 67.
- 8 The following is taken from the handbook of the long day care centre that the author's child attends: 'Where children are not collected by the time the Centre closes at 6.00pm, a charge of \$2.00 per minute may apply. Families frequently late in collecting children risk forfeiting the child's place at the Centre. In situations where children participating in the Long Day Care Service are not collected by 6.00pm the following procedures will apply:
  - 6.00pm: Staff will attempt to contact parents on home or work numbers. Following this, persons authorised as emergency contacts will be rung and, if available, will be requested to collect the child.
  - 6.30pm: If no contact has been made with parents or emergency contacts the staff will contact the Coburg Police and explain the situation and request their assistance. A staff member will stay with the child.
  - A note will be left on the front door of the Centre explaining the action taken, if it has been deemed necessary to take the child elsewhere.
  - You will be required to discuss the situation with the Co-Ordinator the following day. Shirley Robertson Children's Centre Incorporated, *Policy and Information Handbook*, January 1997.
- 9 Ryan, *op.cit.* p. 23.
- 10 Cox & Laura, *op.cit.* p. 79.
- 11 *ibid.* p. 16. The sample consisted of 594 females and 65 men so does not claim to be fully representative. p. 52.
- 12 *ibid.* p. 73.
- 13 Ryan, *op.cit.* p. 40.
- 14 *ibid.* pp. 21-2.
- 15 *ibid.* p. 40.
- 16 Cox & Laura, *op.cit.*, p. 73. The percentage of men who had been in the industry was 5 per cent also but the sample for men is not representative, see above.
- 17 Australian Film Commission, *Get the Picture*, 5th edn, 1998, p.27.
- 18 Cox & Laura, *op.cit.* pp. 28 & 100.
- 19 Australian Film Commission, *Australian Film and Television Industry: Childcare Feasibility Study, Final Report* June 1995, unpublished, p. 20.
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- 22 Letter to the author from Kim Dalton, CEO Australian Film Commission, October, 1999.
- 23 Leonie Morgan, *SharedVisions, Women in Television*, ed. Annette Blonski, Australian Film Commission, 1999, p. 11.
- 24 Iris Marion Young, 'Communication and the Other', in *Justice and Identity. Antipodean Practices*, ed. Margaret Wilson and Anna Yeatman, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995, pp. 150-2.
- 25 *ibid.* p.152.

# AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

## Getting Women Behind the Television Camera

JULIE JAMES BAILEY

### THE EARLY DAYS

**T**elevision commenced in Australia in 1956. It took another 20 years before the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) agreed to start women in production without typing speeds. Even in the early 1970s women in film and television could only do stereotypical jobs such as secretary, wardrobe and makeup. In 1970 Gillian Armstrong graduated from Swinburne Art School and, like the boys, wrote to the ABC asking for work in the Drama Department. The ABC interviewed some of the boys and wrote back to Gillian asking for her typing speeds. Jan Kenny was not allowed to work in the camera department of the Commonwealth Film Unit (now Film Australia) and it wasn't until 1979 that Mandy Smith became the first woman trainee director at Crawfords, then the largest television drama production house in the country (employing over 300 people and producing for all three commercial television stations).

Today it is difficult to appreciate the lack of sensitivity to gender issues. Twenty-five years ago there were no employment statistics let alone information on gender. The ABC did not report the number of staff it employed in its annual report until 1978 and there was no gender break down until 1984. The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) provided staffing figures when it commenced broadcasting television in 1980 but there was no gender breakdown until 1991. The commercial television stations had to supply staff figures in the three

yearly licence renewal applications to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) between 1977 and 1992 but a gender breakdown of those figures depended on outside organisations being able to prove they were relevant to the renewal of the licence. In 1986 the ABT did compile some figures from Melbourne and Brisbane (HSV7, GTV9, TVQ0, BTQ7).<sup>1</sup> Since 1994, commercial television companies who employ more than 100 people have had to submit a report and provide gender statistics to the Affirmative Action Agency, now called the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency.

To get any picture of the employment of women in television before 1994 one has to rely on the surveys conducted, in the first instance, by the Australian Film and Television School and then by the Australian Film Commission.<sup>2</sup> Women working in the freelance film industry, as opposed to full time television, mainly completed these surveys. However, there is an overlap, because increasingly production houses employed freelance women to make films shown on television.

## **WOMEN IN FILM**

The happy coincidence of International Women's Year, 1975, and the government initiatives to support a film industry has made the Australian film industry the envy of many women round the world.

In the late 1970s the newly established federal government organisations, the AFTS (Australian Film and TV School), the AFC (Australian Film Commission), the Film TV and Radio Board of the Australia Council, and the existing government employers, the ABC and the Commonwealth Film Unit all started to introduce affirmative action initiatives to get more women into the industry.

Part of the new school's commitment to International Women's Year was to organise a seminar for women in the media. They also published the speeches from it,<sup>3</sup> a background paper profiling successful women<sup>4</sup> and they conducted a survey of women in film and television<sup>5</sup> as part of a six-country survey for UNESCO organised by CILECT, the international organisation of film schools. Much of the report relied on anecdotal evidence from the 150 individuals and 100 employers who responded to the survey. It noted that of the 482 film projects funded by the Australia Council from 1973 to 1976, 73 (15 per cent) were women's film projects; of the 30 completed feature films which the AFC and the Australian Film Development Corporation (the predecessor of the AFC) had invested in since 1971, only two had screenplays written by women, two had women producers, none had been edited by a woman and it was 46 years since a woman had directed a full length feature film. (It was to be another three years before Gillian Armstrong directed *My Brilliant Career*).

In the following 25 years Australia has carved out an international reputation for its successful women feature film producers and directors. *Premiere Magazine* produced a special edition *Women in Hollywood 2000* in which it stated that Australian women had found a way to make personal films that reach wider audiences whereas American women were still



struggling against 'event' movies and 'gross out' comedies to make female oriented stories and they were not on the director's lists in Hollywood.<sup>6</sup> Gillian Armstrong, Jane Campion and Jocelyn Moorhouse have all worked in Hollywood making films about women. Armstrong and Campion have also won Academy Awards nominations with their films and many other nominations. Campion's *The Piano* won her an Oscar for best script and it got a total of nine nominations including best director in 1993. Armstrong's *Little Women* was nominated for three awards in 1994.

Gillian Armstrong says that Australian directors are not just good, competent directors but they put their own personal stamp on films which is what makes them outstanding in the international market. She believes that it is due to the film schools, 'I wouldn't have been strong enough or had the confidence if I had started at the bottom in that male-dominated industry'.<sup>7</sup>

The Australian Film and Television School offered opportunities to women which had not been available before—to direct, use cameras, sound and editing equipment. The School ran courses specifically for women and later subsidised an on-the-job training scheme. They still continue to support women through their Women's Training Development Fund in areas where women are disadvantaged. But it has always been biased towards film in spite of several attempts to develop a multi-camera television course.

In the 1970s the Film and TV Board of the Australia Council supported video and later radio but when the Board was amalgamated into the AFC, support for community video and radio ceased.<sup>8</sup>

Slowly more women are getting opportunities in the craft areas, but there are still not many women heads of camera and sound departments on feature films.

One of the key issues for women working in films today is childcare. Some women have delayed having children and others are dropping out of the industry because of the lack of childcare facilities. This is a serious loss of experience and role models.

The AFC commissioned a report on childcare in 1995 that highlighted the problems women have in juggling work and family. The AFC decided that the most effective action it could take was to work in partnership with the major industry players to provide information and raise the need of childcare support. This has led to the involvement of the AFC in television.<sup>9</sup>

What happened to women in television?

Although Australia is the envy of most women feature film directors and producers around the world, the same is not true for television. Debra Hill, Hollywood producer (*The Fisher King*, *Crazy in Alabama*) asked the question at a Women in Television Breakfast (Sydney,

November 1997), 'Why is it that Australia has some great women producers and directors but doesn't have as many women in high positions in the television industry?'

In Hollywood and in New York the television industry is really a good place for women.' Debra elaborated. 'One of the reasons network television in the States is a power base for women is that most of the programming, predominantly daytime, is directed towards women, and also because of the buying power of the women.'<sup>10</sup>

One of the answers is that our industry is structured differently. We do not have the large production houses making daytime television programs where a number of women in the States are the power brokers. Janeen Faithful, Head of Network Production at Seven, and the first woman to hold such a position, agrees that television is still a very male-dominated business in Australia compared to the States.<sup>11</sup> She was Vice president, Business Affairs at Columbia Tri-Star and of the six vice presidents, four were women.

Women have been slow to get the senior management positions in television, and when they do they don't seem to stay. They are also very rare in engineering.

The AFC research on childcare found that many women working in television felt that their situation had not improved since the 1960s. As a result the AFC decided to research women's career advancement from mid-career to upper levels in the television industry in cooperation with the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) and the Screen Producers' Association of Australia (SPAA). This resulted in the Women's Television Industry Reference Group, which included the ABC and SBS, and supported skills development workshops and provided opportunities for women to network through industry breakfasts and small informal lunches with guest speakers.

Part of the problem is that many of the full-time permanent jobs in television are technically based and the traditional career path has been through staging, which involves heaving scenery around. The operations area is a male 'blokey' culture and jobs and promotion have traditionally been through mates giving each other opportunities to fill in on holidays and get experience. There is also not the same turnover of staff as there is with production jobs that are based on a specific program. While there are often women producers and assistants, the senior jobs in the station and the heads of departments all tend to be men who have often worked their way up and been there a long time. However, women say that it is much better than it was although most agree that they move up by 'zigzagging between different organisations and different jobs'.<sup>12</sup>

## **THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION**

In 1975 the ABC employed 7,269 people of whom 2,268 (31 per cent) were women. Of the 5,001 men 1,250 (25 per cent) were employed in the technical area but only 23 (1 per cent) of the women, and they were secretaries. 1,450 (29 per cent) of the men were employed in the professional creative categories and only 318 (14 per cent) of the women.

There were only two women Heads of Departments (Education and Research). Until 1966 women had to leave permanent employment in the ABC when they got married. (This was a public service policy).<sup>13</sup>

**WOMEN IN THE ABC 1990 - 1999<sup>14</sup>**

|            | 1990 | 1990 | 1993 | 1993 | 1994 | 1994 |  | 1997 | 1997 |  | 1998 | 1998 |  | 1999 | 1999 |
|------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|--|------|------|--|------|------|--|------|------|
|            | W    | %    | W    | %    | W    | %    |  | W    | %    |  | N    | %    |  | N    | %    |
| TOTAL      | 878  | 32   | 836  | 35   | 2089 | 41   |  | 1875 | 43   |  | 1726 | 43   |  | 1775 | 44   |
| SEN EXEC   | 13   | 15   | 15   | 17   | 88   | 30   |  | 74   | 28   |  | 78   | 31   |  | 85   | 35   |
| ADMIN OFF  | 382  | 73   | 288  | 65   | 807  | 60   |  | 732  | 63   |  | 636  | 63   |  | 643  | 65   |
| ENG/TECH   | 4    | 2    | 4    | 2    | 12   | 4    |  | 11   | 4    |  | 14   | 6    |  | 16   | 6    |
| PROD. OPS  | 115  | 13   | 80   | 13   | 88   | 14   |  | 83   | 145  |  | 79   | 14   |  | 82   | 15   |
| PROD SERV  | 75   | 29   | 53   | 22   | 78   | 33   |  | 59   | 34   |  | 48   | 34   |  | 40   | 32   |
| JOURN/REPI | 73   | 36   | 143  | 45   | 339  | 45   |  | 346  | 48   |  | 346  | 48   |  | 370  | 50   |
| PROD/DIR   | 47   | 26   | 56   | 35   | 64   | 37   |  | 59   | 37   |  | 52   | 39   |  | 56   | 39   |
| PROD SUPP2 | 140  | 62   | 193  | 75   | 221  | 76   |  | 183  | 78   |  | 157  | 78   |  | 155  | 80   |
| TRANSMISS  | 2    | 10   | 4    | 19   | 4    | 18   |  | 6    | 25   |  | 4    | 20   |  | 9    | 39   |
| OTHER 3    | 27   |      |      |      |      |      |  |      |      |  |      |      |  |      |      |

# From 1994 television figures were not separated.

- 1 Journalists/Reporters include overseas correspondents and cadet journalists
- 2 Production support includes FMS, PAs, Script Editors, Program Researchers
- 3 Other includes trainees, overseas administration and ops staff, operation staff, publicity and general staff (property printing etc).

Today women are being appointed to senior positions. The Heads of Children's and Educational programs have from time to time been women and in the 1980s Sandra Levy rose through the ranks of the Education and Drama Departments to become Head of Drama and is now Director Television. Penny Chapman, who came from the film industry, succeeded her as Head of Drama and then became the first woman Head of Television. Today there are seven senior women; they are Director Corporate Affairs, Director Content Rights Management, Director Radio, Director New Media, Director Television, Head Legal and Copyright and Acting Director Development.

The ABC provides the most comprehensive information about its women employees. It has been producing annual Equal Employment Opportunity Reports since the introduction of the Equal Employment Opportunity (Commonwealth Authorities) Act in 1987. It has had an equal employment opportunity (EEO) vision statement since 1990 which stated 'the staffing mix in all areas and at all levels will accurately reflect the cultural diversity and composition of the Australian society'. This means that the three-year plans developed since 1990 not only cover women but also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people of non-English speaking backgrounds and people with disabilities.

The ABC has, ever since it got the wake-up call from its female staff in International Women's Year, tried to increase its female profile.

In 1976 the Australian Women's Broadcasting Cooperative (AWBC) was established and a task force set up to inquire into the role and status of women in the ABC. It reported in 1977 with a list of recommendations and a coordinator was established to oversee and implement some of the recommendations.

In 1980 the ABC appointed an EEO officer and in 1984 the Sex Discrimination Act was passed giving effect to Australian obligations under the international convention on the 'Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women'.

The first EEO three-year plan to 1993<sup>15</sup> introduced ten-year targets of 50 per cent women in the ABC workforce, 50 per cent representation of women in management (this was later revised to 35 per cent<sup>16</sup>), 20 per cent in broadcast engineering and sub-professional positions.

These targets provided incentives for affirmative action and as a result courses for women in management have been offered annually since 1988. When David Hill was managing director he initiated a policy to give women the first opportunity to act in a position of manager if a manager was away. This was a strategy to break down the stereotype that only men could manage.

A lobby group, Network 99, was established for women in television at Gore Hill to lobby for change and raise EEO issues with management. Childcare centres were opened in Gore Hill in 1992 and in Melbourne in 1994. For a number of years young women were supported in a physics residential school. This aimed at encouraging Year 10 girls to take a careers interest in physics. In 1994 four engineering scholarships were established which included monetary payment and three weeks' work experience. These have now been extended to all states and eight of the past scholarship winners are employed in technical areas. In 1998 the training department was restructured to develop trainees in each state and in 1999 there were 41 trainees, of whom 31 were women.

The ABC's policy to improve its gender profile has had to be carried out against a background of staff cuts, but in the engineering and technical areas there have been vacancies

caused by the retirement of many of the men who started in the technical areas when television commenced.

By 1999 there were 4,061 staff, 1,775 (44 per cent) were women, 85 held 35 per cent of the senior executive positions, but only 16 (6 per cent) of the 249 in engineering/technical staff were women and 82 (15 per cent) of the 542 in production operations were women. This is well short of the 10-year plan outlined in 1990, but since then there has been industrial reform legislation, enterprise bargaining agreements and a restructure.

In keeping with the new climate and language which is forcing affirmative action to take a back seat, the ABC has got rid of its Equal Opportunity Program and replaced it with an Equity and Diversity Program where 'gender' issues are part of strategies for 'workplace diversity' to be negotiated and implemented by line management. There are now no specific targets, but a range will be discussed with individual core groups. There is a refocusing away from processing and regulating to a consultancy approach. Will this approach do any better at breaking down the male culture? As always it will depend on the commitment of the organisation to not just help women get equal opportunities but to intervene pro-actively when they do not.<sup>17</sup>

**THE SPECIAL BROADCASTING SERVICE**

SBS is a much smaller operation than any of the other networks. In 1998 it employed only 418 staff in television and there were a total of 103 in the television operations area.

Until 1994 SBS staff were employed under the provisions of the Australian Public Service Act. It then became independent, with its own enterprise agreement. Unlike the ABC it does not table an equal employment opportunity report to Parliament. Instead it reports to the Public Service Commission who does not require it to give detailed gender statistics (except for senior executive service positions), and SBS provides the closest equivalent. The gender statistics in its annual report have become less and less detailed.

**SBS 1994 - 1998<sup>18</sup>**

|           | 1994 |     |    | 1997 |     |    | 1998 |     |    |
|-----------|------|-----|----|------|-----|----|------|-----|----|
|           | N    | W   | %  | N    | W   | %  | N    | W   | %  |
| TOTAL     | 477  | 211 | 44 | 865  | 424 | 49 | 885  | 435 | 49 |
| SEN. MAN. | 17   | 4   | 24 | 37   | 11  | 30 | 39   | 12  | 32 |
| TV        | 285  | 109 | 42 | 413  | 208 | 50 | 418  | 210 | 50 |

SBS TV OPERATION 1998<sup>19</sup>

|             | 1998 |    |     |
|-------------|------|----|-----|
|             | N    | W  | %   |
| TOTAL       | 103  | 40 | 39  |
| MANAGEMENT  | 4    | 1  | 25  |
| SUPERVISORS | 8    | 4  | 50  |
| VTR         | 19   | 6  | 31  |
| EDIT        | 16   | 8  | 50  |
| GRAPHICS    | 6    | 4  | 66  |
| VTLIBR      | 8    | 4  | 50  |
| STUDIO      | 23   | 5  | 22  |
| HAIR/MAKEUP | 4    | 4  | 100 |
| AUDIO       | 5    | 0  | 0   |
| DIR/DAs     | 5    | 3  | 60  |

Overall SBS does appear to have a better gender balance in the difficult areas of studio/engineering and management than the other networks although sound is still a problem.

Maureen Crowe is currently the Head of Resources (Financial, Human, Corporate, Information and Planning) which makes her one of the most powerful women in television. When she arrived in 1993 she was the only woman on a six-person management committee. Sawsan Madina was the Head of Television in the mid 1990s and although she has been replaced by a man there are two senior women—Head of Marketing and Policy Manager.

In 1999 SBS set up a childcare centre in conjunction with Willoughby Council. This was a response to staff wanting secure reliable childcare within the workplace. It was orchestrated by Maureen Crowe and is seen as a milestone in creating an organisational climate which is fair and equitable and encourages and supports women by promoting family friendly policies, providing flexible working hours and ensuring the recruitment process recognises qualifications without gender bias.

### COMMERCIAL TV NETWORKS

Commercial Television is the largest television employer. In 1998 the three networks

employed approximately 4,688 people of whom 1682 (36 per cent) were women. This has been the most male-dominated sector of the industry. There are many stories women tell of the difficulties they have had in working in the male culture. Since the mid 1990s this has started to break down. The publicity around sexual harassment and sex discrimination cases has alerted managements to the issues that confront women in male environments and having to report annually to the Affirmative Action Agency since 1994 has sharpened up the management practices within the commercial networks.

These reports give the most comprehensive statistics that have ever been available on the employment of women in commercial television. Each network has had to give a gender break down of staff in categories that conform to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO). These categories are not readily recognisable in the television industry and the networks are not prepared to identify the specific jobs that they included in each of these categories.<sup>20</sup> The 'professional' category is likely to cover producers and the 'para-professional' category to cover the non-traditional jobs for women in engineering and production operations departments (camera, sound etc) and probably directors.

The commercial networks have now been reporting for five years (1994-98) with the exception of the Nine Network who was exempt for 1998. This was a prize for reaching the status of best practice employer in 1997.

**COMMERCIAL TV NETWORKS 1994 - 1998<sup>21</sup>**

|          | 7    |    | 7    |    | 7    |    | 9    |    |      |    | 10   |    | 10   |    | 10   |    |
|----------|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|
|          | 1994 |    | 1997 |    | 1998 |    | 1994 |    | 1997 |    | 1994 |    | 1997 |    | 1998 |    |
|          | N    | %  | N    | %  | N    | %  | N    | %  | N    | %  | N    | %  | N    | %  | N    | %  |
| STAFF    | 1884 |    | 2609 |    | 1877 |    | 1669 |    | 1725 |    | 1034 |    | 1291 |    | 1086 |    |
| WOMEN    | 185  | 31 | 839  | 32 | 659  | 35 | 569  | 33 | 573  | 33 | 453  | 43 | 568  | 44 | 450  | 41 |
| MANAGERS | 5    | 8  | 11   | 16 | 11   | 16 | 9    | 15 | 17   | 17 | 16   | 28 | 14   | 27 | 14   | 30 |
| PROFESS  | 185  | 32 | 266  | 29 | 219  | 35 | 124  | 48 | 125  | 36 | 104  | 53 | 92   | 39 | 84   | 37 |
| PARA-PRO | 90   | 13 | 172  | 19 | 105  | 16 | 187  | 23 | 152  | 21 | 165  | 33 | 128  | 25 | 117  | 25 |
| TRADES   | 10   | 18 | 47   | 28 | 34   | 31 | 23   | 5  | 30   | 17 | 9    | 25 | 27   | 47 | 17   | 55 |
| CLERKS   | 253  | 75 | 287  | 88 | 247  | 89 | 173  | 92 | 195  | 83 | 115  | 77 | 203  | 81 | 160  | 77 |
| SALES    | 22   | 40 | 34   | 37 | 41   | 41 | 54   | 40 | 52   | 67 | 44   | 47 | 104  | 59 | 58   | 59 |
| PLANT    | 0    | 0  | 0    | 0  | 2    | 50 | 0    | 0  | 2    | 6  | 0    | 0  | 0    | 0  | 0    | 0  |
| LABOUR   | 18   | 20 | 22   | 24 | 2    | 8  | 0    | 0  | 0    | 0  | 0    | 0  | 0    | 0  | 0    | 0  |

There are still very few women working in the operations and technical areas and women senior executives don't seem to stay long.

The Seven Network has five stations in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth, and in 1998 employed a total of 1,877 people, of whom 35 per cent were women. It has had a number of management changes since 1994. When reporting started it was well ahead of the other two networks in its management practices which had been put in place to try and change the culture. It was the only one that had a human resources manager and it had already taken some affirmative action initiatives. The then CEO, Chris Chapman believed that good old-fashioned male chauvinism has stopped women getting into senior positions and that if you acknowledge that, you can start to deal with it.<sup>22</sup>

Since then Seven has had a checkered career, as can be seen by the movement of the employment figures. In 1995 it almost doubled its staff, employing 2145 casual employees—the total staff increased to 5228, raising the percentage of women employed to 41 per cent. The major increase was in the professional category and the number of women professionals employed that year was 1501, representing 44 per cent. However by 1997 there were only 266 women professionals, which represented 29 per cent. There was also a steep downturn in the percentage of women employed in trades—in 1995 there were 58 per cent women and in 1997 only 28 per cent, which rose to 31 per cent in 1998. The increase in women managers has doubled from five (8 per cent) to eleven (16 per cent) in the five-year reporting period and Seven now has some of the most senior women managers in commercial television, with Maureen Plavsic as the first Network Managing Director.

The Nine Network owns stations in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Darwin and Sky TV. In 1997 (the latest figures), it employed 1,725 people, of whom 33 per cent were women. It has been top of the ratings for many years and therefore has a philosophy of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it'. It was only when Bruce Gyngell, who had experience of management practices overseas, became Chairman in the early 1990s that the network started to concern itself with gender issues. However, there is comparatively little staff movement over the five-year period, which does not leave much opportunity for change.

Nine does appear to have made an effort to change the stereotypical jobs, increasing the women in management and in trade jobs although the proportion of women working in the para-professional jobs declined. Eighty jobs were lost (813 to 733) and women lost 35 in that category. Fiona Baker, producer, says 'Things are improving. There are a lot of women who are series producers'.<sup>23</sup> Nine was the first network to introduce maternity leave.

The Ten Network, with the same number of stations, employed 1,086 people in 1998 of whom 41 per cent were women and it has continued to have the highest proportion of women on its staff in the various job categories. However, as the numbers have fluctuated in the five years, the proportion of women has dropped, showing that women are losing jobs faster than men are. In 1994 there were 1,034 staff and in 1998 there were 1,086 but fewer women.



In 1993 Peter Viner, the new Canadian CEO, brought in three senior women executives but none of them lasted. Carmel Travers, who was the first woman to become Head of News and Current Affairs, says that that experience made her aware of the very male culture at that time and how women needed support.<sup>24</sup>

The Affirmative Action Agency requested that the companies identify their goals and strategies to raise the profile of women employed in the jobs where they are under represented.

The first Affirmative Action Reports in 1994 show that basic management practices, which had been very common in the ABC, were non-existent.

Five years later all the networks reported that they have policies for EEO, Affirmative Action and sexual harassment. Managers and supervisors are now trained in EEO awareness, sexual harassment and grievance and dispute resolution procedures. There are staff manuals, job descriptions and selection criteria without a gender bias, regular performance appraisals and career counseling, staff training in appraisals, and vacant positions are advertised within the organisation. These were all practices identified by the Affirmative Action Agency which are needed to assist women.

Each network is trying to assist women to return after they have had children because they now realise that they are losing valuable experience if they don't return. There are now more opportunities for part-time work, flexible work practices and Nine and Ten have established six weeks' paid maternity leave. No commercial network provides childcare facilities, although the Nine network does give assistance in finding childcare.

Each network identifies the goal of 'getting more women into technical positions' but none has set specific targets. So there is a question of how much of this reporting is just lip service, particularly as the statistics don't show a great improvement.

Not all networks demand that the managers and supervisors support affirmative action when their performance is appraised; not all include at least one woman on interview panels nor ensure that their advertising is designed to encourage women in areas where representation is low.

However, many women say that it is much better than it was although all three networks seem to confuse affirmative action policies and EEO policies. All insist that promotion practices will be *fair* and conducted on *merit* whereas affirmative action may sometimes be seen as unfair. The ABC advertised for women only to fill an assistant news camera position to overcome the gender imbalance, and some men complained it was unfair.

In 1995 Seven said that it encouraged applications from suitably qualified and experienced females but also said, 'The company continues to experience a reluctance by females to apply for certain vacancies'.<sup>25</sup> Subsequent reports give no indication of research to find out why women will not apply so that they can be pro-actively supported.

The networks only appeared to take pro-active initiatives when organised by the AFC and when all three networks are involved. They all noted their support for the women's network breakfasts in their reports.

The degree to which each network supports affirmative action can be judged by their calculation of what they spend on the issue. Seven's Human Resource Manager spends 2-3 per cent of his time, Nine's spends 20 per cent of her time and TEN spends 10 per cent of the human resource budget on affirmative action.

Since 1 January 2000, the Affirmative Action Agency has become the Equal Opportunity and Women in the Workplace Agency. The emphasis is to eliminate discrimination and provide equal employment opportunities. The reporting requirement is simplified, no reports are required for 1999, and organisations that have complied with the Act for three years can now be waived from reporting for a period of time.

This, like the new Public Service legislation which affects the ABC and SBS, could mean even less pressure for pro-active policies for women and certainly fewer statistics.

## **THE FUTURE**

The obligation to report has had a significant impact on television management practices even if it is not yet reflected in better gender-balanced statistics. In commercial television it has raised management's awareness to the low proportion of women in certain jobs, and sensitised them to discrimination issues. In the case of the ABC it has meant that targets were set and programs initiated to help meet those targets. It is sad that just as the obligation to report was moving networks beyond setting up good management practices and starting to put into effect policies to actively support women, they now appear to be let off the hook. Is it too cynical to suggest that the need to go further and become pro-active may be the reason why the legislation has been changed? Commercial companies just do not like being accountable.

It takes a perceptive manager to break the male culture. David Hill at the ABC, Chris Chapman at Seven, Bruce Gyngell at Nine and Peter Viner at Ten all broke the mould and encouraged women. But for one reason or another they all left their organisations before they could consolidate initiatives to change the culture.

Gradually the ABC and SBS are succeeding in getting more women behind the camera and the new pay-TV companies are using more women in non-traditional jobs. Foxtel has the only woman post production sound supervisor. But it is a slow process and women agree that it also has to be tackled in the schools and the tertiary educational institutions.

The AFTRS, in spite of its title and its state-of-the-art television equipment, has not really applied itself to training for multi-camera television. Its recruitment for its own technical traineeships has a poor gender record compared to its students for film and radio. This is not all the fault of AFTRS. The Federation of Commercial Television Stations did not sup-

port a national school to teach television in the early days; when the school was being established the ABC had its own very comprehensive training program and SBS TV did not exist. Therefore there were no obvious employers waiting for the graduates and no funding program for women wanting to work in multi-camera television.

However 25 years on the future does not look all that rosy. The AFTRS no longer runs special training courses for women, the AFC's Women's Program has ceased, there is no Women's Television Program or Fund, there has been no industry pressure on electronic engineering courses in the universities and TAFE to become more female friendly and the government has changed the direction and limited the powers of the Affirmative Action Agency.

We have had nearly half a century of television and the very few women in technical and senior management positions has to be an indictment of everyone involved in the industry.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>3</sup> Australian Film and Television School, *The Media as a Profession for Women: Problems and Perspectives*, AFTS, Sydney 1976.
- <sup>4</sup> Australian Film and Television School, *Selected Case Studies of Women Working in the Australian Mass Media* AFTS, Sydney, 1976.
- <sup>5</sup> UNESCO, *Women in the Media: The Professional Participation of Women in the Audio Visual Media - Film, Radio and Television*, AFTS, Sydney, 1976.
- <sup>6</sup> Christine Spines, 'Behind Bars: Town Without Bars' *Premiere*, (Special Edition - Women in Hollywood, January, 2000, pp. 45-48.
- <sup>7</sup> Julie James Bailey, *Reel Women. Women Working in Film and Television*. AFTRS, Sydney, 1999, p. 216.
- <sup>8</sup> The Department of Communications
- took over the funding of public (community) radio and later public (community) broadcast television.
- <sup>9</sup> Annette Blonski, (ed.), *Shared Visions: Women in Television*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1999, p.13.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 128.
- <sup>11</sup> Janeen Faithful quoted in Blonski, *ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>12</sup> Tarni James, 'From Dance Therapy to Mouthing Off' in Annette Blonski, (ed.), *ibid.*, p.40.
- <sup>13</sup> UNESCO, *op. cit.* p.29.
- <sup>14</sup> Collated from ABC Equal Employment Opportunity Reports.
- <sup>15</sup> ABC, *Reports to the Minister of Transport and Communications and the ABC Board, Equal Employment Opportunity, 1990-91*, ABC, Sydney, 1991.
- <sup>16</sup> Revised in: ABC, *Reports to the Minister of Transport and Communications and the ABC Board, Equal Employment Opportunity, 1991-92*, ABC, Sydney, 1992.
- <sup>17</sup> See ABC, *Equity and Diversity 1998-1999 Annual Report, EEO Report to the Minister of Communications, Information, Technology and the Arts*, ABC, 1999, p 19.
- <sup>18</sup> Figures taken from SBS Annual Reports.
- <sup>19</sup> Provided by SBS.
- <sup>20</sup> The ASCO occupation categories definitions. *Professionals* perform analytical, conceptual and creative tasks and require a high level of intellectual ability and thorough understanding of an extensive body of theoretical knowledge. They research, develop, design advise teach and communicate in the specialist fields. Occupations include teachers, business professionals, journalists, graphic designers and actors. The *para-professionals* perform complex technical tasks requiring the understanding of a body of theoretical knowledge and significant practical skills. Technicians in entertainment also pilots, surveyors, inspectors, production assistants are included in this group.
- <sup>21</sup> Taken from relevant reports to the Affirmative Action Agency.
- <sup>22</sup> Julie James Bailey, *Reel Women: Working in Film and Television*, AFTRS, Sydney, 1999, p.372.
- <sup>23</sup> Annette Blonski, *op. cit.*, p.44.
- <sup>24</sup> See James Bailey, *op. cit.*, p.351.
- <sup>25</sup> Seven Network Ltd, *1995 Progress Report*, Affirmative Action Agency, Sydney, 1996, p. 19.



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# FROM CHOREOGRAPHER TO FILM-MAKER

DIANNE REID

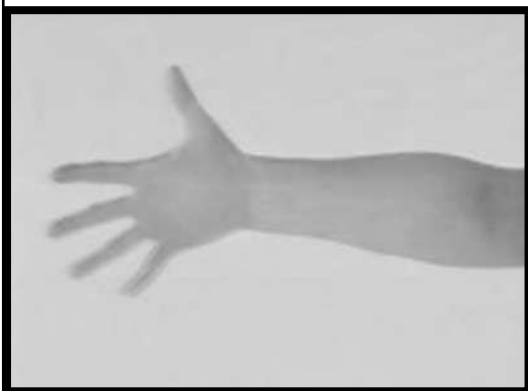
**T**here is a 'triple threat' associated with making dance films. For the most part dance films are disregarded because the content, dance, is a minority interest<sup>1</sup> that is mostly represented in the two extremes of the ethereal or the erotic. Secondly, the form, most often resembling the experimental film or documentary, is not a mainstream genre. The avant garde tendency to oppose our culture's commodification of art, and the often provocative nature of its form, places it on the periphery of accessibility. Thirdly, if the film-maker is a woman, *and* dealing with the 'feminine' subject of dance, she is doubly regarded by the dominant culture as 'other'.

*For me, film is primarily a dance medium ... possibilities peculiar to film in kinetic action give choreographers great dance possibilities, not available in 'real space'. And of course film offers the choreographer a work of art that does not vanish after the performance.<sup>2</sup>*

After 12 years of working as a contemporary dance artist the only tangible body of



HAYDEN PRIEST IN THE 12 STAGES OF  
ADVENTURE DIANNE REID, 1998



work I possess consists of those few works I have created for the camera since 1993. In relation to the other 40 or so programs of work which I have choreographed and/or performed in, my artistic history exists only as promotional material, under-lit wide-shot video documents, and my own fragmented muscle memory. The value of my artistic contribution is potentially reduced to the assessments of those reviewers who wrote about the work, and the quality of the art becomes

directly proportionate to the quantity of written words available.

Choreographing for film and video gives dance longevity. The tangible can become experiential, with those fleeting 'moments' of the body captured. The past can be replayed and transported to a wider, larger audience. But, moreover, dance is given access to the new spatial, temporal and dynamic range of the film medium.

*Film ... provides a new kind of access to the body and its movements: familiar gestures, movements and expressions can be presented for a renewed attention ... such forms of renewed attention can entail a resensitization of the spectator's body and a re-figuring of the imaged body which ... renders visible new spatial and temporal configurations.*<sup>3</sup>

Choreographically I am drawn to the multi-textural and the non-linear, to the combination and juxtaposition of images and text, to a play between abstraction and realism. Film and video offer a re-location and re-arrangement of the body and a re-definition of artistic space. Time is not bound by linear chronology, and alternative narratives can occur simultaneously. An attention to the moving body as a site of meaning and as 'lived' experience can offer the choreographer a new access to the senses of the spectator, and 'a different concept of what dance is arises'.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter I will discuss some of the issues arising from the shift from choreographer to film-maker, in the re-definition of artistic identity. As a choreographer I am looking to redefine my art by exploring the form I consider best suited to my personal aesthetic, namely the mediums of film and video. I can redefine my role as a 'female' artist by taking active control of the range of aspects of production, from choreography and direction, to camera operation and editing. As a dance artist I can redefine dance by seeking new representations of the body and dance in media, and by participating, with the growing number of choreographers working with film and video, in the development of screen dance as a medium in its own right.

## THE STATE OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE

*I was interested in an area of dance that was, if not esoteric, at least not popular. I would do things ... and then they would disappear. Few people would see them and I was interested in having the work subjected to the critical appraisal of an audience ... It was also a question of situating the work in relation to particular modern dance lineages.<sup>5</sup>*



Contemporary dance lives in the present. The nature of funding means that most contemporary dance work is presented in short seasons, at smaller venues, to primarily the same dance-literate audiences. The short performance seasons don't give the work time to mature, to 'live' as a performance experience or for the performers and collaborators to develop the textures, subtleties and emotive range of the performance material. If we accept that the work of art exists through the act of being seen, then it could be said that the art work viewed once by a small live audience is essentially less 'real' than the one that can be viewed repeatedly by a larger film audience. In this sense, live contemporary dance barely exists.

As humans we measure and define our existence in chronological terms. We retrace our family trees and recall our relationships. We list our achievements and collect trophies. We write stories and re-tell them. The stories for the dancer and choreographer are written on the body and, with the physical body, are in continual flux. The subject matter is the physical matter, which carries with it the neuromuscular and emotive patterns of any particular 'moment'. While the emergent nature of the kinaesthetic makes dance intangible, it is *that* very condition which the dance artist seeks to make visible. Our bodies imprint and respond to our lived experiences, and the choreographer seeks to reflect that present moment, to draw attention to change, to movement.

With the expansion of global communication and technology we have become increasingly focused on the future. Our 'present' moments are made up of a pastiche of past and present images; samples of old phrases or melodies are layered and appropriated. Chronology has become non-linear as we float in multi-textural cyberspace always speeding to the next gigabyte, the next web-site and the next piece of information. Our bodies have become motionless shells passively riding on rapid eye and finger movement seated before the small screen.

The contemporary dance artist is being put out of business. The response has been two fold. On the one hand, performance artists are removing themselves from the technological loop, returning to ritual, large-scale outdoor events involving physical masses of people and the natural elements. A growing number of dance artists are drawing on Buddhism



and improvisation to amplify the present, the experiential. Conversely, many artists are re-skilling, collaborating, sourcing and creating their own pastiches of multi-media, programming and projection in performance. These choreographers are trying to fit the three-dimensional body into the computer port and live performances are becoming multi-media installations or virtual transmissions. There is indeed some exciting work being created from these explorations,<sup>6</sup> but

often it serves to draw more attention to the technological processes, back to the cerebral, rather than to the body and the individual housed within.

### DANCE IN A MEDIA CONTEXT

My journey into the dance film/video arena began five years ago with a three minute, 16mm film which was projected with a live dance solo within a larger performance work entitled *Betrayal*. This solo section dealt thematically with those few seconds that build to an outburst of anger; that chemical flash that surges through the physical body as a result of this extreme emotion. The solo became a duet between the live dancer and her projected double.

I wanted to portray the dual nature of the emotion, on the one hand completely physically inhabiting a person while simultaneously placing them outside as observer to their own actions. The physical manifestation of the emotion was represented in the kicking, jumping live dance sequence, while the film showed a parallel social context where the dancer, alone, destroys a surreal dinner table setting as she drags herself across it.

A review described *Betrayal* as 'a complex and accomplished piece from its opening, reminiscent of a Michael Jackson film clip, to a climax worthy of Graeme Murphy and David Lynch'.<sup>7</sup> At once I was linked to concepts of commercial success, popular culture and cult film, yet the role models were all male. At the time the recognition was exciting and flattering and probably played a part in securing my creative development funding from the Australia Council the following year. In reflection, however, I am increasingly bothered by the idea that dynamic imagery, in particular imagery of the moving female body, is associated largely with the male auteur or the music video clip form. The dilemma for the female auteur is in representing the moving body in ways which can distinguish between the sensual and the sexual, and which present the dance form as primary, not merely a supporting visual to the musical form.



While music videos 'have augmented the accessibility of dance via the media', the choreographers of these videos are 'usually anonymous' and the use of 'choreographers of proven worth from contemporary dance is the exception rather than the rule'.<sup>8</sup> The 'dancer' pop stars (Madonna, Janet and Michael Jackson), have 'tended to position themselves in relation to the screen tradition of dance and to current popular forms rendering the activity of dance more one of "social mobility and stardom" than of artistic expression'.<sup>9</sup>



At a recent screening of my video *The 12 Stages of Adventure* an academic colleague apologised for comparing the work to a music video clip. He was at once acknowledging the limits of his experience with the filmed dance image and implying that the music video form is an inferior artwork. The music video is, I think, not a bad model for the contemporary dance video or film. The emphasis is on the moving image within frame, and the assemblage of strong, often close-up images of the body in relation to each other. There is an abstract aesthetic which calls attention to the body in a kinaesthetic way, and which strongly connects the evocative impact of sound or music with the moving image. The 'dancing acts as a metaphor for the individual's control of his or her destiny'.<sup>10</sup>

The music video constructs an often non-linear narrative that returns to physical or emotional themes with the repetition and variation of the musical structure and lyric. Contemporary dance, too, preferences an assemblage of abstract physical and emotional ideas, encouraging the viewer's participation and recognition through repetition, dynamic play, the juxtaposition of sound and moving image, and subtle variation and development. In a postmodern sense the constant juxtaposition of images, the imploding of boundaries between image and reality, encourages the viewer to respond on a more sensual level. The reading is 'sensually felt rather than rationally interpreted'.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the small percentage of arts programming on television (predominantly screened on the public and community networks such as ABC and SBS), the majority of televised dance is seen as music videos, dancesport competitions, or documentaries of stage dance. The latter tends not to be adapted for the camera, ignoring the differing nature of film space 'with indiscriminate use of wide and close-up shots viewed from the proscenium aspect'.<sup>12</sup> In addition, most of these dance works are filmed and edited by non-dancers, adding a language barrier to the translation. As inferior film products, then, these dance documents tend not to get screened on television, 'thereby propagating the opinion that



dance does not translate well to the screen'.<sup>13</sup>

It is the dance artist's level of understanding of the film medium in all its aspects, which has, to date, sparked debate about the relative success of dance on film and video. Bob Lockyer, Director of Arts and Entertainment at BBC Television, supports a re-definition of the role and skills of the cho-

reographer in dance film and video when he suggests that 'it is the choreographers who should direct, and in that way, we, the spectators, would get the creators' view first hand'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Lloyd Newson, Artistic Director of DV8 claims that 'dance on film needs to be better',<sup>15</sup> implying that dance film and video is a distinct art form requiring specialist attention.

### THE ARTISTIC VISION

The tools and codes of the film-maker reflect those of the choreographer so strongly that it could be asserted that the role of film-maker is well suited to the choreographer. Many texts on film production and direction talk about the 'choreography' of a scene, or the camera. Choreographic processes already resemble cinematic codes: framing; open and closed form; depth perception; planes of movement; angle; proximity and proportion; colour; form and line; weight and direction; oblique versus symmetrical composition; texture; lighting; sound; and overall structure or editing.

At the 1995 Green Mill Dance Project, 'Is Technology the Future for Dance?'<sup>16</sup> Susan Jordan acknowledged that choreographers are 'literally taking the camera into their own hands', are 'deciding on the editing cuts' and 'becoming (their own) director'.<sup>17</sup> She attributes this to the fact that 'choreographers are not used to having anybody standing between them and their creation'.<sup>18</sup>

*I am used to my work being my work.*<sup>19</sup>

In 1994 I made *Triggered* with funding provided by a creative development grant from the Australia Council. I collaborated with a writer/video artist (Paul Huntingford), a film-maker/director (Andrew Ferguson) and another performer/choreographer (Brian Parker)<sup>20</sup> to develop dance work for the camera. I wanted to explore the medium, learn the languages and tools, experiment with containing the bodily narrative within the filmed image. Two short stories, one written by myself and one by Huntingford, provided two parallel narrative structures as starting points for movement and image. In both stories a single character (one female, one male) is caught in a sequence of events that leads to their demise. The woman reflects on banal memories evoked by the senses of smell, touch, and image

as she is led to death row. The man, in the course of a mundane nine-to-five day, makes one small mistake, starting a chain reaction that similarly ends in death.

We developed solo and duet sequences performed by Parker and myself which reflected the themes of struggle and isolation, of accident or inevitability.

After working part-time over several months we had several hours of video footage to edit into 10 minutes. After storyboarding a composite structure based around selections of narrated text from the two stories, and grouping selections of footage to each piece of text, the editing was given over to a friend, Jim Stewart, a professional editor with a Sydney video production company, *Apocalypse*.



The result was a surreal but polished edit that would not have been possible given the limit of our financial resources and expertise. However, it was no longer our artwork, and I recall a sense of loss associated with viewing a finished product which I hardly recognised. It was at this time that I realised the extent to which the edit shapes the final product. It was this recognition of the creative influence of the editor that ultimately led me to train myself in non-linear editing, giving myself control over that choreographic range and control over my artistic vision.

*I love editing, it's a stage where you can still bring a lot, where original ideas appear.*<sup>21</sup>

Trevor Patrick says of his experience of creating a dance film as part of the Microdance project<sup>22</sup> that 'a hundred films could have been made from all this material and they could each have been very different'.<sup>23</sup> Unfamiliar with the film production processes, he found himself collaborating 'against [his] will' because 'the whole structure is geared to the losing of ownership in order to become the collective ownership and collective responsibility'.<sup>24</sup>

## CHOREOGRAPHY OF THE CAMERA

Michelle Mahrer, documentary and dance film-maker, asserts that 'dance and film are a very exciting combination, as long as one uses the tools of the medium boldly and appropriately to capture the kinaesthetic quality of the movement'.<sup>25</sup>

As an art form that is mostly abstract and not narrative, dance needs to present images that will lead the eye on, allowing the movement to continue through and in the camera frame to assist the flow from one shot to the next. By controlling the size and perspective of the image, the camera 'can pinpoint those aspects of the dance which are significant [and determine] the emotional content of a scene or section'.<sup>26</sup> With the camera the choreographer can offer views of the body from a range of perspectives, and play with the viewer's



sense of balance and gravity. The camera can come close to the dancing body, offering an intimacy unavailable in the theatre as it brings the viewer into the dance action. Most choreographers focus on the 'choreography of movement within the frame rather than the movement of the frame itself'.<sup>27</sup> The moving camera can further invite the participation of the viewer as it increases the kinetic effect, encouraging a shared sensual experience. Ideally, the camera should be viewed 'as though it

is another dancer in the choreography'.<sup>28</sup>

It is for that very reason that many choreographers are putting themselves behind the camera or, in live performance contexts, placing cameras directly onto the dancer's body. The accessibility of video as an inexpensive format with immediate playback facilities, coupled with the fact that the video camera has become a familiar tool for choreographers in the rehearsal studio, accounts for the ease with which many choreographers approach the camera. The alternative is to train and choreograph the camera operator.

In a 1996 dance work entitled *Point of View* I projected video taken from my point of view inside a duet with Jane Mortiss while we danced the same duet live on stage.<sup>29</sup> Without the equipment or funds to actually strap a camera to my body I went through a fairly elaborate process of 'faking' it. After creating the dance duet I 'pulled it apart' and inserted Paul, the camera operator, into the action. Working in small segments we developed a quartet for three bodies and a camera that could simulate the duet as I experienced it. In the edited video we further distorted real time and space by adding fragments of alternative landscapes (my hand across the floor became a hand wiping sand from the surface of a mirror to reveal my face) or short successive still shots of Jane approaching or receding from 'me'. The live duet was then re-choreographed to fit the timing of the video. The result in performance was an interesting play for the audience between live space and video space, between viewing objectively from a live distance to entering the action and connecting kinetically to a projected image. The process of creating this effect 'manually' actually increased our engagement in the choreographic process and served to inform and enhance both our dance performance and Paul's edit.<sup>30</sup>

### READING MEANING IN DANCE FILM

*Any act of dancing reproduced on screen is at once mediated by all the conventions of that act of recording and transmission ... the dance fraternity [need] to be prepared and equipped to deal with all the ways in which dance is presented and represented on television if it is to gain maximum benefit from such exposure.*<sup>31</sup>

I sent a copy of my latest video to my best friend in Budapest. He emailed me to say he'd received it, and watched it, and 'loved it' but, 'of course, [he] didn't understand it'.

How and why do we 'read' or 'not read' dance and the body?

Dance is primarily identified with movement, and its significance is situated in the moving body. Our readings of dance respond chiefly to the visual stimulus of the body dancing. The act of 'looking' is an activity that distinguishes cinema from many other forms of expression, but one that links it to dance. We have to physically move our eyes in order to perceive an object, so we *do* read an image physically as well as mentally and psychologically.



Leslie Satin summarizes dance theorist Ann Daly's discussion of how we 'sense' a dance:

*According to Daly, that which we claim not to 'get' about dance, that which eludes all conventional critical and theoretical methods of knowing, we do know perfectly well—but we know it at the level of communication which does not preclude preverbal knowledge.*<sup>32</sup>

We become potentially active in the process of observing. The extent to which we 'understand' what we are reading varies, and yet there is a degree of understanding at an unconscious level by which we invest meaning in an image. Meanings attach to parts of the space as they do to parts of the body.

What we see affects how we feel. Leslie Satin writes about the concept of kinaesthesia, how the viewer receives and responds to dance 'through the skin'.<sup>33</sup>

*The spectator completes the dance not only through the experience of intellectual observation, or emotional or psychological identification, but through the somatic, neuromuscular, dialogic response with the performer and the performance.*<sup>34</sup>

### THE 'OTHER' PERSPECTIVE

*I think the sensibilities I have developed in my experience of being a woman have helped me be more aware of the humane potentials of film, and to express myself in my work with freedom and security.*<sup>35</sup>

In 1997 I made a live performance work incorporating a video interview of my parents discussing the pros and cons of contemporary dance as they see it. At one point in the video my father says:

*The sort of work you do, the places you show it, well you're not really beating them away from the door, now are you? You need to be more commercially viable ... more tits and bums I guess is the crude way of putting it.*<sup>36</sup>

During the video I danced in a remote alcove of the performance space, my movements turning in on themselves, coming up against walls, juxtaposing the image of myself physically distanced and confined as my parents' words marginalised and categorised my identity as a contemporary dance artist and as a woman.

Annette Kuhn<sup>37</sup> talks about the 'dominant culture' in cinema as one in which the cinematic address advances male subjectivity as the only subjectivity available, and regarding woman as 'other'. Teresa de Lauretis, in her paper on aesthetic and feminist theory, writes that we 'need pictures of female experience, of duration, perception, events, relationships and silences'.<sup>38</sup> She writes about giving space to the daily gestures of a woman, with her own rhythms, her own way of looking at things, her own aesthetic. The questions that arise regarding a 'feminine' aesthetic reflect those regarding a dance aesthetic in film and video. Dance, of the body, traditionally viewed as a feminine art is equally 'othered', by the dominant cinema's signification process. The woman, or the dancing body, is seen as the object of looking.

The history of dance film-making compares in a number of ways to the 'herstory' of feminist film-making. Both sectors of artists have sought out structures which facilitate an expression of the personal, the intimate, and which have the potential to 'evoke pleasures of looking outside the masculine structures'.<sup>39</sup> Feminist film-makers began working mainly in the documentary genre on the cheaper, more accessible 16mm format, before moving into the avant-garde arena which is mostly underpinned by notions of artistic freedom and self-expression. Dance films could also be most readily classified as experimental or avant garde in genre and similarly seek out alternative narrative techniques and devices to communicate the language of the intimate, physical subject.

Yvonne Rainer moved from dance into film-making and found that 'the complex aesthetic practice' of choreography could exist most comfortably for her within the documentary genre. She also found that 'feminist theory was a means of re-directing an already elaborate process of choreography'.<sup>40</sup>

*My films don't stay at one level of identification ... the spectator's relation to the image is constantly shifting to adapt to shifting registers of meaning. Therefore a 'mass' audience is automatically ruled out.*<sup>41</sup>

While dance may be a minority interest, 'at the same time, dance for screen is tending to challenge the dominant cultural practices of narrative fiction and documentary'.<sup>42</sup> That 'disruption of, or messing around with narrative coherence has a positive function in pointing towards possibilities for a more fluid and open organizing of social relations'.<sup>43</sup>

### MAKING DANCE FILM VISIBLE

*There is no place for [dance] work to be distributed [in Australia], no formal platform where people can come together to look and work and talk about it ... [however] because there is no infrastructure, we can create any model we want to.*<sup>44</sup>

*Dance Lumiere* is a dance film festival based in Melbourne which this year, under the direction of dance film-maker Tracie Mitchell, shifted from being a low-key screening for dance peers at Dancehouse in North Carlton to Australia's First Dance Film Festival attended by an eclectic audience at Cinemedia's Treasury Theatre. Mitchell has been a strong advocate for the funding and distribution of dance film and video in this country, having to fund and distribute her own work for several years in an environment which saw dance film as an expensive means to an unmarketable product. Her first film, *Chicken*, was made to 'give funding bodies a sense of what [she] thought dance for the camera could be ... and when it was finished [she] found it was a substantial piece of work'.<sup>45</sup>

In the short five years since then Mitchell has had her work screened on the water wall of the National Gallery for the Melbourne Festival, at international festivals in New York, Buenos Aires and Auckland, and has received funding from the Australia Council for her work *Sure*, and from the AFC to travel with it to the IMZ Festival in Cologne. *Dance Lumiere* screened three days of international, Australian and New Zealand dance films and videos, showing a range of works specifically made for camera, live works that have been restructured for camera and dance documentaries. Mitchell sees her curated program as 'a window from where Australia can present its work' and dance on screen as 'the place where movement can be captured and, at its best, present us with experiences of the human spirit'.<sup>46</sup>

### CONCLUSION: CREATING IDENTITY

*You can create an audience for anything if it's well done, and you are passionate about it.*<sup>47</sup>

The development of platforms for the screening of dance film and video, the growth of collaborative activity across the dance and media disciplines, and the accessibility of computer and media technologies at a domestic level all serve to facilitate the development of dance film as a medium in its own right. The film and videographers of dance are reclaiming the moving image as dance, making the experiential tangible, and redefining dance as a significant lived experience. Through the choreography of dance for film I have access to 'new excesses and subtleties',<sup>48</sup> to a new range of creative skills, and can make myself visible.

## Endnotes

- 1 Dave Allen, 'Screening Dance' in Stephanie Jordan & Dave Allen (ed.), *Parallel Lines: Media Representations of Dance*, John Libbey & Co. Ltd, London, 1993, p.5.
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- 3 Jodi Brooks, 'Rituals of the Filmic Body' in *Writings on Dance 17: Dance On Screen*, Melbourne, 1997, p.17.
- 4 Amy Greenfield, 'Close-up of the Heart' in *Dance On Camera*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999, p.2.
- 5 Russell Dumas quoted in Deborah Jowitz, 'Russell Dumas: On Film' in *Writings on Dance 17: Dance On Screen*, op. cit. p.1.
- 6 Melbourne-based *Company in Space* use video and computer technology to create unique interactive performance works that occur simultaneously in different global locations.
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- 9 *ibid.* p. 56.
- 10 *ibid.*
- 11 John B. Harms and David R. Dickens, 'Postmodern Media Studies: Analysis or Symptom?' in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 13, p. 212.
- 12 Yvonne Kower, 'Being There: Dance Film/Video History' in *Green Mill Dance Project: 'Is Technology The Future For Dance?'*, Ausdance, Canberra, 1995, p.85.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 Bob Lockyer, 'Stage Dance On Television' in Jordan & Allen op. cit. 1993, p.144.
- 15 Kower op. cit., p.85. DV8 (Dance and Video 8) is a Physical Theatre Company based in the UK under the artistic direction of Australian Lloyd Newson. Established in 1987 the company has presented live performance work internationally and made three award-winning films for television.
- 16 Green Mill Dance Project was a Melbourne-based festival and conference of contemporary dance performance that ran annually between 1994 and 1997.
- 17 Stephanie Jordan, 'Being there: parallel lines – the projected image of dance versus the live encounter' in *Green Mill Dance Project: 'Is Technology the Future for Dance?'* op. cit., p.92.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 Trevor Patrick interviewed by Sally Gardner, 'Making Microdance: Trevor Patrick interview' in *Writings on Dance 17: Dance On Screen*, op. cit., p.39.
- 20 Paul Huntingford has worked predominantly as a sound editor and foley on feature films including *The Big Steal*, *Death in Brunswick* and *Amy*. Andrew Ferguson studied film at Swinburne where he won an award for his short film *Bumps*. Brian Parker has worked as an actor and performer with Danceworks, The One Extra Company and, most recently, in the Philippe Genty production of *Stowaways*.
- 21 Jane Campion quoted in Virginia Wright Wexman (ed.), *Jane Campion Interviews*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, USA, 1999, p.42.
- 22 Microdance was a joint project of the Australia Council, the AFC, and the ABC funding the collaborations between choreographers and directors in the development of six short dance films (1996-97).
- 23 Trevor Patrick quoted in Gardner op. cit. 1997, p.38.
- 24 *ibid.* p. 40.
- 25 Michelle Mahrer, 'Being There: dance on screen—the projected image' in *Green Mill Dance Project* op. cit., p.97.
- 26 Sarah Rubidge, 'Recent Dance Made For Television' in Jordan & Allen op. cit., p.187.
- 27 Kower op. cit., 1995, p.86.
- 28 Mahrer op. cit., 1995, p.96.
- 29 Jane Mortiss was a founding member of Human Veins Dance Theatre and has worked with Danceworks, Dance North, and The One Extra Company. Jane also danced in my first film work *Betrayal*.
- 30 Before 1998 (when I trained in video editing) Paul Huntingford was my editor.
- 31 Allen op. cit., p.19.
- 32 Leslie Satin, 'Being Danced Again: Meredith Monk, Reclaiming the Girlchild' in G. Morris, *Moving Words: Re-writing Dance*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.135.
- 33 *ibid.*
- 34 *ibid.*
- 35 Maria Harriton quoted in Smith, op. cit., p.172.
- 36 *Lay Bare* first performed at Dancehouse in 1997. The video sections of this work were re-cut and screened at the Melbourne Fringe Short Film Festival in 1999.
- 37 Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London & Boston, 1982.
- 38 Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays in Theory, Film and Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis, 1987, p.131.
- 39 As discussed in Kuhn, op. cit. p.65.
- 40 Gabrielle Finnane, 'Discussing Privilege: An Interview with Yvonne Rainer' in Adrian Martin (ed.), *Film: Matters of Style, Continuum: Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 2, Murdoch University Press, WA, 1992, p.271.
- 41 *ibid.* p.272.
- 42 Allen op. cit., p.5.
- 43 Yvonne Rainer quoted in Finnane op. cit., p.273.
- 44 Tracie Mitchell quoted in Philippa Hawker, 'Dancing Screen' in 'Today-Review', *The Age*, 17/11/99, p.6.
- 45 *ibid.*
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- 47 Jane Campion quoted in Wright Wexman, op. cit. p.81.
- 48 Erin Brannigan, 'Moving Pictures' in *Writings on Dance 17: Dance On Screen*, Melbourne, 1997, pp.65-68.



# SHORT CIRCUIT

## Australian Women Film-makers and the Short Film

LISA FRENCH

*In the Australasian context ... the short film is impossible to ignore; it is an integral part of women's film culture.<sup>1</sup>*

### INTRODUCTION

*'But ...' the journalist remarked in a shocked tone, 'some of these are only three minutes long!' In my three years as Director of the St Kilda Film Festival, this was a common refrain.*

Behind the journalist's remark was the assumption that somehow these short films



WOMEN ON WOMEN POSTCARD, COURTESY OF WIFT AND THE PHOTOGRAPHER: WENDY McDUGALL

were inconsequential just by virtue of their length—not worthy, somehow, of attention and certainly not ‘real’ film-making. Yet every year, thousands of people flock to St Kilda Film Festival (three thousand in fact attended the opening nights each year between 1999 and 2002.) In addition, there has recently been a proliferation of short film festivals throughout Australia—WOW (WIFT’s<sup>2</sup> Women On Women Festival), Tropfest, Flickerfest and 58 other festivals around Australia<sup>3</sup> that now screen short films.

Obviously, for many Australian film-makers, short film production has value. Despite the difficulties in raising funds and achieving exhibition for short films, hundreds are made in Australia each year—in fact, this is a booming and fertile production area. The reasons why are explored in this chapter—with a particular focus on the contribution made by Australian women in the production of short films.

The discussion begins with an exploration of the current production context—the short film ‘form’, the role of film schools, the funding of shorts, and indigenous short production. Following this is a consideration of the distribution, exhibition, and awards that are enjoyed by short films. The final section draws together an overview of the directions that can be seen in the short films made by women—in the contemporary context, and into the future.

### THE FORM ITSELF: LITTLE WORKS OF POETRY, OR MINI FEATURES?

The issue of what is important about the short film form presents itself; does their importance lie principally in the belief that they are a stepping stone on the path to feature film production, or is there something intrinsic about the short film that appeals to women film-makers?

The majority of the women film-makers discussed within this book have trodden paths which have included the short film—and many embrace the form wholeheartedly. Academic Anna Dzenis<sup>4</sup> has noted that in Ken Berryman’s survey of ‘key’ Australian films published in *Cinema Papers* in 1996 (as part of the Centenary of Cinema in Australia), the first shorts to appear on the list were by women film-makers: *Passionless Moments: Recorded in Sydney Australia Sunday October 2* (Jane Campion with Gerard Lee, 1983/4), and *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (Tracey Moffatt, 1990). Dzenis has succinctly observed that shorts can simultaneously fulfil a number of roles; they can serve as calling cards to the feature industry, and yet they can also explore territory outside of the conventional definitions of cinema largely occupied by features. She also observed that short films are rarely the subject of individual reviews.

While it may be true to say that short films can be a step along the path to feature production, not all producers of shorts have had a move to feature films as their goal. For some, especially animators and experimental film-makers, there is something about the short film form that lends itself to their work. Even those film-makers who have graduated to features have sometimes returned to shorts. For example, Tracey Moffatt and Jackie McKimmie are

both film-makers interested in producing features as well as shorts. McKimmie has said that people think that 'to go back to making a short film after making long films there must be something wrong', but for her 'short films are little works of poetry'.<sup>5</sup>

Actor, director and Tropfest director, John Polson, has written that 'some say short films are simply "stepping stones" towards a first feature. I disagree. A short can be satisfying in a way that the best

features never can'.<sup>6</sup> Hugh Short, when working as a marketing co-ordinator at the Australian Film Commission (AFC) wrote, that 'short films are not "mini-features", they have unique creative parameters'<sup>7</sup> and Jane Campion has been quoted as being 'adamant that one shouldn't see short films as a training ground for features'.<sup>8</sup> Campion has stressed that 'short films are often maligned. They are a distinct art form in themselves. After all *Un Chien Andalou* [Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali, 1928] was a short film and it was one of the most influential films ever made'.<sup>9</sup>

Short films are generally defined as films under 60 minutes final running time. As they are not constrained by the need to fill an appropriate time slot, unlike television programs or indeed features which must be within a certain length for exhibition, shorts can be three minutes, or 29, or 42. However, there is a length of short film designated 'short feature' that is more well-defined, around the television hour. Ana Kokkinos' *Only The Brave* (1994), Davida Allen's *Feeling Sexy* (1998) and Rachel Perkins' *One Night the Moon* (2000) all had either festival screenings and/or commercial releases as features, despite being less than 60 minutes long. This length is sometimes viewed as a useful 'in-between' the short and the feature film, although in Davida Allen's case, she explained that the film was as long as the story needed to be.<sup>10</sup>

Anna Dzenis has outlined the diversity of stylistic incarnations of the short film: 1) post-modern pastiche; 2) personal, subjective, diaristic and autobiographical; 3) representations and analysis of experiences of ethnic and indigenous film-makers; 4) stylized narratives which experimentally tackle pressing contemporary issues; and 5) the 'gag' film.<sup>11</sup>



AMELIA ROSE TOWERS (JACKIE FARKAS, 1993)



Jackie Farkas' *Amelia Rose Towers* (1993) is a postmodern pastiche of imagery appropriated from diverse sources such as art (including references to other film-makers), music clips and the bible.<sup>12</sup> In her chapter in *Womenvision*, Meredith Seaman explores the second category, films which are personal, subjective, diaristic and autobiographical: Corrine Cantrell's *In This Life's Body* (1984), Merilee Bennett's *A Song of Air* (1987) and Anna Kannava's *The Butler* (1997). Ethnic and indigenous film-makers are discussed both later in this chapter and elsewhere in *Womenvision* (see the chapters on the work of Tracey Moffatt and Monica Pellizzari). Moffatt's films are also examples of Dzenis' fourth category: stylized narratives that experimentally tackle pressing contemporary issues (such as the stolen generation, symbolically represented in her 1989 film, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy*). Examples of the 'gag' film include Di Cousins' one minute production, *Icon* (1994), a female spin on the story of Christ, or Emma-Kate Croghan's 1992 film *Sexy Girls, Sexy Appliances*<sup>13</sup> discussed later.

As well as adopting a variety of stylistic incarnations, shorts also utilise a wide range of technologies in their production. Increasingly, digital video is the shooting stock of choice, but some films continue to be shot on 35mm film, as well as 16mm, super-8, indeed anything that suits the purpose of the film-maker. As Adrian Martin has said: 'independent, short film/video ... is still the place where "low" and "high" technology can be mixed up with impunity...'<sup>14</sup> One of the outcomes of the new technologies is greater access. Lynden Barber explains that, 'films are now also made using digital techniques, and a new generation of relatively cheap camcorders has brought film-making within reach of the average consumer... what fires an increasing number is the do-it-yourself ethic of short film'.<sup>15</sup> Short film-making has led the way in this regard, and feature film-makers are also taking up

the use of these technologies. Technology of course has changed the way contemporary film-makers work. Adrian Martin has described short film-making in the 1990s as 'mutating' because of the influence of computer art and new forms of image generation, 'former "video artists" now declared themselves explorers of the "time-based" or "electronic media" arts, a heady mix of all the new technologies of film, video and sound'.<sup>16</sup>

## THE FILM SCHOOLS

The Australian film schools provide an important contribution to the short film form; many of the short films seen in Australia, certainly at the major film festivals, are the product of the film schools. Two Australian film schools continue to dominate the local scene: the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), which was formerly Swinburne, and The Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in New South Wales. As well, there are film schools in other tertiary institutions such as Media Arts at Deakin in Victoria (formerly known as Rusden) RMIT Media Studies, and Queensland's Pacific Film School of Film Production (a co-operative venture between Griffith University and Queensland College of Art). Robson and Zalcock have noted that the AFTRS 'became a crucial site for the production of women's films'.<sup>17</sup> These schools have certainly played a significant role in offering access and training, particularly for women.

At times it has been suggested that the AFTRS and VCA<sup>18</sup> each cultivate their own style or look. Dave Sargent has written that the AFTRS films are slick and competent while VCA films offer more content, meaning and experimentation. However, if this was once true, it is arguably less certain today. But if the film schools no longer imbue an obvious style or look to their students' work, they are likely to play a role in cultivating the idea that shorts are a training ground for feature film-makers. Certainly the VCA and the AFTRS are perceived as the training grounds of our next generation of celebrated film-makers, the film-makers who will produce tomorrow's award winning feature films.

## FUNDING

The policies of State and Federal Government film funding bodies play a role in shaping the form of Australian short films. Some funding bodies identify funds for the express purpose of funding shorts as a training ground for feature film-making. Film Victoria, for example, established the Independent Film Fund (IFF) in 1985/86 to 'enable a handful of talented film-makers who showed promise the opportunity to make a short film ... with a substantial budget, the resulting film could act as a calling card for more ambitious projects'.<sup>19</sup> The intention was for the funded films to be more ambitious in scope than a student short, but not as complex as a feature. Numerous women have benefited from IFF; for example those who came through the first years of the fund included Lynda House as producer on *100% Wool* (1986), director Nadia Tass on *Mr B Says No* (1986) and writer/director Ana Kokkinos with *Only the Brave* (1994). IFF funded narrative and documentary projects, but not experimental films. The focus was to develop new talent for features and documentaries. House, who had worked as a production manager but had not until then had experience



as a producer, says of IFF that ‘the most important thing about it was that it put me at the wheel. And that is a very different experience to production managing’.<sup>20</sup> Other producers getting this opportunity included Fiona Eagger with *Only The Brave* (Ana Kokkinos), Jo Bell with *Five Easy Pizzas* (1994) which had various directors for five shorts—including one she directed herself (*Gran’s Big Adventure*)—and Ros Walker with two films: *Sheep* (Wain Fimeri, 1991) and *Mr Electric* (Stuart McDonald, 1993).

It is currently difficult to obtain government funding to make shorts in Australia as funding bodies are under pressure to make their money back on projects they fund—a direction that leaves the short film, unlikely to recoup investment, out in the cold. Writer Craig Kirkwood has summarized the rather bleak funding position saying that the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC) have ‘never been big on shorts as they have yet to return a profit (not that features usually do)’ and the AFC ‘is funding less shorts in the wake of the Gonski Review... although it remains the largest source of direct funds’. The state funding bodies ‘continue to fund a slate of shorts, although they ... have had less rather than more money available in recent years’. He cites the other major source of money for short films as television, which represents ‘a modest, if inconsistent pool of funds’ and says that there is not much hope for funding from the commercial free-to-air networks’.<sup>21</sup>

In general, experienced film-makers are discouraged by funding bodies from making shorts after they have made features, although there are exceptions. Film-maker Lawrence Johnston has been quoted as saying that on a practical level, he knows funding options for a

short film do not exist in Australia for an established filmmaker like himself. 'Nobody would give me the money to make a short film because I've made a few and I've also made feature films and in this country, that doesn't happen'.<sup>22</sup>

Since government funding for shorts is highly competitive and highly contested, filmmakers are finding other ways of funding projects. Queenslander Sarah Neal, a 'New Film-maker' Award winner,<sup>23</sup> describes the difficult pathway for making shorts:

*On the up side of this is the almighty Visacard. I love mine. It has helped me to make at least four short films in as many years. I am greatly indebted to it. And I mean greatly indebted ... as I am to my family, a couple of generous individuals and numerous industry professionals.<sup>24</sup>*



TWO BOB MERMAID (DARLENE JOHNSON, 1996)

## INDIGENOUS PRODUCTION

Another important role of short films has been as a vehicle for Indigenous production. Prior to the 1990s, the bulk of production by Indigenous people had been documentary, but in more recent times Indigenous organisations such as CAAMA<sup>25</sup> have turned to drama production, as well as new media.<sup>26</sup> Indigenous production has received particular assistance from public broadcasters, often in collaboration with Indigenous media organisations and government funding agencies. In the late 1990s the most significant advance in regard to Australian Indigenous short film drama production occurred: it received a boost with a series of shorts funded via the Indigenous Drama Initiative (IDI) of the Australian Film Commission,<sup>27</sup> in collaboration with SBS Independent. It gave Indigenous film-makers creative opportunities to make drama, it developed the skills of Indigenous film-makers and actors, and it got black faces on the screen in representations they had constructed themselves and which showed them as they 'see themselves'.<sup>28</sup>

A significant number of Aboriginal women producers, writers and directors were funded as part of the IDI initiative. Their films reflect on identity, relationships, culture, tradition and representation from historical and political perspectives. Titles funded by the IDI initiative include *My Bed Your Bed* (Erica Glynn, 1997), *My Colour Your Kind* (Daniella McLean, 1997), *Promise* (Daniella McLean, 1998), *Two Bob Mermaid* (Darlene Johnson, 1996), *Road* (Catriona McKenzie, 2000), *Fly Peewee Fly!* (Sally Riley, 1995) and *Confessions of a Headhunter* (Sally Riley, 2000)—a film which won Best Short Fiction for Riley at the 2000 AFI Awards. These films have been highly successful in achieving selection for festivals in Australia and overseas.

Wal Saunders, who was instrumental in establishing the IDI in 1995, says ‘What we are endeavouring to do with the short dramas is allowing Aborigines to tell their own stories and reflect on what’s concerning them’.<sup>29</sup> There have been four programs distributed and exhibited by the AFI. The first was *From Sand to Celluloid*, (1996) the second was *Shifting Sands* (1997), the third was *Crossing Tracks* (1999) and the fourth was *On Wheels* (2000).

Film-maker Wesley Enoch (whose 1998 film *Grace* was part of the second series) described it in the following way:

*I think in Shifting Sands there was more of a sense of people’s stories, connections with family and landscape and environment. But what I think both series do well is provide diverse faces of Aboriginality in this country. There’s something special about having black people doing it, that in a deep seated sort of way is unique about the voice. And because From Sand to Celluloid happened it’s created an environment where we can tell a different sort of story, and by the end of the century we’ll have a collection of stories that are as diverse as we are as people...<sup>30</sup>*

Film-maker Rachel Perkins, who was a consultant for the AFC in the financing of the *Sand to Celluloid* package of films, has explained how, in Aboriginal communities or societies, one gender is not more important than the other. Her insights into the way Aboriginal people work portray them as ‘equal but distinct’. In regard to her early work at CAAMA, she has described it in the following way:

*Although there was a little bit of sexism, like the blokes wanted to do all the camera work and wouldn’t let you drive the car. You had to demand to do it. The thing about Aboriginal communities or societies is that we have a different approach to gender than Western society. We are separate. Translated to television, it meant that women did the women’s shows and men did men’s shows; we used women’s crews when we were doing women’s ceremonies and men when we were doing men’s business.<sup>31</sup>*

Many Aboriginal film-makers have expressed the desire to be acknowledged as ‘a film-maker who can tackle any subject’<sup>32</sup> rather than having to necessarily deal with Indigenous issues (Tracey Moffatt and Ivan Sen are two examples). It is a matter of being free to choose—just as women film-makers don’t necessarily want to deal with feminism or ‘women’s issues’. As Bell Hooks has observed, while many black film-makers feel compelled to assume the responsibility for producing resisting images, and ‘in and of itself this desire does not





MY COLOUR, YOUR KIND (DANIELLE MACLEAN, 1997)

undermine artistic integrity, ... it has placed limitations on those artists who allow it to over determine everything they do'.<sup>33</sup> Richard Frankland says that you can 'become categorised as a message giver as opposed to an entertainer'.<sup>34</sup> That Aboriginal film-makers want to be free to explore a diverse range of issues and topics does not lessen the political commitment, it is just one part of who someone is. Rachel Perkins has observed, saying in regard to the release of her feature *Radiance* (1998), that it was 'daunting because I know that all Indigenous work is judged on what has just been done'.<sup>35</sup> The Indigenous Drama Initiative has set a premium benchmark for quality drama, as well as underlined the diversity of Indigenous practice and the skills base in Australia.

### **DISTRIBUTION, EXHIBITION AND AWARDS**

If short films have a unique form, they also enjoy unique opportunities for being viewed by an audience—which after all is the point of making them. In the past, short films were regularly shown before the main feature in cinemas. More recently they can be seen at film festivals as well as non-theatrical outlets. In the future, they may well find an audience via new delivery media such as the Internet and DVDs—indeed, this is already happening.

In a 1989 report to the AFC, Stuart Cunningham interviewed a number of industry professionals regarding short film production in Australia; he found that shorts were 'held in high regard by distributors and exhibitors. Their cultural significance, aesthetic value, and innovations in style rank them highly by international standards'.<sup>36</sup> While this might have been the rhetoric, the reality is that shorts went out in a blazing campaign run by the exhibitors:

'No More Boring Shorts' in the 1980s. However, since 1999 a number of exhibitors have occasionally screened shorts with features as an ongoing element of their programming (although film-makers earn little from this source). Although not extensive, opportunities for the theatrical exhibition of short films have been steadily growing in the last decade, due to the many and various festivals and curated programs that feature shorts throughout Australia. Shorts are marketed through being accepted into film festivals, places where other film-makers (potential collaborators), distributors, possibly international and television buyers (depending on the festival) and audiences are able to see the film.

Although there have been many women curating festivals and screenings<sup>37</sup>, there has not been any specific relationship of women film-makers to the exhibition context, with the exception of exhibition programs run by WIFT, SBS or the occasional special exhibition program. WIFT have run the Women on Women Film Festival (WOW) and awards such as 'The Lotties' and 'The Venus Awards'. SBS have played a significant role, especially in regard to short films made by women. In some cases specialist programming has been pro-active in promoting films made by women, for example, in 1987 SBS purchased numerous films made by women film-makers dealing with women's issues.<sup>38</sup> Organisations such as the AFI, Queer Screen, Sydney Intermedia Network and many others have taken up roles in exhibiting shorts.

Shorts have a strong presence at awards, and festivals with awards; for example the ATOM<sup>39</sup> Awards, Dendy Awards, City of Melbourne Short Film Awards (MIFF<sup>40</sup>). Awards validate short films as 'a respectable "art" form';<sup>41</sup> they rank and categorise, and also play a role in recognising and encouraging film-makers. They encourage critics and reviewers to produce discourse that focuses on the finalists and winners—a group of films already pre-selected by the festival. Festivals and awards are essential to showcase the film-makers and the film to large audiences and potential distributors. At the Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards women have excelled in the non-feature categories in recent years. At the 1999 AFI Awards, women won numerous awards in the Non Feature Film category including Best Short Fiction Film, Best Screenplay in a Short Fiction Film, Best Sound, and Best Editing in Non-Feature Films<sup>42</sup>—the latter two being a significant achievement given that women have been under-represented in terms of numbers in technical areas in the Australian film industry generally.<sup>43</sup> At the 2000 AFI Awards, women made a robust showing winning Best Short Fiction, Best Screenplay in A Short Fiction Film and achieved one nomination (of four) in both the Best Sound and Best Cinematography in a Non-Feature Film; an achievement given how few women cinematographers there are in Australia (see Jane Castle's exploration of this in this book). In 2001 women were nominated in every category (except cinematography) and won five<sup>44</sup> out of the nine awards, including Best Short Fiction. In some categories women dominated the 2001 non-feature AFI Awards receiving three out of four nominations in the categories of Animation, Editing and Best Short Film.

Television has provided a limited market for shorts. While there has been some programming on commercial channels (eg, Channel 7's *Short and Curlies*), most opportunities for shorts on television over the last decade have tended to be in the non-commercial sector.

SBS and its program *Eat Carpet* have played a significant role in exhibiting shorts over a long period, and there have been numerous ABC program packages (such as *Shortwave* and *The Australian Collection*). *Eat Carpet* producer Joy Toma has written that, although this is starting to change, short programming is broadly not undertaken by the commercial networks: 'this is particularly the case with work that requires subtitling, is less than the television half hour or is non-narrative in form'.<sup>45</sup> In the latter part of the 1990s, cable television providers have been purchasing shorts (for example the Comedy Channel and Arena). Some fear though that the commercial networks may have a 'conservatising' influence on shorts.<sup>46</sup> However, it is true that a number of shorts have been produced via the support of pay television (for example the Arena–Cinemedea Accord).

Financial returns to short film-makers are low. If the film-makers were extraordinarily lucky, the film might make up to US \$30,000<sup>47</sup> in sales spread over a number of years. An individual sale might be worth \$100 a minute, when 'it may cost about \$5000 a minute to make' (in 2001 it was around \$10,000).<sup>48</sup> The *Short and Curlies* program on Channel 7 in 1996 only paid \$150 a minute 'making an hour of commercial television for less than \$6,500, which is cheap television'.<sup>49</sup> These anecdotes illustrate that only very low budget, and very successful, shorts can hope to return any investment. As film-maker Sarah Neal has said, 'it is rare that a short film will ever recoup its costs'.<sup>50</sup>

Over recent years moving-image technology has evolved, with digital projection, storage and distribution promising to 'transform the ways we consume and pay for moving-image media'.<sup>51</sup> In terms of delivery and access for audiences, new technologies may create further opportunities for shorts with digital television, the Internet and Digital Video Disc (DVD). The internet has offered a new window in a globalised exhibition chain and shorts are exhibited on film web sites such as AtomFilms, MediaTrip, iFilm.net, Dfilm and ShortBuzz. The world wide web has expanded opportunities for all moving-image production. The ATOM web site had nine shorts<sup>52</sup> by Australian women directors listed in February 2001. Among them were Amanda Brotchie's *Break and Enter* (1999), Emma-Kate Croghan's *Desire* (1992), Kelli Simpson's *Two Girls and A Baby* (1998) and Wendy Chandler's *Vengeance* (1994).

Even on the web, 'the sheer volume of competing film product is rapidly creating a virtual marketplace as crowded as its real-world counterpart'<sup>53</sup> and many of these companies have struggled. Journalist Kate Stables reported that in 1999, the web threw up 'around 30 online film sites' saying that where 'film-makers were once leery of web exposure, since so much of film's value rests on exclusivity, such sites have now become key in creating the kind of profile that will mark a movie out in the crowd'.<sup>54</sup> Film-makers might only get a share of advertising revenue, or perhaps gain a relatively small fee, but potentially could sell video or DVD copies, and they have the opportunity to gain a wider audience as well. Australian film-maker Sam MacGeorge, whose film was acquired by Pop.com after it was seen at the St Kilda Film Festival, explains that 'there just isn't enough money for film bodies like the AFI to distribute us all. I see the internet as a new way of distributing. With short films, you are so incredibly lucky just to make anything back at all, so to get any exposure is great'.<sup>55</sup>

## CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS IN WOMEN'S SHORT FILM PRODUCTION IN AUSTRALIA

In the 1970s and 1980s, many short films made by women in Australia (and elsewhere) could be described as distinctly feminist, or as feminist countercinema<sup>56</sup> (particularly shorts). But in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century there was a shift away from such readily identifiable feminist constructions. From this perspective 'a women's film culture' is less overt in the current industry. This is not to say that women, or their work, are not informed by or interested in gender or feminism; rather, these are among a range of influences that might provide content on which women might want to reflect—as are contexts such as ethnicity or sexuality.

Just as the feature sector has moved in the later part of the 1990s to embrace a new pluralism, so has short film production. The new pluralism in contemporary films could be seen as emerging in part from a climate informed by postmodernism and postfeminism; and also, because of an increasing number of women entering the industry (including Indigenous women and women from diverse cultural backgrounds). This shift is characterised by a reflection of identity as fluid, and a representation that embraces differences in gender, race and sexuality. The directions seen in short films in Australia by women film-makers in the contemporary period is diverse and eclectic—what follows below is a discussion of some of them.

Strong thematic inclinations in women's short film production are the reflections on identity and sexuality—from a female perspective. Examples are numerous and include Belinda Chayko's 1990 *Swimming*, a narrative film where a young girl experiences the death of her mother and makes a cinema verite style film about it; Georgia Wallace-Crabbe's 1993 *Life Forms*, a rites of passage film where Emily, a 14 year old, stamps out her own sexual identity; and Jackie Farkas' 1991 experimental film *Amelia Rose Towers*—an exploration of the evolution of sexual identity and the isolation of adolescence. Other films, such as Samantha Lang's *Audacious* (1994), deal with the physical and emotional complexities of adult sexual behaviour—an area often seen to be absent in Australian films.<sup>57</sup> *Audacious* is a tale of a couple's foray into sexual fantasy via the internet; it ventures into the terrain of sexual incompatibility, the lulls in long term relationships, and a woman's search for a satisfying sex life. From a female perspective, *Audacious* also explores the role of fantasy in emotional life. A recent moving exploration of adolescent female identity is Cate Shortland's *Joy* (1999), a film that focuses on the confusion of adolescent sexual identity as well as the boredom and alienation of adolescence.

*Joy* is a stylised narrative, sharing a feature with many mainstream films of the 1990s, which Adrian Martin has described as 'televisual'.<sup>58</sup> Aesthetically, it has been argued that films made by women are more circular and centrally focused<sup>59</sup> and *Joy* is like this with the female character at the centre and her struggle with an idea of herself heavily imposed by her parents. It explores the process of identity formation as closely bound to the way we think about ourselves and construct narratives of 'self'—as well as being both social and cultural constructions. It features captions such as 'No man in his right mind will ever love you'—



JOY, CATE SHORTLAND, 1999

parental comments that scar, and which are strongly reminiscent of Tracey Moffatt's 1994 photographic series *Scarred for Life* which features captions such as: 'Her father's nickname for her was "useless"'. Film-maker Solrun Hoas, whose films include *Aya*, (1990), has said that as a woman, she brings 'an interest in human relationships, ... a certain kind of sensitivity to what goes on—on the inside, what isn't obvious on the outside, a certain attention to detail, and to subtexts, and structurally ... a circular structure that is not necessarily a set up, a pay off and a resolution type of structure'.<sup>60</sup> Hoas refers to repetition, echoings, interweaving elements, layering or texturing common in women's work and which is also evident in *Joy* (which has sound and image repetition and dislocation).

Some short films can be read as sites of political intervention, or as explorations of 'Otherness'. Although feminist issues are not in the forefront in either short or feature production, they are present in the works of some film-makers, for example in experimental works such as Janet Merewether's 1998 *Cheap Blonde* (an exploration of the cinema as the history of men filming women), and Rebecca Gallagher's 2000 film *A Kind of Portrait* (which questions the impact of media imagery on women still forming a sense of themselves). In terms of race, the films made by Indigenous film-makers are addressing gaps that are obvious in the feature sector—where the relationships between Aborigines and colonisers are generally not explored (for example, Moffatt's films and those produced as part of the AFC's IDI initiative). Migrant stories from a female perspective (and particularly European view) have been told in films by film-makers such as Monica Pellizzari (see Rose Capp's chapter in this



book) and others such as Ana Kokkinos' films (for example, *Antamosi* (1991)). Shorts on migrant experience from a non-European viewpoint are few but there are examples, such as Cate Shortland's *Flowergirl* (1999), which explores the experiences of three young Japanese sharing an apartment in Bondi Beach. There are some short documentaries such as Melissa Kyu-Jung Lee's 1999 films *Soshin' In Your Dreams* and *Secret Women's Business* (the later examines the culture of a women's bath house in Kings Cross, Sydney). In features there have been numerous recent films centring around older characters<sup>61</sup> and they are equally visible in shorts, particularly shorts from film schools, such as Erica Glynn's *Agnes, Maude and Pearly Too* (1999) and Sofya Gollan's *Roses* (1999).

### POSTFEMINIST DIRECTIONS

Many women coming into film-making in the last decade, particularly those in their twenties or thirties, have approached film-making from 'postfeminist', and also postmodern perspectives. Both terms have been in circulation for decades, although postfeminism is not often defined (partly because it is difficult to define and partly because it is constantly evolving). Postfeminism essentially describes the re-looking at, or re-engaging with feminisms to see how relevant they are. Ann Brooks describes it as the theoretical meeting ground between 'feminism and anti-foundationist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and postcolonialism'.<sup>62</sup> In my view it does not imply that feminism is over but rather, it is an evolution of a movement that has always engaged in self-criticism and change. Post-feminism is largely a response to criticisms of feminism, for example, of the feminist subject having been constructed as white and heterosexual (thus excluding ethnic minorities and lesbians) as well as a response to what was seen as a lack of focus on issues of sexual difference and identity.<sup>63</sup>

Emma-Kate Croghan's *Sexy Girls, Sexy Appliances*<sup>64</sup> is postmodern in its parody and pastiche of the 1950s. In suspender belts and plunging necklines, the women in this three-minute gag film eroticise the domestic: immersing themselves in the pleasure of slapping sides of raw meat with long painted nails and enjoying the vibrations of various household electrical appliances. They are sexy but overblown, their voracious sexual appetites, their animality, the portrayal of seepage, their desire for ecstatic experience and their excess move them into the domain of the 'female grotesque' and the comedy relies on us recognising it as

such. The 'female grotesque' is a transgressor who over-steps divisions between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour—with her 'unruly' or over-powering body or attitude, she clashes and upsets rules and breaks 'set' boundaries.<sup>65</sup> In doing this, she forces us to question those rules and can incite us to change them. However, it is not so much Croghan's sexy girls as female grotesques that makes them postfeminist, but rather their conviction that women possess power, like Madonna who uses society's gender ideals and role reverses them—they challenge stereotypical ideas of female sexuality. They are not ideal reconstructed feminists, and they don't reject the home and domesticity. As women they experience power through their sexuality—they do it ecstatically and without men. Which is not to say that they don't have men, they just are free to experience their sexuality independently of them. *Sexy Girls* is a marker to a postfeminist outlook that is more fully explored in Croghan's subsequent feature *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996)—a film that rejects values placed on the 'normal' heterosexual subject versus the 'abnormal' homosexual subject.<sup>66</sup>

On contemporary streets, young women promenade wearing t-shirts sporting words like 'bitch' or 'chick' and to some degree they embody the cliché of the postfeminist woman as tough, sexy and irreverent. However, more than a fashion statement or a cliché, this can be read as political. They are reclaiming offensive words that have made women feel uncomfortable, outcast, or even deviant (a strategy also employed by gay activists to reject humanly made dyads such as homosexual/heterosexual by reclaiming queer and dyke<sup>67</sup>). It is effectively a move to reclaim power and to advertise that they have it; Deborah Strutt's film *My Cunt*<sup>68</sup> (1996) similarly reclaims 'cunt'. It is a monologue featuring comedian Maude Davey who verbally explores the manifestations of female genitalia—without any visual references to it.<sup>69</sup> *My Cunt* is postfeminist in its exploration of identity politics. Like Croghan's *Sexy Girls*, Maude in *My Cunt* actively resists prescriptive and traditional attitudes about how women should experience their sexual identities. Davey offers a character that celebrates female sexuality but not the patriarchal construct 'femininity'<sup>70</sup>—which it resists or questions. It proclaims and rejoices in womanhood—but not womanhood as constructed by patriarchy. Essentialism is not feared because the feminine is not presented as fixed or stable—that is, feminine *identities* rather than identity is a central premise. Strutt and Davey disrupt the status quo by not adhering to social constructions of how a woman might behave or what she might say and her dialogue is not about equality but about difference.

## CONCLUSION

As is evident from the foregoing, the output of women's short film production in Australia has been prolific, spanning a diverse range of genres, styles and forms. As Robson and Zalcock have said, 'short film is an integral part of women's film culture'.<sup>71</sup> This culture has evolved from distinctive feminist forms in the 1970s and 1980s to contemporary times where women have had access and training, and are tending to work in the 'mainstream'<sup>72</sup> rather than in female groups.

While gender is not necessarily an explicit issue, sensitivities to representations of women on screen are evident in the large number of films that tell stories from a female point of

view, and which centre on women characters. Contemporary visions are largely postfeminist (rather than feminist).

While it is impossible to argue conclusively in a chapter this length, certain common threads can be traced, such as an interest in outsiders: an awareness of women (and minorities) as 'Other' and a consequent push towards plural discourse and emphasis on women's difference.

Women film-makers making short films are among the most lauded in the industry (Rachel Perkins, Tracey Moffatt, Rachel Griffiths, Sally Riley, Rachel Ward and Jackie McKimmie—just to name a few). Women's achievement in the form has been acknowledged at our premier film awards, where women have won the AFI Award for Best Short Fiction Film for the last four years in a row (1998-2001).<sup>73</sup> Given all of the above, it is apparent that short films will remain an integral part of women's film culture well into the future.

**Note:** Since 1992, the Australian Film Commission has maintained a shorts database that includes films made since 1988. They also publish a booklet that is a database of short films; the first one is *Australian Short Films 1991-1993*.

**Acknowledgement:** I would like to thank the wonderful staff at the Australian Film Institute for their assistance: Chris Brophy, Aysen Mustafa, Jane Susak, Charlotte Henry and Kylie Muller.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jocelyn Robson & Beverley Zalcock, *Girls' Own Stories, Australian and New Zealand Women's Films*, Scarlet Press, London, 1997, p.30.

<sup>2</sup> WIFT is: Women in Film and Television.

<sup>3</sup> See a listing of 58 Australian Festivals and competitions which screen short works in Australian Film Commission: *Australian Short Films 1996-1997*, Woolloomooloo: Sydney, 1998. Or see the AFC web page which has a handout of Australian Film, TV, Video & New Media Festivals and Awards: <http://www.afc.gov.au> or Freecall the AFC in Australia for a hard copy on 1800 22 6615.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Dzenis, 'Short Film', in Ina Bertrand, Brian McFarlane & Geoff

Mayer (eds.) *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999, pp. 447- 450. See this source for a very good succinct overview of the history of short film production in Australia (although her analysis is not from a gendered perspective).

<sup>5</sup> Jackie McKimmie quoted in Julie James Bailey, *Reel Women: Working in Film and Television*, AFTRS, Sydney, 1999, p.223.

<sup>6</sup> John Polson in Australian Film Commission: *Australian Short Films 1995-1996*, AFC, Woolloomooloo: Sydney, August, 1996, 'Foreword.'

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Short, quoted in *ibid.*, 'Introduction'.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Campion quoted in Margaret Smith, 'Australian Short Film', *Media*

*Information Australia*, no.300, August, 1984, p.60.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Allen said this at the introduction to her film at the 1999, 48<sup>th</sup> Melbourne International Film Festival (Closing Night).

<sup>11</sup> Anna Dzenis, *op.cit.* p. 449.

<sup>12</sup> See Lisa French, 'Interpretations of Amelia Rose Towers', *Senses of Cinema*, no. 1, December, 1999: <http://www.innersense.com.au/senses>

<sup>13</sup> Available from the VCA.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Martin, 'The Short Film', in Scott Murray, *Australian Cinema*, Allen & Unwin, 1994, Sydney, p.207.

<sup>15</sup> Lynden Barber, 'Outtakes', *Weekend Australian Review*, 16/5/98, p. 20.



- <sup>16</sup> Adrian Martin, 'The Short Film', in Scott Murray, op.cit. p.206.
- <sup>17</sup> Robson & Zalcock, op. cit. p. 32.
- <sup>18</sup> See: Dave Sargent, 'How to review the 1981 Greater Union Awards', *Filmnews*, vol. xi, no.6., June, 1981, p.8.
- <sup>19</sup> Pauline Adamek, *Filmnews*, vol. xxv/4, June, 1995, p.10.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Craig Kirkwood, 'Show me the money', *Cinema Papers*, no. 125, June, 1998, p.12.
- <sup>22</sup> Tania Angelini, 'Short films set to Pop', *The Age*, 8/8/00, p. 5.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Young Filmmakers Award', Queensland.
- <sup>24</sup> Sarah Neal, 'Wanted: investors who love to lose money', *Courier-Mail*, 4/1/97, p.19.
- <sup>25</sup> CAMA stands for the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association
- <sup>26</sup> See the Australia Council report, 'Australia's Indigenous Arts' at: [www.ozco.gov.au/resources/publications/artform/aia\\_newmedia.pdf](http://www.ozco.gov.au/resources/publications/artform/aia_newmedia.pdf)
- <sup>27</sup> The Indigenous Drama Initiative is organised by the AFC and sponsored by SBS Independent and the AFTRS, as well as the State film agencies of Queensland, NSW and Western Australia.
- <sup>28</sup> See Val Saunders quoted in Amanda Meade, 'Shifting Visions', *The Australian*, 29/6/1998, p. 16.
- <sup>29</sup> Andrew L Urban, 'All the right MOVIES', *Weekend Australian*: 'Review', 5/7/97, p.10.
- <sup>30</sup> Film-maker Wesley Enoch quoted in 'Diverse Faces of Aboriginality', *RealTime/OnScreen*, June-July, no.25, 1998, p.20.
- <sup>31</sup> Rachel Perkins quoted in Annette Blonski (ed.), *Shared Visions: Women in Television*, AFC, Sydney, 1999, p. 64.
- <sup>32</sup> Ivan Sen quoted in Suzanne Spinner, 'No more lap lap and spear', *RealTime/OnScreen*, October-November, no.33, 1999, p.9.
- <sup>33</sup> Bell Hooks, *Race, Sex and Class at the Movies*, Routledge, 1996, p.71. As Hooks also points out, belonging to a particular racial group does not mean one will automatically create images that work against the racist mythology deeply imbedded in the mainstream—or that simply having black faces will dispel racism given colonization by dominant ways of looking and knowing.
- <sup>34</sup> Richard Frankland quoted in Catherine Taylor, 'Black film-makers tell their tales', *The Australian*, 6/9/99, p.20.
- <sup>35</sup> Rachel Perkins quoted in Annette Blonski (1999), op. cit. p.67.
- <sup>36</sup> Stuart Cunningham, The Big Picture on Short Films, *Filmnews*, vol. xx/5, June 1990, p. 8.
- <sup>37</sup> For example, in 2001 Anne Demy-Geroe is the Director of the Brisbane International Film Festival, the Sydney Film Festival is directed by Gail Lake, the AFI Exhibition Manager is Clare Stewart and Sandra Straulig directed MIFF 1997-2000.
- <sup>38</sup> Stuart Cunningham, 'The Big Picture on Short Films', *Filmnews*, vol. xx/5, June 1990, p. 11.
- <sup>39</sup> The Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) Awards are presented to short, educational films, videos and television.
- <sup>40</sup> MIFF is: The Melbourne International Film Festival.
- <sup>41</sup> Dave Sargent, op. cit.
- <sup>42</sup> The 1999 winners were Best Short Fiction: *Break & Enter* (Amada Brotchie, producer), Best Screenplay: *Break & Enter* (Trudy Hellier), Best Sound in a Non-Feature Film: *Sadness* (Pat Fiske, Livia Ruzic & Peter Walker) and Best Editing: *Hephzibah* (Veronika Jenet).
- <sup>43</sup> For analysis of the representation of women in the Australian film, television and video industries see: AFC & the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, "What do I wear for a Hurricane?": *Women In Australian Film, Television, Video & Radio Industries*, AFC, Sydney, 1992.
- <sup>44</sup> Other winners were Rachel Ward for Best Short Fiction (*The Big House*), Sarah Watt for Best Short Animation (*Living with Happiness*), Robin Anderson as a co-winner for Best Documentary and Best Sound in a Non-Feature Film (*Facing the Music*), Best Editing in a Non-Feature Film: Emma Hay (*Secret Safari*).
- <sup>45</sup> Joy Toma, quoted in Australian Film Commission: *Australian Short Films 1994*, AFC, Woolloomooloo, Sydney, 1995, p.'Foreword'.
- <sup>46</sup> See Lynden Barber, quoting Joy Toma in 'Making it short and sweet', *The Australian*, 4/9/97, p. 15.
- <sup>47</sup> Stephen Jenner, 'The Short Film Biz, Part 2: Distribution', *IF Independent Filmmakers Magazine*, no. 9, November, 1998, p.56.
- <sup>48</sup> Sarah Neal, op. cit. The current (2001) funding ratio for shorts is now around \$10,000 a minute. This is the rate paid by Film Victoria's Independent Film-makers Fund.
- <sup>49</sup> Joy Toma quoted in 'Short Shrift', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2/9/96, p.2.
- <sup>50</sup> Sarah Neal, op. cit.
- <sup>51</sup> Editor, 'Software hardcore', *Sight And Sound*, no.4, April, 2000, p.5.
- <sup>52</sup> This is 27% of the total: there were a total of 34 shorts listed.
- <sup>53</sup> Kate Stables, 'Indie Exposure', *Sight and Sound*, no. 4, April 2000, p.5.
- <sup>54</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> Tania Angelini, 'Short films set to Pop', *The Age*, 8/8/2000, p.5. Note: The AFI ceased to distribute films in 2002.
- <sup>56</sup> Annette Kuhn defines counter cinema as cinema which operates against, questions, and subverts the dominant cinema ... See: Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982. p.157.
- <sup>57</sup> Shane Danielsen, 'The Snigger Factor', *The Weekend Australian*, Arts, 21-22/4/1, p.R.22.
- <sup>58</sup> Ben Goldsmith explains that Adrian Martin has described Australian films in the 1990s as increasingly 'televisional'. See Ian Craven (ed.), *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, Frank Cass, London, 2001, p.127.
- <sup>59</sup> Lucy Lippard quoted in Terry Barrett op. cit. p.49 has said that women's art making can be distinguished from men's because of qualities found more often in the work of women than that of men: 'central focus (often 'empty', often circular or oval), parabolic baglike forms, obsessive line and detail, veiled strata, tactile or sensuous surfaces and forms, associative fragmentation, autobiographical emphasis'. In some

quarters ideas of female sensibility or aesthetic are seen to be reinforcing characteristics socially assigned to the sexes—Barrett outlines these views also.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with the Solrun Hoas by Lisa French, 6/9/94.

<sup>61</sup> For example: *Mushrooms* (Alan Madden, 1994), *Road to Nhill* (Sue Brooks, 1996) and *Innocence* (Paul Cox, 2000).

<sup>62</sup> Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.* p.8.

<sup>64</sup> Available from the VCA.

<sup>65</sup> This definition is paraphrased from an unpublished paper by Terrie Waddell. For more on the female grotesque, see Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Routledge, New York, 1995 or see Terrie Waddell's wonderful piece on Absolutely Fabulous: 'The Grotesque, Dionysos, Trickster and the Patsy/Edina Dyad: Archetypal Fusion and Absolutely Fabulous', *Practice: A Journal of Visual, Performing and Media Arts*, no.1, Summer 1996/97, pp.22-32. In current and past

popular culture examples of the female grotesque are many, traced from Mae West onwards particularly on television characters such as Elle Mc Feast, Noelene Donaher in *Sylvania Waters*, Peg Bundy in *Married With Children*, Fran Fine in *The Nanny*, Lucy in *I Love Lucy*, Madonna, Roseanne Arnold and Patsy and Edina of *Absolutely Fabulous*.

<sup>66</sup> As David Callahan has observed, Mia (Frances O'Connor) and Danni (Radha Mitchell) 'represent their lesbianism with an ease that clearly suggests a liberation from the homogenising constraints of the past in this area'. See David Callahan, 'His Natural Whiteness: Modes of Ethnic Presence and Absence in Some Recent Australian Films', in Ian Craven (ed.), *op. cit.* p.101. However, while it is important as a cinematic representation of lesbianism—rare in Australian cinema—it is a conservative and middle class representation and, as Sally Hussey has argued elsewhere in this book, this film does not deal with the 'specifics of lesbian sexuality'.

<sup>67</sup> See Terry Barrett, *op. cit.* p.59.

<sup>68</sup> Available from the National Library Collection, through Cinemedia and listed in the catalogue as *My Cxxt*—not

*My Cunt*.

<sup>69</sup> Although there are no visual images of female genitalia, when the film was sent to the lab for processing, two film labs refused to work on it on the basis of the title and soundtrack. Davey was quoted as saying 'how many times have I had to listen to boys talking about their dicks in the name of entertainment?' See: 'C Word 'Grossly Offensive' say Film Houses: 'Cxxt' Film Ban!', *Melbourne Star Observer*, 14/3/97, p. 4. Eventually it was completed and screened at the 1997 Melbourne Queer Film and Video Festival.

<sup>70</sup> 'Femininity' connotes socially determined qualities of women such as sweetness and delicacy.

<sup>71</sup> Robson & Zalcock, *op. cit.* p.30.

<sup>72</sup> By this I just mean within the same systems as any other short film-makers—funded, exhibited and distributed with all other productions.

<sup>73</sup> 1998 *Vengeance*—Wendy Chandler, 1999 *Break & Enter*—Amanda Brotchie, 2000 *Confessions Of A Headhunter*—Sally Riley, 2001 *The Big House*—Rachel Ward.

# DRAWING TIME

## Some threads in animated films made by Australian women

ANN SHENFIELD

**T**here is a type of contemporary independent animation by Australian women that distinguishes itself both in terms of aesthetics and by the types of narratives that are the central concern.

*There's an army of women ... who come to share stories of pain, joy, life and grief.*

*Small Treasures Sarah Watt (1995)*

Characterised by an intimacy of scale, these women's animations have little in common with either the 'toon' genre or live-action film-making. The film-makers are asserting themselves as *short film-*



ONA FULL MOON, (LEE WHITMORE, 1997)

makers/animators who have something to say that can be effectively said in a concise and visually poetic medium whilst also proving that they can narratively pack a powerful punch.

### **OBSESSIVENESS AS A PREREQUISITE FOR A CAREER PATH**

A majority of the non-studio based animation that is being created in Australia is made by one person/woman on her own in a backyard studio. There is an equivalence to labour intensive domestic craft forms such as embroidery and tapestry that is likewise created stitch by stitch, or frame by frame. There is a labour-of-love aspect to them both in the content, a story that needs to be told, and also in the painstaking genesis of the production, which is often over years, and, in the case of animation, after the funding has ceased. Homes are regularly makeshift studios and production roles cover assistant animator/babysitter.

Within the broader film-making context, animation is an area particularly appealing to women.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to speculate why this might be. One possible explanation is that animation is not as intimidating as a starting point for film-makers given that there is less reliance on other people such as actors or crew. A benefit of this is the ability to work almost completely independently while retaining tight control of most aspects of the production.

Another possibly appealing factor that may draw some women to animation is that it is not a prominent area of filmmaking. Animated films don't tend to 'hog' the spotlight—especially as they are usually short films. Perhaps this is equally why successful women animators don't tend to have high profiles within the broader community and, despite success at the highest level of film festivals, their awards are rarely publicized. This can be a particularly frustrating side to an often fickle industry, where there is no ongoing support for women in the animation area. As explained below, the odds are very much stacked against pursuing animated films as a long-term career in Australia.

Funding guidelines in the short film area have to date focused (rightly or wrongly) on assisting 'up and coming' film-makers with the view that a short film presents a progression towards a feature film. For the animator this invariably means that the more experienced film-maker has limited options as their career progresses and it is ironic that as one's skills improve, there are fewer avenues for making films. In the independent animation area this is an unfortunate and undeniable reality; Sabrina Schmid, a truly gifted animator, left Australia in order to maintain a career in animation. The fact that she is internationally regarded and is represented in a definitive English text on animation, *Animation*<sup>2</sup> was of no assistance to her in Australia where she sought desperately to continue her work.<sup>3</sup>

To be an animator requires obsessiveness, knowing in advance that there are 1440 frames per minute somehow to complete. This requires tenacity, as does having a career as an animator, given that it is such a difficult career path. For example, it is not unusual to have to supplement work with other jobs in order to continue to animate. A significant number of



SMALL TREASURES, (SARAH WATT, 1995)

the animated films that have achieved success have been made as student films or first films, perhaps because this is one of the only times when there is a supportive, nurturing environment for the would-be independent animator.

### AN ANALYSIS OF SELF

Documentary-like in style, and often using first and second person narrative voice-overs, many Australian women animators fictionalise events, so that the nature of the visuals implies a metaphoric quality, or an abstract emotional content to the work. This aspect of visual abstraction resonates in the animated medium and the ultimate effect can have more in common with poetry than most forms of cinema. Sarah Watt's *Small Treasures* (1995) is one such film. With refreshing candor, it takes us on a journey through 'hormone hell'. It is such a representative portrait of pregnancy through insufferable childbirth classes to manic nesting that the ensuing stillbirth shocks with its heartfelt immediacy. The film is artlessly simple in its construction, using the first person narrative. The audience is immediately engaged by the narrator's combination of delight and ambivalence about her pregnancy and the future that it holds. Rachel Griffith's voice-over narration has a humour and authenticity that is furthered by the unpredictable course of the pregnancy.

*Small Treasures* has a connection to traditional animation in that the artwork was created on acetate cell layers, although there is a sparkling freshness to the imagery which has more of a loose, painterly approach not often associated with this medium. Watt conveys the Australian beach in vibrant oranges contrasted with translucent blues of the underwater world.



She revisits this terrain in her most recent short film *Local Dive* (1998), where she focuses on adolescents at a swimming pool and observes another aspect to hormones at play.

Therese Ritchie's graduating film *Tango* (1999) presents an authentic and frank account of her friend Sue's experience of bowel cancer. A documentary-style animation, *Tango* is visually told primarily through domestic objects: tea cups, fairy cakes, a pet dog and yellow duck pyjamas. The voice-over tells of the horrendous repercussions of cancer and radiotherapy in every aspect of Sue's life. The juxtaposition of the ordinary imagery to the confronting nature of the dialogue gives the film a compelling humanity and offers a rare insight into the everydayness of life with cancer. Ritchie manages to evoke a gentle underlying humour and strength to Sue's character that gives poignancy to this understated work.

Intimate in scale and self-reflective in tone, many Australian women film-makers draw on complex life experiences that have essentially reshaped their teller. There is a sense of subdued emotionalism that is understated and sensitively presented. The journey that the films take their audience on is generally one of identification through comprehension of the personal narrative as it is presented. An example of this is Lee Whitmore's presentation of her childhood self in *Ned Wethered* (1983), a film about the profound effect on her of her relationship with a family friend, Ned Wethered, whose love of storytelling and photography unconsciously affected Whitmore's own later career choices. She presents her childhood

self encountering Ned, through to his eventual demise, while her adult self re-interprets his powerful impression on her in later life. Ned's story is somehow intrinsically bound up in Whitmore's own life path but not in a way that she states explicitly, more in an intangible metaphoric way that she seeks to hold through the intimacy of the animated medium.

Whitmore's more recent film *On A Full Moon* (1997) similarly deals with a passage of interconnected events surrounding her daughter's birth and her mother's death. The film shifts effortlessly between the expansive and unpeopled terrain of a lake at night (a boat drifts on the water, a duck bobs to the surface) and the immediate present world of motherhood where there is little time or space for grief. In both of these films Whitmore suggests a lyricism, both in the story telling and in the choice of animation style. Through the use of shimmering pastel drawings that effortlessly blend into each other the animation highlights its own dirty smudginess, a quality distinctly at odds with the world of traditional cell animation where colours stay within defined lines and dirt and dust are eschewed.

### A DOORWAY TO CHILDHOOD

Sabrina Schmid's film *Once As If a Balloon* (1989) takes the audience back to the animator's childhood, or rather to a moment in childhood, caught in original photographs which have now been animated. In the process Schmid captures the fleeting essence of a moment as reviewed through memory and the animated medium. A child is depicted in the European countryside, being gently tossed into the air. Is it in the child's imagination that she feels herself to be a balloon, or has the metaphor arisen through the adult looking back at these images and trying to work out herself and the genesis of her creative spark? Through Schmid's wondrous child-like animation drawn over the top of the photographs, there is an expansive feeling of playfulness that evokes childhood both in the boldness of the colours and the freeness of the drawing. The naivety of the drawings works to synthesise the past with the present and to literally animate the past. Sabrina Schmid has said in regard to the making of *Elephant Theatre* (1985), that:

*I did not like to think in terms of a narrative story as such, but I did want to suggest a very loose storyline, or the inklings of a story, to venture into the absurd and also humorous, to suggest the beginnings of a story left open-ended, within a visual context.*<sup>4</sup>

In *Elephant Theatre* Schmid creates an authentic doorway into childhood through her character Shane, who has created a miniature theatre that fits into the palm of his hand. The audience suspends disbelief as the film speaks to the child in us, drawing us into a world in which such a marvelous theatre truly exists. We identify with the two dimensional cardboard character Bob who is entirely transported by the elephant theatre. With remarkable playfulness Schmid unlocks the world of childhood imagination. She dangles a key to what is most precious and irretrievable about childhood, where all is possible and over a thousand elephants can dance and perform tricks in a tiny theatre. The vibrancy of the primary colours is especially enhanced by the black background and the smeary feel of the childlike painting that has a tactile quality like a young child's scrawl. The theatre itself has

an old-fashioned sparkling jewel-like quality to it and though it is created as a hand colored background, there is something oddly nostalgic about it, which is furthered by the use of barrel organ music that powerfully evokes times past. Schmid revisits this world of the child in her later film *Midriffini* (1994).

Other women animators exploring childhood include Pamela Woods with her film *Kitchen* (1993) and Sue Stamp with *Nan Is In A Box* (1994). Sue Stamp's hand drawn animation, *Nan Is In A Box*, is a quiet film obliquely about a grandmother's death as largely perceived through the uncomprehending child/grandson's point of view. Her more recent work *The Windwheel* (1998) depicts a moment in childhood at a fun fair where the focus is on the unspoken nature of the parent/child relationship. Also focused on childhood, Pamela Woods uses the words of poet Maddox Ford as a starting point for her ingenious short animated film *Kitchen*, a film about childhood impressions of a particular domestic space. There is a compelling and unsettling tone to the film as the poet describes, in playful terms, his feelings of love for, and intimidation by, the kitchen. Woods subtly brings the kitchen to life, animating it with three-dimensional cut outs integrated with collage. While retaining a sense of naive playfulness, Woods somehow manages to evoke the blackness of Maddox Ford's depiction of a privileged Victorian childhood.

### **HANDMADE TECHNIQUES**

The films described in this chapter reflect the diversity of the techniques with which women animators in Australia work. In my view there is a preference for animation that is more painterly and fluid rather than either traditional cell or 3d computer animation. Perhaps it is this 'hands-on' quality, or the immediacy of such a tactile approach, which appeals to women animators, for example Amanda Coleman's *The Stupid Piano* (1995), a linocut animation. It tells a story of a piano that is transported from holiday to holiday in the face of the resentment of the child, who feels oppressed by the enforced gaiety that the piano represents for her. Likewise is Cath Murphy's *Like Drowning* (1998), a film shot onto a clay slab. Created by etching directly into the clay slab and rubbing over the lines under the camera to redraw the following frame, Murphy depicts a boy's drowning death and the effect it has not only on his surviving brother, but also on his mother, who relives the drowning in her every breath. The technique used gives the film a distinctive quality at one with the outback world which it depicts and also elicits the mother's impossible psychic state, which audiences are able to visualise, in her every breath.

In *Driving Home* (1999) Susan Kim economically and lyrically evokes her childhood experience as a Korean Australian. The film explores the cross-cultural divide that separates her from her father, and the complexity of this relationship. Created like Caroline Leaf's influential work, *The Street* (1994), the technique involves positioning the camera above the artwork and painting straight onto the glass below. The film has a warm intensity to it and an abstract quality that fits well with the intangible nature of the relationship that Kim explores.



In the creation of many of the films described here, there is a directness to the creation of the artwork, devised as they were, at least partially, under the camera. The artwork is systematically made and shot, then systematically destroyed. The only life that the artwork has is on the frame of film stock. This is quite an ephemeral way to make films and there are many elements that are fraught. It is not unusual with this type of animation to have to re-shoot scenes from scratch or to recreate the artwork from scratch for sundry reasons such as a hair in the camera gate or incorrect exposure.

## BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

The ephemeral quality of the production of many of the animated films described in this chapter crosses into the subject matter of the films—passages of time, whether in childhoods' past, or in depictions of moments of inexpressible grief. They explore the boundaries where words often fail and where what is fragile is the inaccessible. There is a tenuousness and poignancy to this approach to film-making, which attempts to affect the audience in subtle understated ways with themes that are intrinsically emotional landscapes. In their making, the challenge is to say less rather than more, to not overstep bounds and drift into cliché, but to give the experience authenticity and to respect the silent space where there is no room for words. Although the subject matter can be disturbing, these films are not bleak. Most often they have a joyous life-affirming feel which gives them much of their strength.

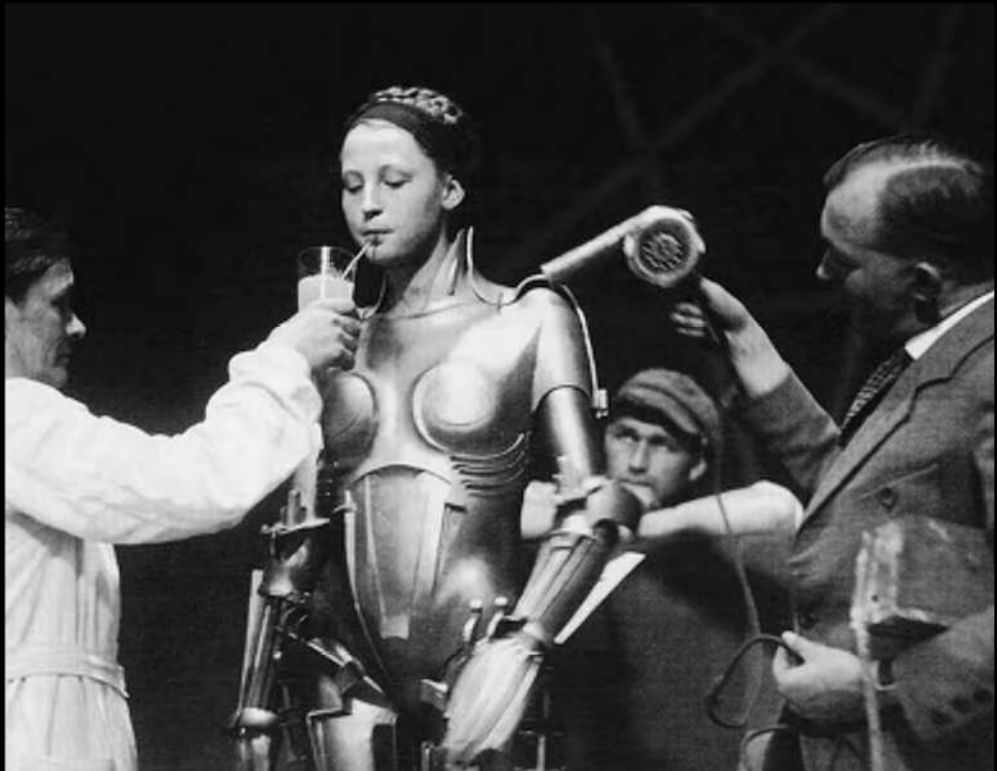
*The stories help. We live.*

Sarah Watt *Small Treasures* (1995)

## Endnotes

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| <p>1 From personal observation as a lecturer in animation where the number of women applicants routinely outnumber those of male applicants, specifically in 1999, the ratio was seven to one in Victorian College of the Arts, Post</p> | <p>Graduate Animation course.</p> <p>2 Roger Noake, <i>Animation</i>, Macdonald Orbis, 1988, p.27.</p> <p>3 Personal communication with the filmmaker.</p> <p>4 Sabrina Schmid, 'Making Elephant</p> | <p>Theatre 1985: A film by Sabina Schmid', <i>Cantrill's Filmnotes</i> No. 51/52, p.52.</p> |
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# FUCK THE MAINSTREAM —LET'S MAKE ART

## Women experimenting with form

JANET MEREWETHER

*It's not only what you say, it's the way that you say it ...*

### INTRODUCTION

Australian feature films have been well documented since the revival of the industry in the 1970s. However, this represents only one part of our national screen culture. Less well acknowledged is the rich history running in parallel—that of experimental film and video production, and more recently, digital and sound art.

Many of the most successful and innovative short works from the



CHEAP BLONDE (JANET MEREWETHER, 1998)

last few decades have extended conventional notions of film and video form. A large number of Australian women artists and directors arrived at film and video after earlier studies in architecture, photography or art school, and they challenged the standard narrative structures, preferring instead to explore the capacity of images and sound to communicate political ideas and emotional states, to critique contemporary culture and technology and to enliven the senses. Many artists engaged directly with technology rather than falling into the traditional 'mothering' role of producing. Some directors have imaged their own bodies, others have recycled mass media representations of other women's bodies. Some have displayed irreverence and audacity, others have explored feminist and political issues with serious intent. In this chapter I present an overview of the body of work often internationally recognized, yet (largely unexplored by the local mainstream 'industry') made within these film and video scenes in the last three decades in Australia. Even though I am attempting a balanced chapter, my emphasis is likely to be on the Sydney scene only out of familiarity with the work of artists in this city, rather than intentional bias.

For most of these practitioners, the short film or video form has not been used as a practice run on the road to conventional feature film production. Rather, the process has led to the development of a strong personal aesthetic and working methodology, and, with so few precedents in cinema history, a fresh approach to the possibility of marrying formal experimentation with subjects of interest to women. Historically, the short films which sustain the interest of academics across the decades are those which progress the medium, rather than slavishly reproducing the stylistic conventions of the time.

### **THE EXPERIMENTAL LANDSCAPE: THE 1950s AND 1960s**

Aside from films made by Gil Brealey's Experimental Film Group formed in Melbourne in 1952, and the work of Norma Disher and the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit based in Sydney, there appears to have been little in the way of independent short film-making in Australia, aside from home movies, before the mid 1960s. However, techniques associated with the avant-garde traditions from the US and Europe started to filter into Sydney during this period, especially through the Ubu group. Many women, most commonly the wives or girlfriends of group members, were involved with this 'free flowing creative community'.<sup>1</sup> This was definitely the pre-feminist era of free love, and censorship at the time was brutal and prudish. David Perry made a collaborative work, the intimately domestic, ripe portrait of his pregnant wife (Abigail Day) in *Sketch of Abigail's Belly* (David Perry, 1968). Described as a poetic expression of the beauty and urgency of pregnancy, the film was considered obscene and banned by the censors until 1970.

Several women involved with Ubu made their own films. Clemency Weight (later Clemency Van Leewen/Clemency Browne) directed a film portrait of her son, *Tobias Icarus Age 4* (Clemency Weight, 1968) featuring camerawork by David Perry, with producing and editing by Albie Thoms. The film was popular, being programmed widely in local Co-op events, as well as internationally. The warm, open relationship between mother and son explored in the film is in striking contrast to the more traditionally austere investigations of the avant-garde, where



TOBIAS ICARUS AGE 4 (CLEMENCY WEIGHT, 1968) PHOTO: DAVID PERRY

form served as content. As well as her painting and film-making, Weight had also performed, playing 'herself' in the controversial, unscripted 'no-plot narrative' *Marinetti* (Albie Thoms, 1969). Weight's performance attracted lurid headlines in the *Sunday Mirror*—'NAKED MUM DARES CENSOR - PICTURES'. For Weight, 'beauty' was not the issue; rather, she was interested in women feeling relaxed with their nakedness, rebelling against the sexual inhibition and dullness of the 1950s. However, she did admit to 'acting orgasms',<sup>2</sup> which were later cut by the censor in Victoria, who claimed that orgasms were obscene.

Susan Howe's go-go dancing torso was frequently seen in Ubu films, but she also worked behind the camera, crewing as continuity 'girl' and camera assistant. Her animated 'handmade' films appeared in the group's expanded cinema/lightshow projections, including *Fosforus Face* (Susan Howe, 1967). Bronwyn Stevens-Jones, who appeared in *Bolero* (Albie Thoms, 1967), also produced handmade films. The lightshows, a bridge between film, theatre, music and

painting, were known as 'expanded cinema'. These 'happenings' were extremely popular events, a reflection of the rise of psychedelic culture and the use of mind altering drugs in Sydney at the time. They were also a dependable form of income to sustain the group and its newsletter, *Ubu*news, laid out by Toni Rendall, who also helped to run the Ubu business out of a small Redfern office. Tina Kaufman, who was later to write extensively about Australian cinema in her role as editor of *Filmnews*, the journal established by the Sydney Film-makers' Co-op, was also involved with early Ubu productions.

Likewise, Corinne Cantrill, filmmaker and writer, has contributed greatly to experimental cinema in Australia through the publication *Cantrill's Filmnotes*, co-edited with partner Arthur from 1971 until 2000. This labour of love, which helped to bring Australia into the consciousness of the international experimental scene, was to continue to document and critique the work of local and international artists for another thirty years. Commencing their collaborative work in Brisbane in 1960, Corinne (who formerly studied botany) and Arthur produced a large body of films. One series of explorations of the visual, rhythmic, aural, and spiritual qualities of the Australian landscape, included *The Native Trees of Stradbroke Island* (Cantrills, 1964). The Cantrills also produced a colour essay film on the life of poet *Harry Hooton* (Cantrills, 1969–70). In this film, 'the strip of celluloid is assaulted, animated, dissected, removed from the camera and made to capture light in ways that its maker never intended when it left the factory ... and forces it to reveal its own innate beauty, the beauty of light exposed to chemicals'<sup>3</sup>

Corinne Cantrill saw the period of 1969–1973 as the 'Golden Age' of experimental film-making in Australia. Always critical of 'humanist narratives luring us to identification',<sup>4</sup> she felt that funded mini-bureaucracies 'stole the language of the experimental film movement and showed the sure-fire, tried and trusty documentaries about 'causes': uranium mining, land rights, women's refuges'<sup>5</sup> Her rejection of a committed political cinema was outlined by Andrew Pike in 1979, who wrote that 'the Cantrills are artists concerned with seeing, not seeing through an ideology to perceive social and political realities, but seeing through the eyes, and so to discover the wonders of sight'<sup>6</sup> Despite these views, Cantrill did return to autobiographical film-making in her brilliant and meditative feature-length experimental essay, *In This Life's Body* (1984).<sup>7</sup>

### **FEMINISM'S NOISY ARRIVAL - THE 1970s**

The 'feminist take-over' of the Sydney Film-makers' Co-op, co-founded in 1966 by Ubu members, was later described by Clemency Browne as somewhat of a showdown between women who had previously worked with the hedonistic Sydney-based Ubu and the Co-op, and the new arrivals. She vividly recalls making a critical remark about a woman's film at a screening, only to be 'booed down'. She had little involvement with the Co-op after that event, especially when separatist women started to debate about the 'problem of having a boy child', and when 'peace and love faded away'.

Whereas the underground film-makers had seen themselves as avant-garde artists, the early 1970s saw a major shift to film and video agitprop used as a political tool in the spread of

feminist and labour movement doctrines. The fact that women had started to write, direct and shoot films was radical in itself. The 'auteur' model was rejected in favour of documentary and essayist work, most frequently co-authored by a 'collective' of women. These films incorporated techniques pioneered by the underground film movement. Striking visual effects created by the use of an optical printer, such as the colourisation, refilming and manipulation of footage, were later used in films such as *Size Ten* (Sarah Gibson/Susan Lambert, 1978). Directors also rejected the male 'voice of God' narration, still common in documentaries at the time, favouring direct interviews with women subjects, whose views had been marginalised and trivialised for so long.

Before the advent of any film school, pioneer film-makers such as Martha Ansara joined other passionate and enthusiastic women in Sydney to take up cameras, take control of the process and 'learn on the job'. *A Film For Discussion* (Sydney Women's Film Group/Jeni Thornley & Martha Ansara, 1974) was designed to trigger discussions about women, work and the family. Despite its undisguised propaganda style, the film is formally inventive and powerful, featuring hand held camera, location shooting, jump cutting and the use of extended shots, an introductory sequence including footage of feminist marches and posters, and improvised sequences with actors, some of whom had previously acted with Newtown's New Theatre. The twenty year old Jeni Thornley, in her first film, appears not to be 'acting', but rather to be 'experiencing' the inner transformation which was occurring for her generation of women.

Soon after, Thornley directed her energies into helping to organise the first International Women's Film Festival in 1975 to mark International Women's Year. This remarkable programme, co-ordinated by the Sydney Women's Film Group, toured every state and capital city and introduced films by innovators such as Maya Deren, Dorothy Arzner, Susan Sontag, Alice Guy, Shirley Clarke, Agnes Varda, Mai Zetterling, Lina Wertmuller, Leni Riefenstahl, and Germaine Dulac to Australian audiences. On seeing these films, Thornley came to the realisation that 'we were poets and we had our own voice'.<sup>8</sup> Thornley was later to direct several films including the award winning *Maidens* (Jeni Thornley, 1977), a compilation documentary about four generations of the film-maker's maternal family, which broke new ground in its use of old photographs, slides, letters, home movies as well as extracts from her earlier films.

There was much debate in the 1970s as to whether a 'female aesthetic' could be defined. *We Aim to Please* (Margot Nash/Robin Laurie, 1976) explored female sexuality, vulnerability in a violent society and the playful representation of female eroticism. Images were designed for the appreciation of a specific, female audience. Other films exposed taboo subjects. *Behind Closed Doors* (Sarah Gibson and Susan Lambert, 1980) challenged romanticised notions of love and marriage by exploring the subject of domestic violence. Several films emerged from the first AFTRS Women's Training Course which reflected the impact of Patricia Edgar's text '*Media She*' published in 1974. *The Selling of the Female Image* (Carole Kostanich, 1977) is based around a woman's observation of the media, and is constructed largely from sampled extracts of soap operas and advertising.

Despite the support of *Filmnews* for these types of films, journals such as *Cinema Papers* continued to aggressively encourage a polarization between the so-called mature plot-driven feature film industry and the alleged 'artistic puberty'<sup>9</sup> of experimental, low budget (and women's) cinema. The female-dominated Sydney Film-makers Co-op continued to actively screen and distribute these films, but soon, postmodernity would throw a spanner in the works.

### **EARNEST 1970s TO POSTMODERN 1980s**

Susan Charlton became the Women's Film Worker at the Co-op in 1982, drawn to Sydney from Adelaide to experience 'the talk, film, music and action ... [which] ... was volatile, feral and glamorous'.<sup>10</sup> She notes that 'feminist' film-making was 'under interrogation'<sup>11</sup> during this period, as theorists explored issues of representation, sexuality and films as texts. The issue based women's films of the 1970s began to be replaced by films that explored women's pleasure and desire. With a diversity of women directors, and the official 'women's movement' breaking down, was the category of 'women's films' still a relevant idea at all? Ironically, Charlton 'argued for the dismantling' of her own position at the Co-op during this period. The 'no meat in the fridge, no men in the bed' (and no diaphragms left in the bathroom) feminist film scene was soon to splinter.

This break up of the women's movement seemed to parallel the proliferation of new formats available to artists, such as the 'amateur' gauges of Super 8 and video. In the late 1970s, courses at the New South Wales Institute of Technology (NSWIT, later to become UTS), gave students such as Kate Richards 'a politically conscious framework for understanding experimental cinema'.<sup>12</sup> Minority groups previously 'without a voice or screen time' were granted access to production equipment. The Sydney Film-makers' Co-op became an 'idealized matrix' where theory, practice, criticism and distribution all happened under one roof.

However, when Richards and Deborah Collins approached the Co-op to screen a Super 8 programme, the 'older generation of film-makers did not see Super 8 as a legitimate form, in the same way that 16mm, that they were working on, was not seen as a legitimate form in relation to 35mm'.<sup>13</sup> Despite the medium being perceived as 'hobbyist', the Co-op finally agreed to hold a Super 8 screening in 1978. Richards and Collins, with no real resources, coordinated the event. Richards recalls, 'Neither of us even had a telephone in those days living in the squats' The screening was a surprisingly huge success, 'absolute chaos ... the Co-op cinema was packed to the gunnels' Richards recalls some drama with the hastily installed Fumiyo projector: 'I do remember it overheated and standing there with a wet sponge to the body of the projector for the entire festival!'

The popularity of the medium was, perhaps, a backlash to the earnest feminist documentary films which had become rather institutionalised by this time. Theorists such as Meaghan Morris were creating local debate, as film-makers began to embrace postmodernism and French feminist theory. Conceptual art was flourishing in the art schools. In the late 70s a group of academics started to meet at a place called Side Effects, close to the Co-op. Taking the form of



a free university, it was, according to Richards, 'very radical because it was (straddling) academia and studio based artists and squats and alternative modes of living and working'.

Richards comments that '... we were the first generation of Australians who ... grew up totally on television ... had a formal film education ... and we were probably all terribly precocious. So, while we were down at Side Effects talking about different ways of representing the feminine and the impossibility of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucault's ideas of history and how to communicate that in film, and going very deeply into abstract ideas of structural materialism ... there was this older generation feeling threatened. Of course on our side were some of the theoreticians like Liz Jacka, Meaghan Morris and Susan Dermody.' Film-makers shifted their focus—the question was less about what the definition of a feminist text/film could be, but, rather, the acknowledgement that textual meanings and audiences were not fixed, and that 'a viewer is a subject in history rather than a subject of a single text ...'<sup>14</sup>

Some feminist film-makers later bridged the gap, absorbing the influences of the avant-garde and redefining it in a new, personal, essayist form of cinema. *My Life Without Steve* (Gillian Leahy, 1986), composed of glimpses of domestic spaces and melancholy diary fragments, was a 'discourse about romantic love, obsession and abandonment'.<sup>15</sup> When it was released, the film polarised feminist audiences, as it explored and acknowledged the emotional impact of relationship breakdowns on women. However, across town, another scene was thriving.

## SYDNEY SUPER 8

Super 8 was a low cost, accessible, expressive, anarchic, spontaneous, perfect postmodern medium. Less overtly political, the works made by women involved in the scene were often playful, reflecting the lifestyles of friends living in squats in the inner city. There was a conscious rejection of 'production values' and the film 'industry' as Super 8 scenes emerged in both Sydney and Melbourne. The Super 8 film-maker traded 'freely in signs, images, styles, codes and iconography borrowed from both the commercial and avant-garde cinemas, television, comic strips and the visual arts ...'<sup>16</sup> The films were self funded, and the format was favoured by artists for its portability and accessibility—stock and cameras were inexpensive, and the beauty of the image undeniable. The influence of the newly emerging music video form, which, in some ways could be said to have replaced, or at least redefined experimental cinema, was evident.

Catherine Lowing and other university or art school educated women working in the Sydney Super 8 scene did not follow in the footsteps of the 16mm materialist avant-garde tradition of the 1960s and 1970s, which Lowing perceived as 'celebrating an obscure marginalised aesthetic'. Instead, Lowing used the 'amateur' Super 8 medium to capture an 'objective ... mainstream' look in her films, which reworked the music video format. In *Westworld Story* (Catherine Lowing, 1985), 'there is very little distance between the actors in the film and their daily lives',<sup>17</sup> and yet, the films are not classified as 'documentary' in the traditional sense. The film observes the inner city rockabilly revival, but, unlike the 1950s, the women dance together to 1980s electro pop. The second film in the *World As We Know It* trilogy, *Knife in the Head, Spooky* (Catherine Lowing, 1985) explored the defined limits of women's sexual behaviour by working

with two women from a lesbian S & M group. These and other films screened at the Sydney Super 8 Group's highly popular, regular *L'eight* programmes at the Dendy Cinema venue. Other programmes screened at music venues such as the Trade Union Club.

Another women involved in the Sydney scene was Virginia Hilyard, whose Super 8 films in the 1980s were personal documents, fluidly weaving her domestic life with images from travels and dreams. The works reflected a level of autobiography and subjectivity. *Yes It Is* (Virginia Hilyard, 1985) uses a slowed down Beatles track to evoke a haunting sense of intimate memory and yearning, whilst *Love Homer Rova Roma Hemi Hubba Mercedes Mash* (Virginia Hilyard, 1984) documents the lives of a group of friends squatting in a Woolloomooloo house, threatened by demolition and freeway construction.

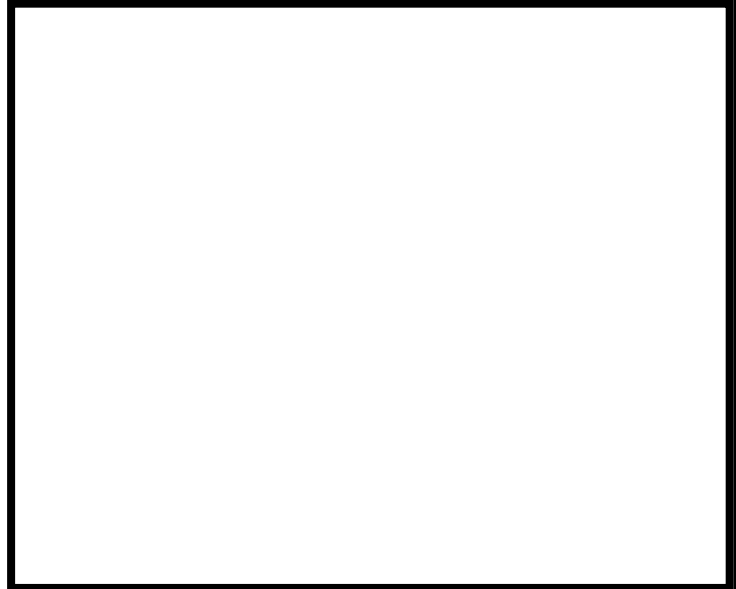
The proliferation of film-makers and the popularity of screenings attracted the Australian Film Commission to fund the group's activities, allowing the purchase of equipment, the rental of a production space, and the employment of technical co-ordinators, which included Toulas and Hilyard. Initially set up in the laundry at the back of Gary Warner's house, the group's office moved to Bourke St and became a center of activity and friendly support. When they weren't 'fixing their cars or getting their teeth done'<sup>18</sup> with meagre No Frills grant money, the film-makers were busy making new work and documenting the inner city Sydney scene. There was little cross-over with video at the time. Hilyard comments that 'a lot of experimenting that went on was to get the image as grungy as possible ... film for me is sculpture ... it is pliable'. Video effects seemed 'phoney ... and hands off' by comparison, and video was favoured only if 'the projected image became part of the space ... worked in a sculptural way'.<sup>19</sup>

Stephen Cummins curated several Super 8 programmes for international touring, including *Eclectic Dreams* (1986) and *34 Degrees South 151 Degrees East* (1987). Films by Ruby Davies, Benay Ellison, Rhonda Kelly, Debra Petrovich, Catherine Hourihan, Anne Rutherford, Anne Marie Crawford and Catherine Lowing were toured. Another programme, *Surface Imprint*, curated by Jodi Brooks in 1989, focussed on the performing body, and image and sound as means of visual and aural intensity and rhythm. The scene was developing and diversifying. *Eat* (Kathy Drayton, 1988), with its Vertov-inspired, frenetic montage of the social and architectural landscapes of the inner city, in some ways marks a crossover point between the mobile, urban based Sydney Super 8 work of the 1980s, with the more ambitious 16mm films of the early 1990s.

The Sydney Super 8 Film Group's 1989 *Attitude* programme had also pushed the boundaries. Curated by Susan Charlton, this event took films out of the cinema context, exploring a range of alternative screening environments. Artists were commissioned to create site specific work—shop windows and video walls in Sydney's CBD were used as exhibition venues, and a series of image-text leaflets was commissioned. However, the Super 8 scene had not simply been confined to Sydney.

## MELBOURNE SUPER 8 AND BEYOND

The medium of Super 8 had also been embraced in Melbourne in the late 1970s, influenced by the revival of the medium by artists in the New York underground a few years earlier. The Clifton Hill Community Centre was one of the centres of Super 8 activity.



DREAMS COME TRUE (JAYNE STEVENSON, 1982)

A compilation tape 'Eight in the 80's'

released in 1989 by the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group included an extract from the experimental musical *Dreams Come True* (Jayne Stevenson, 1982). Set to a melancholy electronic score by David Chesworth, the film is 'a "miracle" that is staged, "ordinary" people ... living their fantasy of being in a beautifully lit, stereophonic musical ... (whilst being) ... profoundly sad ... suffused with the melancholy of memory and the impossible dream, not ignited by the energy of any vibrant Hollywood spectacle'<sup>20</sup> Stevenson had been a founding member of Melbourne's influential multi-media performance group 'Tsk Tsk Tsk' from the early 1980s. The group's 'post-pop' explorations into genre, style, electronic music and the screening context were witty and intelligent. Stevenson's work included *Italian Boys* (Jayne Stevenson, 1984), and *Flesh and Fantasy* (Jayne Stevenson, 1982) where a 'male' subject is transformed into a 'female'. Whilst being strictly 'formalist', the films toyed with issues of representation, genre, theatricality, and gender. Adrian Martin, who appeared in two films, wrote that Stevenson's work 'set against one another oppositions like: spontaneity and contrivance; truth and fiction; stereotype and real life; fantasy and materiality'<sup>21</sup>

Maria Kozic, another Melbourne artist using Super 8, was also developing her post-pop aesthetic at this time. *Manless* (Maria Kozic, 1981) features a love-sick single woman, pining for 'Johnny', as she sips cocktails in exotic and romantic travel locations—a 'café' in Paris, a Spanish 'flamenco' performance and a restaurant in 'Italy'. The work was strikingly different from the autobiographical Sydney films, and revelled in the artifice of cinema, featuring kitsch, lurid set/costume design, and an ironic exotic lounge musical score.

Amongst others, Maeve Woods and Ooni Peh were involved with the Melbourne Super 8 Film Group, which persisted with its purist approach of shooting and exhibiting films on the original Super 8 format even into the 1990s. In *The Things I Can Do With My Toes* (Moira Joseph,

1993), the artist captures the dexterity of her daughter performing a variety of physical feats. The film sits somewhere between a bizarre freak-show act and a personal, affectionate 'home movie'.

A Melbourne writer and curator actively working from the mid 80s was Vikki Riley, whose reviews appeared in *Cinema Papers* and *Cantrills Filmnotes*. Riley was a regular on Melbourne Film Festival Experimental Film selection panels, and was active within MIMA (the Modern Image Makers Association). Later, she also curated weekly screenings at the Café Bohemio in Collingwood, which exposed audiences to international experimental work, such as Brazilian video art.

### **DIVERSIFY OR DIE**

The early 1980s had seen a transformation in the use of video, moving from mainstream television usage, and the 1970s social/ political 'community' and 'guerilla' forms, to the use of the medium by artists influenced by postmodern practices such as the sampling and recycling of mass media television images. The 1980s also saw the use of video in 'installations' by artists such as Paula Dawson and Joan Brassil.

The Australian International Video Festival, organised by EMA (Electronic Media Arts) from the mid 1980s until the mid 1990s, exposed audiences to both local and international video/ electronic art. Women artists involved with this group included Julie Vulcan, Jill Scott and members of the Sydney Front. Videos such as the split screen *Anatomies* (Belinda Chayko, 1992), based on the writings of Robyn Ferrell, and made for SBS TV's *Carpet Burns* series, were also screened in the festival. The organisation closed due to funding cuts by the AFC, the perception being that a video-only festival was too narrow in focus. Other organisations however, did survive.

Melbourne's MIMA (Modern Image Makers Association) held its biennial *Experimenta* programme from 1988, and the event exposed Australian audiences to a wide range of local and international films, videos, installation and sound work. Many curators and artists visited the event from overseas, and MIMA also published the quarterly *Mesh*<sup>22</sup> magazine to promote debate and criticism. MIMA continued to hold other regular screening events, but internal politics in the mid 1990s lead to a fracturing of the Melbourne scene—it seemed that experimental film-makers and digital media artists were having trouble co-existing in the one organisation. The group changed its name to Experimenta Media Arts. Lisa Logan and Shiralee Saul were two curators involved in new digital media exhibition during this time. After this, film exhibition became a somewhat neglected area of focus for the organisation.

### **SYDNEY INTERMEDIA NETWORK (SIN)**

Having been pressured by the AFC to become more inclusive of various formats in the late 1980s, the Sydney Super 8 Film Group had changed its name to the Sydney Intermedia Network (SIN) in 1990. Like MIMA's *Experimenta*, and the Women in Film and Television's WOW

festival, SIN's new annual survey event, *Matinaze*, reflected the fact that artists were increasingly exploring video and newer digital formats, or using Super 8 as an originating medium only. Other film-makers like Jackie Farkas and myself were experimenting with form, but, having trained at the AFTRS, had access to the professional 16mm and 35mm formats. It was in the early 1990s that I became involved with the Sydney Intermedia Network, firstly as president of the committee and participating film-maker, and then later as curator of three events (*ShortEnz—video work from Aotearoa/New Zealand* (1994), *Serious Art of the Unserious—Experimental Comedy* (1995), and *Transvideo—New South American Video Art* (1997)). SIN held regular curated programmes (The Art of the Moving Image series), mostly at the Art Gallery of NSW.

In 1991, SIN co-ordinated the *Visual Purple* programme as part of the *Dissonance: aspects of feminism and art* event, including the work of Leone Knight, Melanie El Mir and Perth-based video artist Colleen Cruise, whose computer animation *Head* (Colleen Cruise, 1991) broke new ground in its use of Amiga computer technology. The artist described the work as a '... solitary journey... about war, masculine power and destruction'.<sup>23</sup> Curated by Jodi Brooks, Melody Cruickshank, Ruby Davies, Virginia Hilyard and Toni Ross, *Visual Purple* aimed to push 'the parameters of what has been identified as a feminist film and video agenda ... questions of gender and filmic performance ... female fetishism and the exploration of a masochistic aesthetic ... [and] comedy ... ranging from the whimsical through to slapstick and black comedy, and in the process renegotiating the terms of cinematic pleasures'.<sup>24</sup> Also included was Mahalya Middlemist's *Vivarium* (Mahalya Middlemist, 1993), an unconventional dance film featuring Sue-ellen Kohler's extraordinary performance work, Ion Pearce's resonant soundtrack, and utilizing colourisation and stretch printing as well as matte shots to create a work of great intensity.

Barbara Campbell was also involved with SIN during this time. One of a number of Brisbane artists moving to Sydney in the late 1980s, Campbell concentrated on performance and video, often using the lives of women in history as a starting point for her work. In her performance work *Backwash* (Barbara Campbell, 1993) the artist wove 'a loose intertextual narrative that (took) in *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* (and Eleanor Coppola's diaries), the 1937 Stinson plane crash in the rugged southern Queensland of the artist's youth, and Campbell's own recollection of childhood'.<sup>25</sup> A later performance, *Zero Hour* (Barbara Campbell, 1996) featured a contemporary reconstruction of an original 1944 broadcast by 'Tokyo Rose', a character created by Radio Tokyo as propaganda for the Allied Troops in the Pacific during the Second World War. Campbell was also the curator of SIN's *Performance on Screen* programme in 1994, which marked 25 years of performance art in Australia, and included the collaborative film *We should call it a living room* (Joan Grounds/Aleks Danko, 1975) which captured, using single frame pixillation, a room and furniture growing out of grass in a kind of organic performance. This use of the camera as recording device, a witness to performance events, was later found in short films from the 1980s, such as *Passionless Moments: Recorded in Sydney Australia Sunday October 2* (Jane Campion with Gerard Lee, 1983/4) which toyed with a formal structure, and the minimalist aesthetic gained through the use of a static 'objective' camera.



### SUPER 8 AS ORIGINATING MEDIUM

In the trend towards working with the more professional 16mm and 35mm formats in the early 1990s (mainly due to improved sound quality and festival/distribution possibilities), Super 8 was often still used as an originating, rather than an exhibition format. The highly textured Super 8 image was often blown up to 35mm, for example in *E.G.* (Virginia Hilyard, 1990), where the camera caresses its subjects, and close-ups of the textured 'landscapes' of elephant skin and mud on women's bodies become abstract and merged in an explosion of film grain on the screen. Some of these qualities were shared by Toulou Anastas's work which aimed to question the relationship between photography and cinema. The explorations made in her film *Ec/static* (Toulou Anastas, 1988) were further investigated in the heavily textured split screen *Floating World* (Toulou Anastas, 1997) in which black and white Super 8 was layered with still photographs and details of television images of sumo wrestling, and refilmed onto 16mm reversal stock. Working in collaboration with Anastas, I crewed as cinematographer, shooting a 35mm blowup on the AFTRS Oxberry rostrum camera (on which I had shot many film titles sequences and the animation *A Square's Safari* (Janet Merewether, 1992) some years earlier.) Anastas recalls the experience of pegging strips of Super 8 film out on the washing line to dry after hand processing the footage in her own darkroom. The random imperfections in the emulsion arising from this process became a powerful aesthetic quality in the work, which was one of the few films supported by the AFC's New Image Research Fund in the late 1990s. The film pre-empted a more recent trend by artists to exploit the imperfections and qualities found in the grain and scratches on celluloid and vinyl records, sampled and reprocessed using digital software or optical printers—the 'lo-fi' aesthetic.

Women directors were no longer working in the 'non-hierarchical' collaborative models popular amongst the feminist film-makers of the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, many developed a personal aesthetic, working as short film 'auteurs', either in a solitary fashion, or with more conventionally structured crews. The episodic black and white film diary *A Slice of Life or the Crumbs of Existence* (Janet Merewether, 1992), shot in Paris on Super 8 and completed on 16mm, exploited the capacity of the Super 8 camera to capture fluid hand held moves, as well as in-camera animation and pixillation effects—the camera is used as a notepad or sketchbook to capture a highly personalised vision of the city. Another resonant experimental documentary from the period is *The Illustrated Auschwitz* (Jackie Farkas, 1992) where the recollections of a survivor are woven from found footage and Super 8, a collage of haunting vignettted visual imaginings, simultaneously evoking distant, traumatic memory and the intimacy of the home movie screening. Melbourne artist Marie Craven also worked across formats. *Pale Black* (Marie Craven, 1992) is a reworking of the film diary form based on daily life and dreams, the images simultaneously grainily obscure yet minimal. Composed of a series of static black and white tableaux, the film plays with the link between photography and cinema, and evokes the sense of a spiritual presence, a 'phantom self' seen only in her traces.

Increasingly, women were producing films and videos in universities and art schools. Sydney-based Melanie El Mir's consistently bizarre and intense body of surreal Super 8 work was made from 1989 (as a student at the Sydney College of the Arts) to 1995, including *MRSOSO* (Melanie El Mir, 1992) and *Sunset Aorta* (Melanie El Mir 1993), an expressionistic exploration of a 'surgeon's' love for the bloody flesh and organs of his patient. With their barely suppressed erotic charge, sensual, almost abject representation of bodily secretions and textures, as well as frequently sleazy, cruel male characters, the films, in their exploration of inner psychological states and desires, compress past and future into the present, and entrap characters into largely claustrophobic spaces. A regular in many of SIN's *Matinaze* programmes during the 1990s, El Mir's films are 'home movies' in the true sense, as they were made in collaboration with the film-maker's mother, who often played all male and female roles. Despite references to the horror genre, and the film-maker's claim that the characters often represent various sides of the same person, the works exhibit a particular female sensibility, featuring a succession of rather unpleasant male characters, and open ended, ambiguous structures.



SUNSET AORTA (MELANIE EL MIR, 1993)

## ANIMATION

Kathy Smith also commenced her animation and film work using Super 8. In *A Figure in Front of a Painting* (Kathy Smith, 1985) Smith began to develop a way of avoiding individual shots and edits, instead, designing a fluid sequence of paintings to transport the viewer from space to space. A later film *Living on the Comet* (Kathy Smith, 1993) uses rotoscoping, painted and scratch techniques to evoke a recurring dream, as a vehicle for examining the various ways in which humans interpret and evaluate the patterns in their lives and environment. Despite the fact that many animators chose more conventional, character based, narrative structures for their work, some attempted to address questions of form. *Pleasure Domes* (Maggie Fooke, 1987) was constructed from colourised photocopies and animated watercolours. The film, a reflection on the view from the film-maker's balcony from a flat in St Kilda, was a meditation on the imposition of European planning on the natural Australian landscape: 'I sit on my balcony and think ... This could be anywhere' ... Images of the landscape fade and dissolve as the metaphor of a glamorous riviera anywhere, a 'Hollywood anywhere, Hollywood already being a riviera transplanted'.<sup>26</sup> The film was structured as a contemplative essay, and, in breaking with the standard definition of the 'animation' form, achieved considerable success, even screening at the Cannes Film Festival.

## EXPERIMENTAL/PROFESSIONAL—THE 1990s

The absence or intentional exclusion of performance and fictional structures in film/video art practice of the 1970s and 1980s was also addressed by artists in the early 1990s, as post-modernist and poststructuralist explorations prompted a reconsideration of narrative forms by film-makers. Questions were posed regarding the subjects of style, history, representation and the perspectives of the 'author' and the 'viewer'. Breaking from conventional realism, *Nice Coloured Girls* (Tracey Moffatt, 1987) juxtaposed the interaction of European men and Aboriginal women in the early years of white settlement, with the contemporary urban experience of women picking up white sugar daddy 'captains' in Kings Cross in the 1980s. Moffatt's next film, the stunningly designed, studio based *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (Tracey Moffatt, 1989) foregrounded the power structures between a white 'mother'/Aboriginal 'daughter', referencing, but inverting, the family relationship explored in Charles Chauvel's 1955 classic *Jedda*.

With access to the professional standard film studios at the AFTRS, other women directors also moved away from realism, exploring the potential of production design and cinematography, to construct a heightened and intense cinematic experience. The visually inventive *Amelia Rose Towers* (Jackie Farkas, 1992) placed a baroque fiction within an ingenious film set based on the design of the Ames room (originally developed by a group of Gestalt psychologists for the study of human perception.) The film combines a black sense of humour, especially explored in the deadpan rap soundtrack, with a rather menacing exploration of personal and sexual identity/ambiguity. The film straddled the boundaries of 'experimental' and 'mainstream' and achieved considerable international recognition.<sup>27</sup> The strength of these works indicated a trend in that they were both formally inventive, as well as displaying what could be described as a more open form of writing, or perhaps a 'feminine cinematic writing, a cinema of jouissance ...',<sup>28</sup> an idea discussed by Annette Kuhn. She considered 'the crucial point of distinction



between deconstructive texts and feminine texts ... Whereas the former tend to break down and challenge the forms of pleasure privileged by dominant texts, the latter set up radically "other" forms of pleasure'.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the development of the 'queer' aesthetic in the 1990s was a further development of this process.

There was also an increased conservatism in government funding bodies in the 1990s, which favoured more conventional short fiction films over experimental film projects. However, a handful of exceptional short works were funded. *At Sea* (Penny Fowler-Smith, 1997), based on the recollections of the film-maker's mother, extended the documentary form in new ways, weaving together standard 8 home movies evocative video reconstructions of a sea voyage on 'The Canberra' and images of domestic rituals, to explore maternal loss, and the grief for a child buried at sea. *Five Hundred Acres* (Lucy Lehmann, 1996), a pixillated, visual poem of family 'loss, longing and belonging' also explored a type of grieving process. 'Fragments of the landscape [were] ... captured, frame by frame, as if to transform something fleeting into something tangible'.<sup>30</sup> One film from this period had been commenced decades earlier by photographer Sue Ford, who had been a founding member of Melbourne's Reel Women film group in the late 1970s. Her silent film *Faces 1976–1996* (Sue Ford, 1996) contemplated the processes of time and experience. A series of acquaintances were filmed in black and white in 1976, and then again in 1996. The faces, as they gaze back at the audience, lead the viewer to consider the qualities of texture, grain and impermanence on the human face as well as the filmed image itself.

My own work in the 1990s explored the intersection of formalism and comedy, an area unfairly dismissed as superficial or apolitical by many avant-garde and documentary filmmakers from the previous few decades. The graphic and absurdist mockumentary *Tourette's Tics* (Janet Merewether, 1993) was an explosion of the myth of female hysteria, whilst 'scratch' and collage videos influenced *Making Out in Japan* (Janet Merewether, 1993). A collaboration with performer Yuji Sone, this video juxtaposed recycled mass media images with a fake 'Japanese language lesson' soundtrack to form a new 'narrative' describing a relationship breakdown. Combining film and digital video aesthetics is a third work, *Cheap Blonde* (Janet Merewether, 1998) which utilises digital voice sampling software and chroma-key video test footage to explore text, gender and layers of meaning in the construction of media images. The strongly textured image and saturated chroma in the film imbues it with a quality that is 'more video than video itself'. My most recent film, the bleak 'unromantic comedy', *Contemporary Case Studies* (Janet Merewether, 2001) uses a graphic, stylised split screen treatment to combine typographic elements with live action performance. The colourised image and digital music soundtrack work together in this nine part film to create an artificial 'showroom of emotions', a commentary on relationships in Sydney at the turn of the new century. In my film, video, and most commonly, in my 'day job' as a film titles and motion graphics designer, I continue to explore the intersection of experimental and mainstreams forms using a combination of film and new digital video technologies.

## DIGITAL SCREEN ARTS

Women's use of computers and new technologies is not only a recent trend. A parallel history exists, running alongside women's short film work, since the early 1980s. Training first as a biochemist and then later as a computer programmer/animator, Sally Pryor became a pioneer of Australian electronic media art, being the first Australian artist to be exhibited at SIGGRAPH in the USA for her 3D wireframe animation *Dreamhouse* (Sally Pryor, 1982), produced at the Swinburne Institute of Technology, in which a dreamer tours the inside of her head/house. Later working as an academic, Pryor's writings and artworks have explored issues such as the computer/ human interface and the relationship between computers, the body, and gender.

Other artist/film-makers have explored contemporary pop culture, and the development of virtual worlds. Referencing a Japanese 'cute/kawaii' aesthetic, digital animations such as *Robot Cycle* (Elena Popa, 1993) play with ideas around the cyborg body, computer obsolescence and reproduction, whilst the visually inventive *Range of Experience* (Maryella Hatfield, 1993) explored ideas around virtual reality products of the future, dream simulators, which could recreate sensory experiences 'lost to the human range for a century or more'.<sup>31</sup> Other women have explored cross cultural subjects. Perth video artist Jo Law, in works such as *Old Earth* (1995), combines text and home movie footage in an exploration of her Chinese cultural heritage, using new media tools to reprocess the image, creating a new identity of sorts. Another Perth artist, Vikki Wilson, has collaborated on the ambient, experiential videos created by her fellow members in the RetArded Eye group.

The recent emergence of new medical technologies which allowed the body to be observed and recorded, combined with the development of desktop compositing and 3D software, also led to a new trend in digital animation in the 1990s. *Rapt* (Justine Cooper, 1998) is a stunning work which explores the virtual body as a site of experience, and is constructed in 3D from 'sliced' MRI scans of the artist, allowing the audience to navigate around the body and to view it both externally and internally. Melbourne's Tina Gonsalves, who is also interested in the convergence of art, science and technology, has produced a large body of multilayered, composited video works. *Swelling* (Tina Gonsalves, 1998) reworks images of diseases, tumors and corporeal abnormalities from hospital diagnostic imaging sources. A few years earlier, *Here I Sit* (Alyson Bell, 1996) had also broken new ground for a short film. Animated typography and image were layered using recently developed desktop compositing software. The film, a visual interpretation of a poem by Sandy Jeffs, evoked the complexities of the mind and the emotions of schizophrenia.

Sound artists also took up the use of digital audio technology from the early 1990s. Sherre DeLys continues to produce 'filmic' radio features, as well as installations (in collaboration with Joan Grounds) which explore the musicality of the human voice, the potential for vocal interaction and the mimicry of natural sounds in architectural spaces. Another artist, Joyce Hinterding, has produced numerous sound and installation works, including *Cloud* (Joyce Hinterding, 1994), where satellite picture transmissions of turbulence and cloud formation (gathered from

a studio in Vaucluse) were translated into sound 'shapes', exhibited through a custom built electrostatic speaker system.

## THE FUTURE

The mid 1990s saw many artists such as VNS Matrix, Norie Neumark and Linda Dement working with interactive media and the internet, as funding was all but withdrawn from experimental film and video projects at the AFC and the Australia Council and directed towards 'new' digital media. dLux media arts established the annual *d>art* programme (as part of the Sydney Film Festival) to feature CDrom, web, sound and digital arts in the style of SIN's '*Matinaze*' programmes of the 1990s. The decade has also seen an ongoing interest in artificial intelligence, as well as works based around the 'fusion of new media arts with popular culture forms such as games, cartoons and the amusement park', as featured in the 'Cyber Cultures' programmes curated by Kathy Cleland. SBS Television's *Eat Carpet* programme, commencing in 1988 with producer Annette Shun Wah, then later Joy Toma, has also continued to be a site for the transmission and support of experimental film and video programming in Australia.

Unlike the USA, Canada and Europe, where there is still significant support and interest in film-making, especially in the manipulation of found footage and the exploration of the aesthetics of photo-chemical media, Australian funding bodies have favoured digital media projects in recent years, leaving film-makers with the choice of either the independent film 'industry' or gallery-based digital arts practice. This either/or situation has in some ways led to the artificial demise of the once lively 'experimental' short film/video scene, as little work is funded, and most short form work is now created within educational institutions by students. More experienced artists are forced to work in interactive forms, to develop longer format works for television, or to find their peer group amongst artists, film-makers and curators overseas.<sup>32</sup> However, with these changes, and with the limited levels of government funding now available, new low budget forms are bound to emerge in the coming decade. As long as women have ideas which are not finding expression or representation in the mainstream film industry, they will continue to challenge and provoke in the production of edgy and challenging work.

## Endnotes

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- 1 Peter Mudie 'Ubu Films - Sydney Underground Movies—1965-1970' UNSW Press, Sydney, 1997, p.7.
- 2 Quotations by the film-maker are from an interview with Clemency Browne by Janet Merewether, January 2000.
- 3 Andrew Pike 'The Cantrills—The Art of Seeing' *Mid Stream programme*, Ewing and George Paton Galleries, Melbourne University Union, 1979.
- 4 Corinne Cantrill 'Melbourne Film Festival', *Cantrills Filmnotes*, no. 33/34, Melbourne, 1980, p.56.
- 5 Corinne Cantrill 'Editor's Comment' *Cantrills Filmnotes*, no. 49/50, Melbourne, April 1986, p.4.
- 6 Andrew Pike, op. cit.
- 7 See the chapter by Meredith Seaman in this book.
- 8 Quotation by the film-maker is from an interview with Jeni Thornley by Janet Merewether, January 2000.
- 9 Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed, & Freda Freiberg, (eds.), 'Cinema Papers: An Endless Parade of Interviews with Naked Women', *Don't Shoot Darling, Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Greenhouse Publications Pty. Ltd, Richmond, Melbourne, 1987, p.269.
- 10 Susan Charlton (Sydney Intermedia Network) *UBU screening catalogue* Sydney, 1993, p.2.
- 11 Quotations by the curator are from an interview with Susan Charlton by Janet Merewether, June 2000.
- 12 Quotations by Kate Richards are from an interview by Janet Merewether, December 1999.
- 13 *ibid.* for all quotations in the next three paragraphs.
- 14 Blonski, et al., p.10. Quote from original, unpublished paper by A. Collinge, F. Collins, B. Luby, 'What Is This Thing Called Audience?' presented at *Women & Arts Festival*, Chauvel Cinema, AFI, Sydney, October, 1982.
- 15 Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) programme, 1986, p.52.
- 16 Rolando Caputo, *MIFF programme*, 1986, p.62.
- 17 Mark Titmarsh (curator) '*Follow the Sun' Super 8 programme*, Sydney, 1986, p.6.
- 18 Quotations by the film-maker are from an interview with Virginia Hilyard by Janet Merewether, December 1999.
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 Adrian Martin, 'Letter to Jane' (sic: Jayne) *Cantrills Filmnotes*, no. 41/42, June 1983, p.13.
- 21 *ibid.*, p.18
- 22 MIMA changed their organisation name to Experimenta in 1996 and they continue to publish *Mesh* today (2002).
- 23 Colleen Cruise, *Visual Purple programme notes*, Sydney Intermedia Network, Sydney, 1991, p.1.
- 24 *ibid.*
- 25 Annemarie Jonson, *Realtime*, no.1, 1994, p.18.
- 26 Sabrina Schmidt, *A Selection of Independent Animation Films from Australia*, touring film programme, Melbourne, 1996, p.4.
- 27 For example, among the awards it won was a special achievement award for Direction and Cinematography at the AFI Awards in 1992.
- 28 Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1982, p.168.
- 29 *ibid.*
- 30 Natasha Stellmach, *MIFF programme*, 1997, p.98.
- 31 Maryella Hatfield, extract from voice-over of the film: *Range of Experience* (1993).
- 32 In the last ten years, despite minimal support or acknowledgement from funding agencies here in Australia for the production of new work, I have travelled with my films and videos to Brazil, the USA, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Japan, and England, making contacts with film-makers, curators and distributors. As a consequence, I have been able to curate programmes in Sydney (for example, *Transvideo*, a selection of Brazilian video, for dLux media arts). In 2001, *Contemporary Case Studies* was screened at the New York Film Festival, and in 2002, I will be touring a programme of Australian women's documentary and experimental films from the last decade to the Tampere Film Festival to the Berlin kinemathek at the Arsenal cinema. Despite the interest of curators, distributors and audiences overseas, current support for, and awareness of experimental forms of film-making and programming in Australia is limited, and restricted largely to digital arts. Meanwhile, many local independent features and documentaries have become stylistically conservative in an attempt to satisfy a 'mainstream' market. However, the market is actually more likely to respond to innovation in form and structure—many of these feature films and documentaries attract smaller audiences than inventive and edgy short films, which find a wider viewing public internationally.

# CYBERNETIC WOMAN

## Impossible Perfection

FIONA KERR

**W**e are living in the era of the cyber world. Cyber-reality is inhabited by cyber-people with polygonal forms. In the world of computer games, players have become avatars, where men are 'men' and monsters can kill you. In a virtual world, I am not even me any more, and neither are you. This is the world of the cyber-babe, the high kicking, monster-crunching female.

We meet cyber-babe on the computer screen. She can be made to kick, jump, run and kill. Her representation brings with it a set of cultural values—those of women.

The sexist portrayal of the cyber-babe, how we as female players react to a sexualized cybernetic entity created for



COMPUTER GAME CHARACTER FROM TOMB RAIDER SERIES (1996)

the 'male' gamer, and why this has led to a perception that computer games are 'not for women' will be examined here.

As a 3d artist working for computer games, I am acutely aware of the 'embodiment', or pictorial representation of cyber-babe; after all, I'm one of the people who create her! When I approach the design and modeling of a cyber-babe, I also bring my own personal history to the representation, my idealized western concept of beauty, my love of fantasy, my sense of aesthetics. I also have to take into consideration the technical limitations of the computer medium. The portrayal of characters can become abstracted, or even miniaturized, depending on the technical capacity of the computer or console that the game will be played on, and the type of game it is intended to be.

Computer games allow the separation of the physical from the represented. *Physically* the player sits in front of a computer screen, interacting with it, but an avatar, a character in the game, may represent them. It is role-play, the player 'becomes' the avatar, and the avatar 'becomes' the player. In a sense, everything within a computer game is a simile, it is 'like' real world objects and people, but there the similarity ends. In a computer game the player can 'become' male, female, animal, mineral, vegetable ... the representation can be customized, idealized, the screen avatar becomes whatever the player wants to be (within whatever the game designers allow).

It is not really the player who is being represented on the computer screen; it is a cybernetic representation/construction, an amalgam of the physical attributes and permitted actions of the avatar, coupled with the skill of the player. The player interacts with the virtual character to change what it does and who it can be. The input, resulting in instant character response, allows the player to step into the narrative, beyond the looking glass, to become Alice, to move freely within the virtual world. The world within the computer, of course, is a construct. Range too widely, and there are limits and boundaries to where 'you' can venture. Authorial control is inserted over apparent freedom, and the player is directed in a multitude of ways to interact with the game in the way that the authors have intended.

Which is where I come in. I am a 3d game artist. One of the people who create the characters that can be chosen as an iconic representation of the player. Yet it is my professional capacity as a 3d artist that conflicts with my alter ego as female gamer. My concerns? The sexist stereotyping of virtual women. No matter what Australian gaming company I work for, I discover two conflicting attitudes—the acknowledgment by the managers and developers that they need to attract more female gamers, and the desire to reach the demographic. 'Remember we're aiming for spotty faced teenage boys'. When creating a female character, I may advocate a more realistic body shape. I am told that the teenage male market wants 'the perfect woman'—long legs, large breasts and flawless complexion.

Recent US statistics show that 72 per cent of game players are over 18, and of those half are over 35.<sup>1</sup> The perceived market for computer games within the industry is actually quite

different than the sales figures show. Obviously the games are selling, so aiming at a teenage market does not exclude the sexual fantasies of older men. Yet still the cyber-babe is constructed as a sexualized being, a fantasy that offends and excludes many women. The objectification of cyber-babe encourages the male audience and frames cyber-reality as a 'boys' club', where the female form is created purely for the male audience and is exclusive rather than inclusive of women.

There are women who subscribe to patriarchal representations of women, seeing cyber-babe as either a joke (and inherent in this a recognition of the skewed representation) or as an extension of the id, a projection of their own and society's ideals of the perfect woman. Cyber-babe represents them on the screen and *embodies* the perfection that is unobtainable in the physical world.

The computer gaming industry has a problem—it doesn't know how to deal with women. More and more women are discovering computer games and women are a growing sector of the market place that can no longer be alienated. 'Forty per cent of PC gamers and 27 per cent of console gamers are women. Video games are no longer the domain of teenage boys'.<sup>2</sup> So the commonly held perception that women don't like computer games is clearly false. Game developers are aware that many of the genres or types of games being developed, 'mostly appeal to a male audience',<sup>3</sup> but many are unsure of how to solve the problem.

So what computer games do appeal to women? The top ten video games for women, as listed in the *gamegirlz*<sup>4</sup> website are: *Myst* (adventure), *Nascar Racing* (motor racing), *3D Ultra Pinball*, *Zork Nemesis* *The Curse of Monkey Island* (adventure), *Quake* (shooter), *You Don't Know Jack* (trivia), *Tomb Raider I & II* (role playing), *Mah Jong* (puzzle) and *Tetris* (puzzle). It's interesting to note that many of these games are not considered 'gamers' games. *Myst* in particular was enormously popular, but almost unanimously got the 'thumbs down' by many 'hardcore gamers'.<sup>5</sup> Most of these titles are non-gender specific or use the first person viewpoint, where the gender of the player is indeterminate. The list is interesting reading, because six of my personal favourites are here, and the others I am yet to play!

The exceptions are the *Tomb Raider* titles, where the cyber-babe Lara Croft can be seen as sexualized physically, but in her actions can be seen to provide a positive and active role model for women. 'Lara is a girl with attitude'.<sup>6</sup> Journalist Janice Tong describes this as a positive: 'This "new woman" is an iconoclast, the antithesis of the role played by traditional heroines, and, to top it all off, she exists only in the realm of the virtual, as a possibility, and thus she is entirely liberating'.<sup>7</sup> As such Janice Tong sees Lara Croft is a cyborg, an amalgam of the imagination and the possible. But whose imagination? Certainly not that of women who struggle to find a place in development teams. Lara may represent a post-gender, post-human future, but she is framed within a masculine discourse.

In looking at the list of favorite games for women, I wondered what some fellow women gaming friends of mine felt were their favorite types of games, so I did an email questionnaire. I had ten respondents from all over the world and the results were most interesting.

It emerged that amongst this very small sample, the favorite types of game for women are puzzle games, even amongst women who don't consider themselves gamers. To quote one of the respondents, 'I like puzzle games. I like having something to think about. No fighting. No driving. No reading little messages that interrupt the game'. Or as one U.K. respondent commented, 'testing intelligence rather than co-ordination'.

Computer games are not quite as popular with women as with men, and I wondered why. I put this question to my survey group: 'What do you find as the main impediment to you playing more games?' Eighty per cent of the respondents quoted *time* as being the main reason why they don't play more computer games, and time even influences the type of game they enjoy. One of the respondents summed it up, 'I prefer puzzle games to anything action oriented. I like the fact that there's usually unlimited time, that you think rather than simply react. I quite liked text adventures for that reason yonks ago'. With family and employment, we simply don't have hours and hours to spend playing computer games, or to quote a U.S. respondent, 'not being able to fit in the time to play between work, children and house cleaning!'

So puzzles and games that allow you 'time to think' appear to be popular amongst women. But these sorts of games only make up a small percentage of the computer games being produced today. The main problem within the industry is that most game developers are men, and being a 'hardcore gamer' is a prerequisite for the job. A developer has to be familiar with most of the games in the marketplace and be able to formulate new games that will appeal to the consumer, without plagiarizing game ideas. Harvey Smith of the US game company ION Storm says, 'I still do not work with any female developers. Okay, occasionally an artist. We need MORE female developers! I think the perspective that any such developer brings will have more to do with her personality than her gender'.<sup>8</sup> And here's the dilemma. If female gamers do not play the sort of games that existing (male) developers want to create, there is little likelihood that women will be employed to produce games. And if those who have control of what is produced are all men, then this will be reflected in the products or programs that emerge. It is an age-old problem common in all sectors of industry.

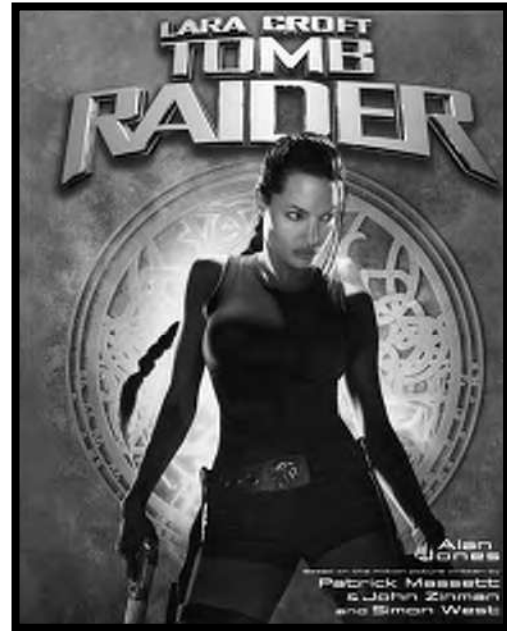
The desire to see more females in the gaming development area was also reflected in my small survey, with all of the women surveyed answering my question: 'Do you think more women should work in the computer gaming industry?' with a resounding 'yes'. One Sydney respondent added, 'there should be an all-women team dedicated to making different types of games for women and also children. I think they would have a good insight for the children's market'. Another woman from Sydney commented, 'I think the more women involved, the more likely better games will be produced'.

And what of the cyber woman? She is a computer creation, an electronic illustration, a construction born in an industry that is dominated by men. The 3D model *represents* woman, but often portrays her with an unrealistic, unobtainable body shape. The gaming woman, the



avatar, is a fiction that helps define our generation and yet can never be realized by our young. Bizarre competitions are held to find a human version of Lara Croft, when Lara herself never existed, except as pixels on a computer screen. That wasp-shaped waist and silky smooth legs are not a product of genetics, but of nurbs curves, polygons or splines. Although Angelina Jolie comes close in *Tomb Raider*.

This process of design perfection begins in the character design stage, where a 2d sketch (usually on paper) is drawn and given to 3d artists like myself. The female form is deconstructed to its basic elements, then built, shaded, and textured. Throughout the modeling process, flaws, or deviations from the artist's idea of the *perfect* female form are removed. Areas of anatomy can be altered, breasts enhanced, thighs made thinner. Hair color can be changed from blonde to brunette in seconds. What remains is the avatar, the representation of woman. The 'perfect' female form is a product of the 3d artist's (and original sketch artist's) culturally defined concept of beauty, and is sexualized to be appealing to men.

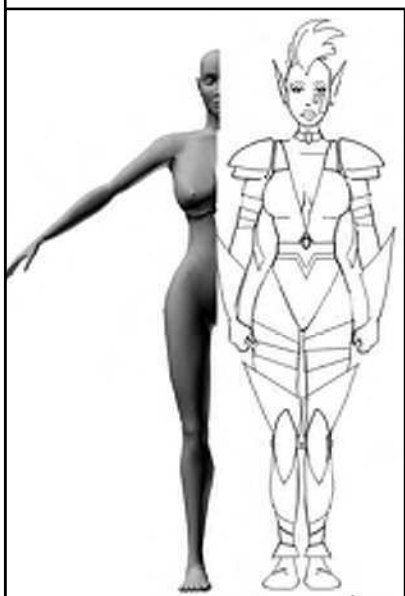


ANGELINA JOLIE IN *TOMB RAIDER* (SIMON WEST 2001)

And the sexualization is not lost on women. Eighty per cent of the respondents in my questionnaire thought that the physical representation of women was sexist. Comments such as 'they look like Barbie dolls with unhealthy figures', 'sexy bimbos', 'portrayals as sex objects, i.e. emphasis on breasts, and insanely thin waists—the iconic *perfect woman*'. The sexual fantasy is *embodied* on the computer screen. The image is impossible perfection. What is portrayed is not human, but a representation of an idea of what the artist thinks is the *ideal* woman. Nothing about this is new. Artists for centuries have been portraying the idealized woman, and their fantasies reflect back from the canvas to alter our own ideas of *beauty* and *perfection*. The cyber-babe can influence the real world from within her virtual universe.

Current rhetoric which surrounds the body in cyberspace, suggests that we are more fluid, have greater freedom, can be more beautiful, can be shape shifters to suit our lifestyle and body choice. In reality, medical and media technologies are determining more and more the way we view ourselves and others.<sup>9</sup>

The risk we take when assimilating the cyber woman is to reference our bodies, our fleshed reality back onto the constructed female. Our preconceptions of body shape distort into the unobtainable. We start to reconstruct our own bodies to fit the creation. According to Anne Balsamo, computer rendering tools are now being used by cosmetic surgeons



"Woodelf Hero" Designer; Alister Lockhart. 3D modeler/ animator; Fiona Kerr. (Copyright—Strategic Studies Group 1999)

to 'visually illustrate possible surgical transformations'.<sup>10</sup> Take a photograph of your patient and erase, enhance, distort the image until you achieve an aesthetically pleasing result.

One of the consequences is that the material body is reconfigured as an electronic image that can be technologically manipulated on the screen before it is surgically manipulated in the operating room. In this way, the video consultation enables the codification of surgical 'goals'—goals which effect, in short, the inscription of cultural ideals of Western beauty.<sup>11</sup>

The cybernetic woman, however, is not merely computer-generated imagery. She is interactive. She is the remote control woman, a machine response to human interaction. Click and she responds in a pre-programmed way to your input. She is a pistol-packing, high-kicking woman. The woman without tears, without kids, without bonds. She is the independent, world conquering/saving woman. She is a sexual fantasy; she can not only fight, kill, kick and maim, but she is a babe as well. She is the ultimate femme fatale. Good to look at, but she can kill you. And she doesn't appeal to women at all. The *image* of the cybernetic woman sits in stark contrast to the *narrative*, and this uneasy juxtaposition makes it difficult to suspend our disbelief.

And it's here that opinions might differ. Some may revel in the independent nature of cyber-babe's actions. She lives hard, plays hard and fights as good as the men. She is the quintessential 'woman as warrior' and spares no quarter. However, although she *looks* female, and embodies all of the male fantasies of desire and the perfect female body, her *actions* are framed within a male paradigm. The game designers might *balance* her personal attributes (not as strong, more agile) to take account of her gender, but the fact that she is female is incidental to the narrative/game. So when you look at recently released Australian games, it is difficult to find many with women represented at all. Of those that do have women characters, such as the strategy games

*Dark Reign* (Publisher Activision 1998, developer Microforte) and *Warlords III Darklords Rising* (Red Orb 1998, developer Strategic Studies Group) and the driving simulator *Powerslide* (GT Interactive 1998, developer Ratbag), female characters are in the minority.

When you're designing a game, it's best not to think of characters in terms of gender. In a sense, they are gender-less. They're more of an 'action figure'. You're interested in what they can do, not who they are.<sup>12</sup>

And when placed within the narratives of the game, the 'action figure' female is able to fight up there with the best of them, but she *does* nothing that distinguishes her as female. Indeed, change the screen image, alter the voice track and she is for all intents and purposes, male. Many of my survey respondents commented on the difference between the roles of women in computer games, and those of women in real life. When was the last time you saw a cyber-babe wash the dishes or change nappies? When was the last time she raised any issues that might seem even remotely relevant to how we live our lives? The conundrum of how to attract more female consumers to video games is tied up with this duality of representation: the image, the visual representation of the women is seen to be unrealistic, unobtainable and sexist; the narrative is male. The two work together to push woman away from video games, and those who persist with the media have to 'suspend disbelief' in the constructed reality to a greater extent than do men. Women gamers have to have thick skins, constantly being confronted in the name of entertainment.

So why this portrayal of women-as-warrior in computer games? To understand this, you have to delve into the nature of interactivity, and into the history of computer gaming. The fundamental difference between interactive media and other media forms is the changed function of the audience. You are no longer a mere spectator of the action, you are a participant.<sup>13</sup> You can reach through the computer screen and interact directly with the 'there', the constructed reality. This interaction allows the two worlds, *reality* and the *cyberworld* to exist contemporaneously. The 'there' is changed by the 'here' in a way that can never happen in traditional media.

Animation may now be undertaken by the navigator rather than the author. Three-dimensionality means that a cyberworld is becoming more and more like our experience of the real world. Interactivity means that the player may enter the cyberworld and affect what is happening there. This is becoming more apparent as ways to produce cyberexperiences are being developed.<sup>14</sup>

Games have to give you a reason to interact, a set of narrative goals. Otherwise you would be wandering around a fully constructed world wondering what to do. What these goals are can be many and varied, depending on the type of game played.<sup>15</sup> What is interesting is that the emphasis is on gameplay. The idea is to set the stage and characters as quickly as possible so that you can *get on with the game*. Characterization becomes stereotypical, a pencil sketch of character development. Because of this emphasis on gameplay, many (but not all) computer games are fast-paced and action-based. Get the exposition over in the three-minute introduction, and let's get on and kill those beasties!

Computer games draw their roots from three different existing areas— the cinematic/television media, board games and strategy (tin soldier) games. The military/combat scenario is often the easiest in which to set up instant, easily recognizable gaming parameters with minimal need for background information. In a war or close combat, conflict is guaranteed, you either win or you lose, and gameplay is fast. And that is where the problems arise with the characterization of women within games. Female narratives just do not fit within a male-based stereotypical combat/action scenario. Cyber-reality is being populated by men, and the narratives contained therein are masculine discourse. Male game developers simply do not have the time within the game to develop their female characters and narratives.

Time, however, is the key. For female gamers, time is the most important thing, *time to think during the game, time to play the game and time within the game for character development*. Developers have to give themselves *time to examine* the portrayal of women (both in the physical representation and in the narrative) and consider the marketing ramifications of how a sexist image may put off forty per cent of their PC gaming market. Management has to consider allowing female developers into the gaming industry and give them *time to listen* to what they have to say. If more developers consider what makes a game attractive to women, what sort of representation women feel is acceptable within a game, the better their sales will be. Tailoring a game so that it is interesting and involving for women without being confronting does not necessarily exclude the male gaming market. And the sooner that games become less exclusive of women, the richer the gaming industry will be!

## Endnotes

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- 1 IDSA Interactive Digital Software Association <http://www.idsa.com>
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 Interview with Harvey "witchboy" Smith, lead designer with ION Storm <http://www.gamegirlz.com/articles/witchboy.shtml>
- 4 <http://www.gamegirlz.com>
- 5 This is an opinion based on conversations with 'hard core gamers'.
- 6 Janice Tong, 'Hear Her Roar' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Summer' supplement, 25-31/3/00, p. 20.
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Julie Clarke, 'Body Status', *Mesh-Game Theory*, Issue 12, 1998-99, p.50.
- 10 Anne Balsamo, 'Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture' in Janet Price and Margaret Shildrick (eds.) *Feminist Theory and the Body - A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999, p282.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Interview with Roger Keating, Senior Vice President, Strategic Studies Group—and the author of this chapter.
- 13 Darryl Wimberly and Joh Samsel, *The Interactive Writer's Handbook*, The Carronade Group, Los Angeles, 1996, p.31.
- 14 Josie Arnold, 'Feminist Poetics and Cybercolonialism', in Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein *Cyber-feminism*, Spinifex Press Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, 1999.
- 15 Genres in computer games have been evolving and are by no means fixed yet. Unlike cinema and television, the categorization is based in terms of interaction/point scoring methodology as well as content. Generally games are categorized as action, adventure, driving, puzzle, role-playing, simulation, sports and strategy.

# THE SELF IN THE MIRROR

## Feminism and Australian Documentary Film-making

MEREDITH SEAMAN

### INTRODUCTION

In significant independent films of the last 30 years in Australia, women have exposed aspects of their personal histories, self-consciously performing and constructing their identities. They have documented their lives through an exploration of visual evidence including old film footage, photographs, interviews with family members and even re-enactments. The self is most intensely performed in these films through self-portraiture, as the film-makers step not only onto the screen as subjects but in front of the mirror to view the reflection of their own image. I will focus specifically upon three of these films in which the film-makers not only document their personal histories, but also most dramatically use various forms of filmic self-inscription to reflect upon their contemporary self-image and identity.



ANNA KANNAVA

These films are *In this Life's Body* (Cantrill, 1984), *A Song of Air* (Bennett, 1987) and *The Butler* (Kannava, 1997).

Questioning how these 'intense performances of self' function remains relevant, as personal testimony in films by women continues to be a significant factor in recent years. Filmic self-representation by women has had particular effect on the field of documentary film-making and an examination of how these films have developed over the years provokes a closer understanding of how the portrayal of the feminine self relates to broader histories. While questions about what is real constantly seep into discussions about both autobiography and documentary film-making, for the purposes of this paper I am more concerned to investigate the subtleties of personal discourse in film. Turning to Jacques Lacan's metaphor of the mirror-stage, and the impact of his theories more generally upon readings of autobiography, serves to highlight some of the complex issues involving filmic self-representation.<sup>1</sup>

### **REFLECTIONS OF SELF—IN THIS LIFE'S BODY**

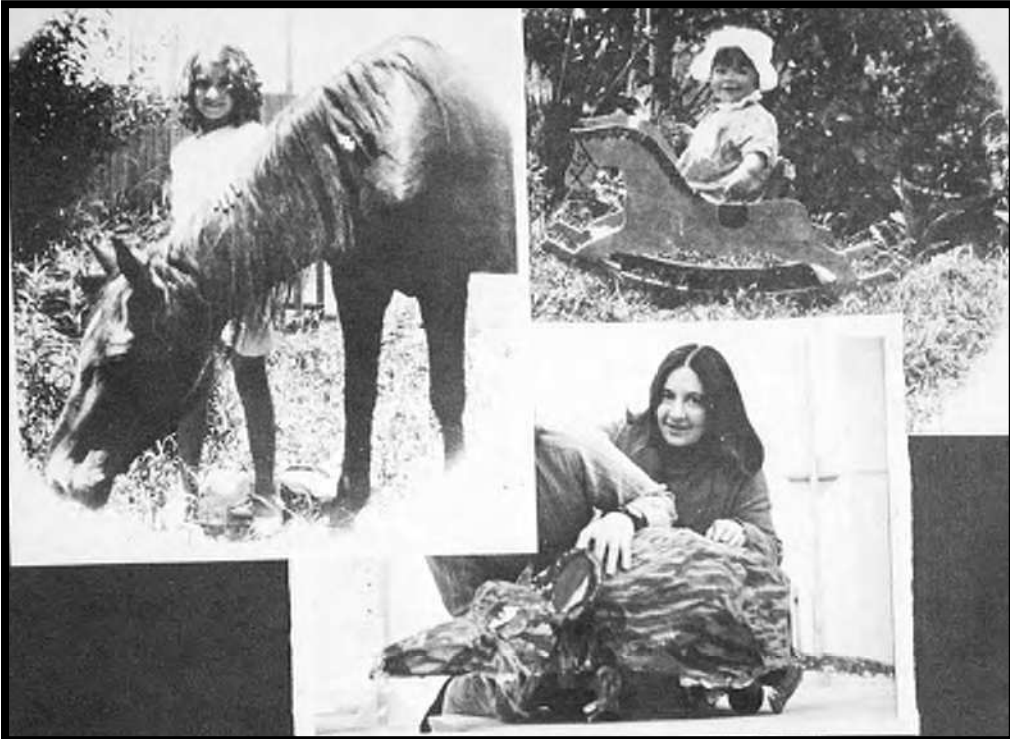
*In This Life's Body* (released in 1984) was written, narrated and filmed by Corinne Cantrill, a Melbourne film-maker with a long history of avant-garde film-making. In this work she self-consciously re-evaluates her life experiences, showing more than two and a half hours of photographs, almost solely of herself, from childhood to middle age. She tells of her painful childhood in a violent and unloving household against the backdrop of 'happy family' snapshots and of her adventurous adult life as an artist's model, botanist, traveler, mother of an autistic child and film-maker. While she narrates her life experiences in chronological order, there are two elements of this film that are unique. Firstly her treatment of the photographs, which are projected separately onto the screen like slides, and retain the character of still photography without the dramatic highlighting and simulated animation usually accorded to photographs in documentary film.<sup>2</sup> And secondly, the way she interrupts her own first person narration of her life experiences to address the emotional and practical process of making the film from the position of a third person.

Cantrill narrates her life mostly in first person voice, as in the following excerpt:

*I am a child of mixed race, destined to be a marginal person, caught in the push and pull of conflicting values. Destined to be inherently insecure, restless, dissatisfied, wanting everything, wanting it both ways, outside the rules, open to possibilities ...*<sup>3</sup>

This first person narrative is interrupted by use of the third person voice for the more intense and painful incidents in the story, and moments when she considers the autobiographical project itself:

*Trying to be honest—which of all the many things that could be said, should be said? She had always been a show-off, an exhibitionist—she feared that pitfall greatly. Was the whole idea just an*



*excuse for her narcissism? Like making eyes at herself in mirrors, looking for her image in dark glass city reflections? In love with herself as the most special person?*<sup>4</sup>

This use of third person voice allows Cantrill greater distance and perspective on her life and emotions. Her sudden reference to herself as 'she' is jarring, testing and rupturing her presentation of a linear life history. This supports the claim she makes within the narration that there is more than one possible account of her life and version of herself. As Kate Sands has observed, it draws attention to the way our visions of self can come from others, to the fact 'that a person's identity is crucially and frighteningly dependent on the stories she carries in her head'.<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of the work she reveals that prior to and during the film she had been very ill, physically and emotionally, to the point that she was sure she would die. Her intense reflections on the relationship between the body and psychic life relate to her decision to refuse an operation and Western medicine in favour of the alternatives of Eastern medicine. At the climax of the film she questions her own physical image using self-portraiture: potent shots of herself as reflected through a mirror, camera in hand. An issue I will return to later with the other films is the act, as here, of the film-makers visibly performing the authorship of their own image.



### RECLAIMING PAST IMAGES—A SONG OF AIR

While in *In This Life's Body* photographs are presented as the questionable evidence of a life, in Merilee Bennett's *A Song of Air* (1987), the film-maker uses amateur films taken by her father—of her and her family—as the backdrop to the story of her family life. Both films refer to the challenge of illustrating the self using existing images given the gaps between memory, truth and the arbitrary nature of remaining visual evidence. *A Song of Air* is about the film-maker's difficulties growing up as a young woman in a claustrophobic conservative environment and tells the story of her relationship with her father, a barrister and archetypal patriarch, particularly focusing on her ambivalent feelings after his death. The basis of the film is the home film footage: mini-dramas enacting, as Bennett claims in her narration, a 'family alliance in the face of an outside threat'. In 'the present' she shows herself positioned at a film editing desk. While this image is obscure and she shows herself only from behind, it has the less than subtle implication that she and not her father now controls her physical image. As she takes control of her own physical image, indeed performing her power to manipulate her father's images, the film presents a more complex account of her struggle to create an emotional self free of her father's authority.

As she records her feelings towards her father prior to, and after his death, the film has a 'tone of table-turning revenge' which as Anne-Marie Crawford observes, reflects a self pos-



sibly 'unable to entirely escape defining itself through these early patriarchal constructs'.<sup>6</sup> However, the film presents the full process of mourning and this tone of revenge and anger shifts towards an admission of love and an attempt to understand the basis of her father's motives: 'Interwoven in this account is Bennett's developing understanding of her father's behaviour as an attempt to protect her from pain. The film is able to assert "both her difference from him and her love for him" ...'<sup>7</sup> The most powerful and personal moments of the film are when she reveals that she has been a junkie, a topless waitress and loved women, but these references are fleeting and in the context of her search to construct an identity violently opposed to her father's ideas of feminine grace and family 'goodness'.

As Corinne Cantrill in her film uses third person voice to create some sort of distance from herself as subject, Merilee Bennett similarly uses another's perspective, her father's, to structure her story. The film reflects upon the intense loss of self which can result as easily from the death of another as from facing one's own mortality. Another point of comparison is that as both film-makers base their films around the photographs and films taken by their families, they share an intense skepticism of these images. As the films unfold, an intense fascination and attraction for these images also becomes apparent. In each, it is this relationship—between the film-maker and the images of their past—which is the centrepiece of each film.



## PERFORMING THE CONTEMPORARY SELF—THE BUTLER

While the two films discussed above both date from the mid-1980s, an intense period in independent feminist film-making in Australia, the impulse to document the personal has continued well into the 1990s. While the 1990s have been a period of much less overt feminist content in film-making, personal narratives have had, if anything, broader appeal and reached a much wider audience through the medium of television. One such film is *The Butler* (1997) by Anna Kannava. In this film the film-maker documents her life within the framework of family history. She relates the experience of living with her brother Nino, whom she describes as a combination of Mr Bean, Peter Sellers in *The Pink Panther* and Jerry Lewis—‘only Nino is for real’.<sup>8</sup> She also recounts the break up of her parents and the subsequent experience of migrating from Cyprus to Australia with her mother and two brothers. In *The Butler* Kannava uses film and photographs taken by her father in Cyprus, and later by her brother and herself in Australia, as well as staged re-enactments of their experiences growing up in Australia. The re-enactments use actors and cinéma-vérité style depictions of Kannava’s contemporary life living with her brother and family gatherings.

Interestingly she also uses fragments of the Greek melodramas she watched each week as a teenager, and films she had made years before (with her brother and as a drama student), as a different kind of visual illustration and evidence of her past. Kannava does not attempt to undermine or challenge the evidence presented by the images of her childhood. While this ‘deconstruction of the image’ is an element crucial to the two other films discussed, in which the film-makers visibly manipulate the images of their childhood to their own ends as much as learning from them, this does not occur in *The Butler*. A likely reason for this is that Kannava does not rely as heavily on images taken by family members as the other film-makers. Instead, she uses her own student films, reconstructions of moments in her teenage years using actors, Greek melodramas and so on, to tell the story. These images do not have for Kannava the same implications of family control and emotional investments as the posed photographs taken of Corinne Cantrill by her family or the structured films of Merilee Bennett’s father, and therefore do not have to be deconstructed or undermined in the same way.

There are climactic moments in *The Butler* when, towards the end of the film, Kannava reveals more personal details about her private past. Specifically these are the account of the break up of the long term relationship with her partner following her discovery that she suffers from the painful condition Clairaderma. Clairaderma is a fatal illness in which the skin grows hard and tightens around the body. It is not accidental that as she addresses her terminal illness and feelings of alienation in the narration, we see her looking in the mirror considering the loss of her physical self. Her changed physical appearance, caused by her illness, is emphasised as she tries on a dress in front of the mirror and is confronted with a face she no longer recognises.

While the use of this greater range of visual materials sets it apart from the other two films, what truly sets it apart in my view are the cinéma-vérité segments because of how

they function in terms of authority and authorship. While there is not the same overt analysis of the construction of self, nor the same intense reflexivity and questioning of the image common in independent 1980s film-making, in Kannava's work, the inscription of authorship and self is on a level more complex than in the other films because of her on-screen 'live performances'. In the other two films the physical appearance of the film-maker's contemporary self on screen is limited and carefully controlled. In *The Butler* the audience has supposed access to Kannava's daily life with her brother, and Kannava's reflections on her life take place in a filmic space much closer to 'real' time. In the other films the distinction between narration and image is clear. While the narration has its own temporality and sense of development, the images are fairly static. While there are moments of visual self-inscription on the part of the film-makers, the sense is of the film-maker consistently behind the camera controlling events. The imaginary line between on and off screen is not crossed—only the narration can be immediate, contemporary. In *The Butler*, however, this role of authorship is challenged, as Kannava's 'contemporary self' appears on screen in daily interaction with her brother and her own image via the mirror.

### THE MIRROR IMAGE

I would like to look to the mirror and the moments of heightened and self-conscious reflection in the films more carefully to try to unravel some of the cultural and personal meaning invested in these moments. The mirror is the obvious medium for representing the process of self-analysis because it emphasises and performs the film-maker's dual role as both subject and author. The mirror also draws the spectators' attention to the process of representation and the performance of identity itself. It also, of course, draws attention to how we see our own physical self-image. The moment when each film-maker stands in front of the mirror is the ambivalent point at which she reveals her pain and perceived loss of self, yet at the same time constructs a filmic self. It is this ambivalent moment that I want to go on to consider further.

It is first necessary to clarify what these moments of heightened self-reflection are. In *The Butler* and *In This Life's Body* there is a moment where the film-maker/subject literally faces the mirror; in *In This Life's Body* the mirror is a way for the film-maker to author her own image to the fullest degree—by using the camera she is in control both on and off screen. Cantrill's use of third person voice is another way, through language rather than visual means, of distancing herself from the representation of herself as subject. In *The Butler* Anna Kannava performs herself in 'real time' on-screen through interaction with her family and in viewing herself in the mirror; in *A Song of Air* Merilee Bennett does not show her contemporary self physically on screen in the same way—we see her most in the images taken by her father. We do catch glimpses of her, and in *A Song of Air*, images of water and the editing desk stand in for the more direct symbolism of an actual mirror.

These moments at the mirror (real or metaphorical) can be usefully identified as a literalisation of the Lacanian concept of the mirror-stage. In Lacanian terms this stage occurs when the subject first sees herself in the mirror and can recognise herself as other. The

subject's relationship to the mirror-image is an ambivalent one for Lacan, as Elizabeth Grosz writes, as the moment is 'an ensnarement and lure as much as a pleasure. The child is fixated by the image, enamoured and captured by the specular double'.<sup>9</sup> There is a disparity between what the child feels and sees. The child 'sees itself as a unified totality, a *gestalt* in the mirror' and yet 'experiences itself in a schism, as a site of fragmentation'. The process of recognition/misrecognition is an intensely ambivalent one because it is a moment of both 'delusion' and 'accuracy'.<sup>10</sup> Without wanting to take Lacan out of context or overstate the connections between a stage of psychic development with what occurs in moments of self-inscription in the films, some very useful parallels can be drawn.

First the idea that self-image can be an 'ensnarement and lure'. This raises the notion that the film-makers are captivated by their image in a process beyond their control. Second, that they can only be reminded of the incompleteness of their image in the mirror and finally, on the filmic screen. There is the problem of communicating to the audience the fragmentation of the self that they feel, when what they and the audience can see is a unified totality. The moments of self reflection in the films seem to be caught in the 'system of confused recognition/misrecognition' that Lacan identifies as characteristic of the mirror-stage.<sup>11</sup> If the 'apparent mastery the spectator exercises over the image is an illusion', then the subject's attempts to construct a filmic self can never be satisfied or at least only be a delusion.<sup>12</sup> Each film, as I have identified above, was inspired by, and framed within the context of personal crisis and the loss of self. Faced with death each film-maker struggles—through the analysis of personal history and the construction of a life story—to construct a stronger, unique and unified sense of self and identity. At the very same time the film-makers are constantly reminded of the fragmentation of self that they actually feel, that they experience, as they gaze into the mirror and at themselves on the filmic screen.

It is this ambivalence which is the key to the personal discourse of these films and provides a challenge to their interpretation. A similar state of recognition/misrecognition occurs as the audience or critic attempts to decipher the 'self' they see on screen. It is hard to read the self as performative and a cultural artifact given the intensely personal nature of these films and the strong codes of authorship at work. This ambivalence is particularly intense at the moments when the film-maker appears physically on screen. Elizabeth Bruss argues that when the film-maker passes into view on-screen the whole diegetic world, the whole coherence of what is occurring in the filmic world is disrupted. She goes further to claim that there can be no cinematic equivalent of autobiography because when the film-maker comes from behind camera onto screen there is 'a flash of vertigo, an eerie instant when "no one is in charge" and we sense that a rootless, inhuman power of vision is wandering the world'.<sup>13</sup> While I do not necessarily concur with Bruss about the futility of filmic autobiography, (I believe there are other possibilities for reading such texts), I am fascinated by what does happen when the film-maker not only crosses onto the screen as subject but looks into the mirror. What happens to the gaze? Is the protagonist looking at their self or back at the camera and audience? In one moment the fragility of the self is projected and we are reminded of the performative nature of the filmic self. Yet, in that same moment

at the mirror, authorship and the possibility of women controlling their own image are celebrated.

### ISSUES OF IDENTITY AND AGENCY

Lacan and his commentators have emphasised the illusion in the mirror stage: the self itself 'is an illusion done with mirrors'.<sup>14</sup> Reading the self as illusional or fictive has been sometimes interpreted in a negative way as diminishing the possibility of human agency, of women becoming authors of their own histories. One helpful application of Lacan's theory would be to turn not to the idea of these films as failed records of historical reality, but as projections into the future. In Paul Jay's account of autobiography he claims that 'the recuperative power of the narrative resides not in its factualness but rather in the creative capacity of language itself'.<sup>15</sup> Even more striking is the idea, here expressed by the sociologist Jerome Bruner, that 'we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives'.<sup>16</sup> For Bruner 'the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualising that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future'.<sup>17</sup>

If we shift the way we read these films away from history and into the future, they become more powerful examples of women as active agents in their own lives, and begin to address the circular temporality which is at work in the films as the film-makers juggle stories of their past, present and future in a circular manner. If we consider, along with Linda Williams, that 'the self is itself made up of tales and images which are already "literary" and that 'if we come into being through fantasy, we are at root its construction'.<sup>18</sup> Then we have a fascinating way to consider the films, not as historical records or testaments, but as cultural attempts to actively construct identities. Concepts of authorship and a self that can be represented can be challenged, but we can also readdress what we are concerned with as truth. The films are truthful in that they relate to how the subject is constructed offscreen: through fantasy and desire. This is a position which challenges readings of the films as a celebration of women authoring their own histories, and yet it is also liberating. Given the fragile and fragmented nature of the self in crisis that the film-makers address in their films, it is a valid position to take. It allows for an understanding of self-inscription as fundamentally challenging any easy relationship between the represented self and real self, and as a process of reflecting possible selves into the future rather than portraying the 'real' self of the past.

### CONCLUSION

Although I have de-emphasised the documentary elements of these films—in favour of emphasis on the creative and fictional aspects of performing the self—this is in some ways to read against the grain. They do rely heavily on the codes of veracity that documentary film evokes. The films might not technically be able to go beyond the real to fully unsettle the spectator, playing with language and authority. As a result of the cultural status

of individualism, the spectator is constantly drawn to the perceived unity of the author (however fictive or transitory this 'author' may be in reality). Also fascinating is the similarities between the three films and the ways history writes itself even into our most private performances of self. The performance of self in these films is an ambivalent one, but necessary given the historical need for women to both question the nature of identity and at the same time record its reality. The self-conscious performance of authorship in these films lays enough bare perhaps to begin to reconsider how we understand 'the author' and 'the self' away from preconceived notions about their essential and knowable characteristics. We can actively read these films as performative however, celebrating their attempts to envisage the self in new and productive ways.

## Endnotes

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# BRAZEN BRIDES, GROTESQUE DAUGHTERS, TREACHEROUS MOTHERS

Women's funny business in Australian cinema  
from *Sweetie* to *Holy Smoke*

FELICITY COLLINS

**T**he dilemma posed by narrative film comedy for women filmmakers, spectators and critics is evident in Northrop Frye's seminal description of the classical plot structure or *mythos* of New Comedy:

*New Comedy normally presents an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition, usually paternal, and resolved by a twist in the plot which is the comic form of Aristotle's "discovery" ... [after which] a new society crystallises on the stage around the hero and his bride.<sup>1</sup>*

For Frye, the resolution of oedipal conflict between father and son through a discovery or *cognitio* 'causes a new society to crystallise around the hero'.<sup>2</sup>



CATE BLANCHETT IN THANK GOD HE MET LUZZIE

As feminist critics have taken pains to point out, the mythos of comedy requires the bride to be little more than the hero's prize. New Comedy's bride is bereft not only of her own desire, her own oedipal conflicts, but also, as Stanley Cavell has famously pointed out, she is almost invariably deprived of her mother.<sup>3</sup>

Film comedy, as a genre of happy endings at the expense of the bride and her mother, would seem to be unpromising territory for women. However, as Frye argues, comedy develops in two main directions: romantic comedy where the focus is on 'discovery and reconciliation'; and savage comedy where the focus is on conflict with the 'heavy father'.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, as Frye points out, 'Happy endings do not impress us as true, but as desirable, and they are brought about by manipulation'.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the manipulated image of the happy ending, it is worth noting a further point made by Frye: there are 'a variety of comic structures between the extremes of irony and romance'.<sup>6</sup> This variety offers a range of possibilities for women film-makers working with film comedy in both romantic and savage modes.

In her reading of *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987) as a romantic comedy-melodrama, Kathleen Rowe argues for a feminist reappraisal of comedy as the 'unruly' genre.<sup>7</sup> Taking up the problem posed by comedy's conventional plot structure, Rowe sees feminist potential in 'comedy's *antiauthoritarianism* ... its attack on the Law of the Father', and in its 'impulse toward *renewal and social transformation*'.<sup>8</sup> Rowe insists on an alternative reading of the happy ending 'as a sign of the partial suspension of conflict ... the tolerance for difference ... on which community depends'.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, it is not so much the wedding of the hero and 'his' bride that worries feminist criticism. Rather, taking issue with Cavell, feminists, including Rowe, have insisted that the problem with romantic comedy is the mother and her marked absence from the scene of her daughter's 'acceptance of the terms of heterosexuality'.<sup>10</sup> In the cycles of romantic and grotesque comedy which are the focus of this chapter, Australian women film-makers not only renegotiate the role of the hero's bride and the tyrannical father, they refigure the happy ending to include the mother and other women in comedy's festive community.

### **BRAZEN BRIDES: WISH FULFILLMENT IN NEW ROMANTIC COMEDIES**

In the short history of cinema, film comedy has been divided into two major forms: comedian comedy and romantic comedy. Women (with the exception of Mae West) have been excluded from the canon of comedian comedy. The main vehicle for funny women to meet on equal terms with the male lead (in Hollywood cinema at least) has been the cycles of romantic comedy identified by Steve Neale.<sup>11</sup> According to Neale the formal conventions of the genre are consistent from one cycle to the next: the meeting of the fated couple is auspicious; the 'wrong partners' must 'embody key ideological attitudes' that block the relationship between the right partners; the couple's eccentricity, capacity to have fun together, and their subjection to a learning curve are part of the spectator's fun as well as evidence of the genre's apparent commitment to equality between the sexes. However, as Neale demonstrates, for ideological reasons the conventions shift with each fresh cycle, from the education of the woman in the 1930s/40s screwball comedy to the education of the playboy



in the 1950s/60s sex comedy, and from the neurosis about commitment in the 1970s/80s nervous comedy to the return of traditional values in the new romance of the 1980s/90s. Noting the embrace of old-fashioned marriage in the new romance, Neale argues that the current cycle's 'dominant ideological tendency ... in countering any "threat" of female independence, and in securing most of its female characters for traditional female roles, very much echoes the tendencies of the screwball films'.<sup>12</sup> Neale's ideological suspicion of the genre, despite the fun it offers spectators and critics alike, is typical of contemporary criticism.

Australian women film-makers have made an original contribution to international cinema's most recent cycle of romantic comedy by testing the terms by which the 'new romance' educates its heroines into acceptance of a happy ending based on inequality. *Dating the Enemy* (Megan Simpson-Huberman, 1996), *Love and Other Catastrophes* (Emma-Kate Croghan, 1996) and *Strange Planet* (Emma-Kate Croghan, 1999) are conventional romantic comedies of gender inversion, wrong partners and eventual *cognitio* arrived at through mutual eccentricity, play and learning. The plots are driven by female characters who renegotiate the heterosexual pact at the heart of the genre. *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (Cherie Nowlan, 1996) and *Love Serenade* (Shirley Barrett, 1996) shift the mood of the genre from wish fulfillment to cool irony at the expense of the feckless hero (and the spectator). In various ways, this cycle of Australian romantic comedies upsets the genre's intransigent commitment to heterosexuality, refusing to secure 'its female characters for traditional female roles'. The bride, transformed beyond recognition, is a telling figure in these films. The bride's mother puts in an uncharacteristic appearance in *Lizzie*, and her conventional absence from the genre is noted in *Strange Planet* and *Love Serenade*.<sup>13</sup>

The most conventional of these romantic comedies, *Dating the Enemy*, exploits the trope of gender inversion to put its mismatched couple—Tash (Claudia Karvan), a nerdy science journalist, and Brett (Guy Pearce), a narcissistic music-TV host—into each other's bodies for the course of the film. The overt lesson they learn (entirely suitable for the corporate 1990s) is how to harness their sexual differences to become successful team players in international media space. Near the end of the film, a professor of genetics assures a television audience that opposites attract because their genes are perfect complements for each other, 'just like male and female'. However, there are passages of play between three potential couples in the film which complicate this conservative ideology. Tash and Brett are versions of the Doris Day virgin and Rock Hudson playboy of the 1950s/60s sex comedy; their best friends are the neurotic sidekicks given centre stage in the 1970s/80s nervous comedy. The third couple is much closer to Frye's bland hero and bride who function as figureheads for the new society rather than as individual characters. The wedding vows of the bland couple are featured in *Dating the Enemy* at the point in the plot when Tash (in Brett's body) experiences 'Wow!' sex with a Monroe-esque blonde and Brett (in Tash's body) has 'is that it?' sex with his best mate. These inverted sex scenes, rather than the wedding vows of the bland bride and groom, promise some sort of utopian re-negotiation of heterosexuality for the corporate career couple of the 1990s. However, what is carefully excluded from the plot is a sex scene between Tash and her best friend to parallel the sex scene between

Brett and his best mate. The implication is that mateship can survive a (disguised) homosexual encounter, but the erotic bonds between women pose more of a threat to the genre's heterosexual ideology.

BODY SWAPPING TO BECOME TEAM PLAYERS: GUY PEARCE AND CLAUDIA KARVAN IN DATING THE ENEMY



The repressed question in romantic comedy of the bonds (erotic and otherwise) between women is more insistent in Emma-Kate Croghan's two tributes to the genre, *Love and Other Catastrophes* and *Strange Planet*. These films take up the problem of the woman's education (not only into the norms of heterosexuality but also into the public playing field of knowledge and work). Although the potential couples are drawn from the four cycles of the genre (including screwball eccentrics, sexual sophisticates, neurotic sidekicks and incurable romantics) the women are not restricted to the traditional female role (ultimately the bride, no matter how spirited). In *Love and Other Catastrophes*, Francis O'Connor plays Cary Grant to Radha Mitchell's Irene Dunne, effortlessly appropriating classic scenes from *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937) to place a lesbian couple's breakup and reunion at the centre of the comedy. In *Strange Planet* the crucial meeting between the three right couples (the sexual cynics, the romantic idealists and the eccentric sidekicks) is delayed until they enter a 'green world' at the very end of the film where the self-knowledge they have acquired in the everyday world of same-sex friendships, from one New Year's Eve to the next, enables them to recognise their heart's desire (if only for one magical night).

Although *Strange Planet* refers to the 1980s/90s new romance (exemplified by Meg Ryan in Nora Ephron's comedies) it does not educate its women into acceptance of traditional domestic roles. The only bride to appear in *Strange Planet* is a computer mismatch, while, mirroring Meryl Streep in Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, Joel's 'perfect wife' finds love with another woman. Croghan's films not only decentre heterosexuality, they delay the moment of *cognitio* in order to focus attention on the bonds between women, the problems of their working lives, and the parallel ties between men. What is made clear is that these couples, who find each other in the end, inhabit an unequal world which, in the tradition of comedy defined by Frye, is under patriarchal rule. The absence of the mother from this comic universe is a buried problem not only for the characters but for the women writers and directors who have attempted to appropriate romantic comedy for a social transformation that requires rethinking 'the hero and his bride'.



ROMANTIC COMEDY'S NEW COUPLES IN LOVE AND OTHER CATASTROPHES

In *Love and Other Catastrophes* the world of cinema is exclusively male, from petty power-monger, Professor Leach and his canon of male auteurs (Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen, Quentin Tarantino, Spike Lee), to the guru of cultural studies, Adrian Martin (played by the Melbourne film critic himself). Even the academic supervisor of Alice's thesis on Doris Day is played by film buff broadcaster, Paul Harris. These are more than 'in-jokes' for a Melbourne audience: the two romances in the film are boldly indebted to Eric Rohmer and Leo McCarey, begging the question of female authorship in romantic comedy and in cinema.<sup>14</sup> This question has much to do with the absent mother and women's conditional access to

sexuality and culture—an access which is licensed at the cost of becoming their father's daughters, an issue first raised by Cavell in his analysis of the absent mother in classic screwball comedies of the 1930s/40s.

Feminist critics, seeking to understand their ambivalent pleasure in the genre, have focused their attention on the figure of the absent mother, drawing on Naomi Scheman's sharp critique of Cavell.<sup>15</sup> Scheman, like Cavell, adopts both a Freudian and a mythological framework to understand why 'neither [the woman's] appropriately feminine sexual identity nor her ability to assume public power is compatible with her being her mother's daughter'.<sup>16</sup> Scheman argues that by shifting her active desire from her original bond with the mother to become the passive object of her father's desire, the female subject learns the first lesson of femininity: father-daughter incest is the 'paradigm of female desire'.<sup>17</sup> This shift from the mother to the father 'must leave some considerable residue of loss, a grief at the heart of socially acceptable femininity'.<sup>18</sup> It also requires a degree of amnesia of the original attachment to the mother: 'that attachment is most likely to be rediscovered through an erotically experienced bond with another woman, or through the daughter herself becoming a mother'.<sup>19</sup> The return of the mother to romantic comedies written and directed by Australian women, at the very least, challenges the genre's habit of 'securing most of its major female characters for traditional female roles'.<sup>20</sup>

In *Strange Planet* the scenario of women as authors of their own oedipal quest draws on one of comedy's carnivalesque sites, the graveyard. The long-buried mother of romantic comedy is 'unburied' in two scenes where Judy (Claudia Karvan) visits her mother's grave, the second time to let her mother know that she has given up her father-complex and that her career is now being advanced by her female boss. The dates on the mother's grave, 1954-79, indicate that not only has Judy been brought up by her drug-fucked rock'n'roll father, but that her mother belongs to the baby boom generation of feminists whose daughters have inherited their mother's new society, post-feminist perhaps, but still under the law of the father.<sup>21</sup> In Croghan's films this double legacy, of a paternal cinema of re-educated brides and a postfeminist society of motherless daughters, is accepted in true comic spirit as a fallen world which nonetheless has potential (literally, a niche market in Croghan's case) for the pragmatic film-maker unwilling to relinquish her pleasure in romantic comedy but willing to examine her complicity with its traditional happy ending. By drawing attention to the missing mother, by insisting on the erotic bonds between women, Croghan transforms the incestuous terms on which romantic comedy 'educates' its women into heterosexuality. Assuming authorship of the genre, Croghan and Simpson-Huberman imagine different erotic and economic futures for their female characters.

While the mother as muse (and mentor) is affirmed in *Strange Planet*, the mother-in-law (a stock figure of comedy) is revived in *Thank God He Met Lizzie*. The mother's manipulation of her daughter's wedding into a social event is central to the film's gradual revelation that Guy's 'perfect' bride, Lizzie, is truly his mother-in-law's daughter and that the terms of the marriage will be set by Lizzie to preserve her (erotic) independence.<sup>22</sup> In *Lizzie* the joke is on Guy, but it is also on the spectator. *Lizzie* sees through the patriarchal joke of romantic



comedy at the same time that it cleverly seduces the spectator (aligned with Guy's gullible point-of-view) into wanting the genre's conventional happy ending to prevail. The sublime Lizzie (in Cate Blanchett's most luminous performance to date) has no intention of cutting her desire to fit Guy's fantasy of the idealised woman who will complement him to perfection. This bride has long since fled her virgin bed and moreover is not afraid of her mother's power. Nor is she afraid of becoming a mother: the final, ambivalent image of Guy, Lizzie, two children and the family station wagon fails to affirm 'family values' or to recuperate Lizzie for a traditional female role. Instead, *Lizzie* revels in what comedy does best: deflating the spiritual aspirations of ordinary mortals and bringing them back to earth with a harsh thud, reminding us that we are indeed 'of woman born'. As Walter Kerr puts it, 'Low comedy is a birth experience ... It consists in the discovery that we have a backside and that it is going to be slapped'.<sup>23</sup> When Guy discovers on his wedding night that his beautiful bride (like her mother) has desires which rudely conflict with his own, romantic comedy begins to shift into a more savage mode.

The cruel joke of romantic love is further exposed in the small-town comedy, *Love Serenade*, a kind of footnote to the 1990s cycle of romantic comedy. In this laconic satire, two rustic sisters (whose orphaned status is silently marked by a shot of an empty wheelchair in the family lounge-room) compete to 'ease a man's loneliness', then conspire to 'set love free' by turning him into a fish when their romantic desires are thwarted. *Love Serenade*, like *Muriel's Wedding*, treats the bride as a grotesque figure of crippled female sexuality which, pushed to a limit, becomes deadly to the male. If, in the end, *Love Serenade* puts a smile on the specta-

tor's face, it is an uneasy smile at a compensatory image of female bonding (on the mother-daughter model) in the face of disappointed female desire which has taken on a grotesque form. *Lizzie* and *Love Serenade* are liminal films: they stand on the threshold between romantic and grotesque comedy, revealing something of the treachery concealed in the idealised figure of the bride and her mother. The question of whether these ambivalent images of the bride are also regenerative (in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, as images of a new social order)<sup>24</sup> requires investigation of another figure in Australian film comedy, the grotesque daughter and her treacherous mother.

### GROTESQUE DAUGHTERS: SAVAGING THE FAMILY ROMANCE

Degrading the figure of the bride in romantic comedy extends the genre into that other comic terrain—the antiauthoritarian rebellion of the son against the 'heavy father'. In the hands of Australian women film-makers this rebellion has been transferred from the son to the unruly daughter. In the grotesque comedies the figure of reconciliation is usually the mother-daughter rather than the hero-bride. Rebellion against father-daughter incest as the model for the daughter's heterosexual identity is central to a series of grotesque comedies inaugurated by *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1989) and in some sense completed by *Holy Smoke* (Jane Campion, 1999). These comedies of degradation, death and rebirth, savage the family romance in ways that are better understood in terms of grotesque comedy rather than the closely-related genre of family melodrama.

To understand the image of the grotesque female body in antiauthoritarian comedy, feminist critics have turned to Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque world of Rabelais.<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin describes the grotesque (eating, drinking, defecating, copulating, birthing, ageing, decaying) body of Rabelais's medieval carnival as a comic figure of profound ambivalence: its positive meaning is linked to birth and renewal while its negative meaning lies in decay and death.<sup>26</sup> In Bakhtin's utopian view, grotesque comedy defeats the fear of death by combining images of birth and death in the one body, that of the 'senile pregnant hags' whose decaying-birthing flesh is 'the epitome of incompleteness'.<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin's maternal image of the earth as both womb and grave is central to feminist reappraisals of the grotesque female body as a source of comic rather than melodramatic attitudes to sexuality, death and the material life of the body. The female body is central to Bakhtin's argument that 'blood as a seed buried in the earth, rising for another life ... is one of the oldest and most widespread themes' of the carnivalesque.<sup>28</sup> A powerful image of carnivalesque ambivalence appears at the end of *Sweetie*, when Kay's slim, pristine, disciplined body merges with her sister's fat, naked, blood-gurgling corpse in a mouth-to-mouth transfusion of Sweetie's abundant life-blood into Kay's classically bloodless body.

The cycle of comedies initiated by *Sweetie* draws on Rowe's key figure of the 'unruly woman' whose history extends from the medieval figures of Ursula the Pig Woman and Mrs Noah to popular culture's Miss Piggy and Roseanne. For Rowe, the unruly woman is 'above all a figure of ambivalence' who seeks to dominate men and is unafraid of making a public spectacle of herself with her body, her speech, her laughter, her sexuality and her

association with 'dirt, liminality ... and taboo'.<sup>29</sup> In the carnivalesque world, 'dismemberment, horror, death, and taboo' (epitomised by the maternal body) invite communal laughter rather than individual fear of mortality.<sup>30</sup> However, as Rowe points out, 'Carnival and the unruly woman are not essentially radical but are ambivalent, open to conflicting appropriations'.<sup>31</sup>

The ambivalence of *women* toward the female grotesque is highlighted in the carnivalesque assaults on patriarchal authority in *Sweetie*, *Dallas Doll* (Ann Turner, 1993), *A Fistful of Flies* (Monica Pellizzari, 1996), *Soft Fruit* (Christina Andreef, 1999) and *Holy Smoke*. These savage comedies invite a different kind of laughter from romantic comedy. Their regenerative endings depend on death, often of the grotesque woman herself (in *Sweetie*, *Dallas Doll*, *Soft Fruit*). The quintessential image of rebirth through death in Australian grotesque comedy is the burnt-out backyard (and its iconic hills hoist) which marks the mother's suicide in *Muriel's Wedding*.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the definitive image of the unruly daughter exploding her incestuous tie to the father occurs near the end of *Sweetie* when Dawn, naked, fat, obscene and greedy, farts in her father's face as he tries to force her down from her childhood 'palace', the fatal treehouse that he built long ago for his 'princess'. In *Dallas Doll* the unruly woman reconstitutes a middle-class family according to her incestuous fantasies (seducing mother, father and brother, resisted only by the sceptical sister). As an evangelical agent of free enterprise, Dallas liberates the family from its upper middle-class, heterosexual regime, at the same time setting the scene for her own dismemberment. Her brutal demise is absurd rather than tragic, affirming unruliness as both fatal and regenerative.

Father-daughter incest as the model of heterosexual desire is turned on its head in these grotesque films, leaving the father figure weakened and isolated. The death of the grotesque, cancer-ridden mother at the end of *Soft Fruit* leaves a vacuum around the violent father which his fat, sexy, loud-mouthed daughters refuse to fill. In *A Fistful of Flies* the sexually rebellious daughter dons her mother's wedding dress and takes her father's shotgun to the cemetery where she misfires, shooting her father's statue of the Virgin Mary instead of herself. Saved by the Virgin, she joins forces with her mother to turn the gun on her violent father. It is crucial that the father is humiliated and disarmed in public—he is forced at gunpoint to relinquish the black leather belt which he has used in private to sustain his fantasy of the virgin daughter and the chaste wife. In *Dallas Doll* the middle-class father loses his authority as he submits to beatings from Dallas, while in *Soft Fruit* the brutal father loses his wife and daughters but regains his son by stripping naked, in public, in the rain.

The daughter's assault on the incestuous palace of childhood (built by the father and maintained by the compliant mother) is a central image in the grotesque comedies. It involves not only an assault on the father's power but the rebirth of the mother. In *A Fistful of Flies*, the punitive mother, under pressure from her daughter's sexuality, casts propriety aside, urinating in the street, flashing her 'onion' at the onlookers, and declaring to her daughter

that 'men are like toilets: fully engaged, pissed off or full of shit'. The mother's sexual re-alignment with the daughter reverses the 'natural' order of the father-daughter alliance usually affirmed by romantic comedy. The rejection by the mother of her complicit relation with the heavy father (who is rendered absurd rather than evil) leads to a different ending from the betrayal and self-sacrifice of maternal melodrama.

The connection between maternal melodrama and comedy has been noted by Scheman in her critique of 'the teaching and learning of female powerlessness [as] the dark underside of the laughter of the remarriage comedies'.<sup>33</sup> Rowe picks up Scheman's point and argues that 'the most dangerous expression of female unruliness, after all, is the love between mother and daughter, which must be shattered to enable



FISTFUL OF FLIES: MARS (TASMA WALTON) IN HER MOTHER'S BRIDAL DRESS ARMED WITH HER FATHER'S SHOTGUN



the daughter's narrative to end on a note of romantic comedy'.<sup>34</sup> Like the romantic comedies discussed above, the grotesque comedies end in wish-fulfilment, avoiding surrender to a new paternal order. The grotesque wish takes the form of a (violent) separation of the mother from the father which restores the primary bond between mother and daughter. In *Soft Fruit* the three daughters remove their dying mother from their father's house to a caravan. The mother's death does not pave the way for a renewed relation with the father—the daughters are already aligned as mothers with their own children. Similarly, the father is excluded from the new matriarchal family at the end of *A Fistful of Flies*—hope for a different future for Italian-Australian masculinity is vested in the young boy who meets his Nonna for the first time. Although *Sweetie* leaves the parental relation unresolved (the mother's liberatory trip to the desert occurs in the middle of the film), the wish-fulfillment images of Rosalind on her tractor in a field of sunflowers at the end of *Dallas Doll*, or of Ruth in India with her mother (and a new boyfriend) at the end of *Holy Smoke* are calmly regenerative. They resonate as fertile after-images of the sexual and spiritual upheavals of carnivalesque comedy.

As a champion of the regenerative laughter of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin reminds us not only of the healing power of laughter in the face of death but also of laughter's peculiar spiritual dimension. In Bakhtin's view, comedy relocates the spiritual from the head and the face to the belly, the bowels and the genitals: 'The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract'.<sup>35</sup> This downward movement from the thinking head to the laughing genitals is a 'popular corrective to individual idealistic and spiritual pretense'.<sup>36</sup> In *Holy Smoke* Campion brings spiritual and erotic desires to bear on the voluptuous body of Ruth (Kate Winslett) and subjects both Ruth and PJ (Harvey Keitel) to the humiliations of the flesh. When PJ succeeds in destroying Ruth's blind faith in her Indian cult leader, Ruth's illuminated body becomes grotesque: stripped of her sari she stands naked in front of PJ and urinates, weeps and demands sex; at the pub she gets drunk and stoned, slow kisses a girlfriend and is groped by two louts. However, it is not only the woman who makes a spectacle of herself in *Holy Smoke*. In the film's central, staged struggle between cruel beauty and armoured age, degradation is mutual. Ruth derides PJ's sexual vanity as he exposes her spiritual vacuity: their mutual descent ends in a bizarre desert odyssey where both undergo a symbolic death (Ruth dressed in tea towels in the boot of a car, PJ in a skin tight red dress, covered in emu shit, under the blazing sun).

The spiritual and sexual descent in *Holy Smoke* takes place in a carnivalesque world inhabited by Ruth's family of buffoons and tricksters who happily transplant themselves from suburban Sans Souci into the outback. Their televisual world of kitsch Australiana intrudes into the rarefied cinematic world inhabited by Winslett and Keitel. These intrusions comically deflate the spectator's desire for spiritual redemption, a desire ignited by the film's transcendent opening sequences set in India. At the end of the film Ruth returns to India with her mother and PJ returns to America (with Pam Grier) to become a writer and father of twins. The final images of postcards and computer screens hold out a cautious hope for a future, web-based, digital world (neither televisual nor cinematic) which might include PJ as the father of newborn twins but is likely to exclude Ruth's suburban father and her corrupt guru. Ruth's rejection of PJ's incest fantasy (at his most debased he begs her to

marry him) and her alliance with her rejuvenated mother, implies that her renewed spiritual quest will be grounded in her sexual identity as her mother's daughter. Ruth's carnivalesque release from father-daughter incest as the prototype of proper femininity opens onto a third (mostly overlooked) terrain for women in film comedy, the terrain of the mother and the crone.

### WOMEN'S FUNNY BUSINESS: POST-FEMINIST PLOTS

WAITING FOR A SURROGATE BIRTH(NONI HAZELHURST, DEBORAH-LEE FURNESS,  
HELEN JONES AND FIONA PRESS)



If the mother is mostly absent from romantic comedy and, initially, complicit with the father in grotesque comedy, then she appears in her own right in three post-feminist comedies, *Waiting* (Jackie McKimmie, 1990), *Talk* (Susan Lambert, 1993) and *Road to Nhill* (Sue Brooks, 1996).<sup>37</sup> These eccentric comedies break the mould of romantic and grotesque comedies which devote themselves to women's funny business from the point-of-view of the daughter. By taking conception, birth and death as their focus, postfeminist talkies bring to mind the origins of comedy in ancient female fertility rites and the subsequent elimination of the mother from the scene of comedy.<sup>38</sup> If *Talk* and *Waiting* derive their fun from re-inventing fertility rites within a post-feminist milieu whose biological time-clock has started to tick, *The Road to Nhill* derives its laughs from the post-menopausal end of the fertility cycle. Together, the three films remind us that it is the regenerative, fucking, birthing, decaying body of the 'senile, pregnant hag' which makes women's business central to comedy.

Post-feminist talkies have little in common with New Comedy's rebellion against the father and the crystallisation of a new society around a young couple. Rather, they draw on Old Comedy which Frye describes as 'a blend of the heroic and the ironic' whereby the 'comic hero will get his triumph whether what he has done is sensible or silly, honest or rascally'.<sup>39</sup> In particular, *Waiting* and *Talk* bear the imprint of old comedy's struggle to construct and protect an 'enchanted and idyllic' social order against all opposition from a world 'like our own ... or worse'.<sup>40</sup> In *Waiting* the struggle to protect an idealised, feminist worldview is represented in the documentary film-in-progress which aims to record and celebrate the events leading to a surrogate birth. The impending birth re-unites four female friends: the pregnant artist, the feminist film-maker (and her teenage daughter), the ex-patriate career woman back from London, and the adoptive mother who longs for a baby of her own. In an ironic ending which ruins the ideological project of the feminist documentary-in-progress, the artist (Noni Hazelhurst) is unable to give birth until she decides to keep the 'surrogate' baby. In *Talk* a post-feminist utopia (of creative work, liberated sexuality and 'freely' chosen motherhood outside marriage) is mirrored by a dystopic, cartoonish world of stolen jewels, sexual jealousy and murderous passions. This parallel world is imagined by the silent Julia Strong (Victoria Longley) in response to the non-stop 'talk' of her friend and cartooning colleague, Stephanie Ness (Angie Milliken).

In post-feminist 'talkies', action is suspended in favour of unleashed tongues and no topic is taboo. At the centre of *Waiting* and *Talk* is an ongoing conversation on female fertility, fucking, conception and birth. There is also betrayal (of a daughter, of a friend, of feminist ideals) and the best-laid plans ('sensible or silly') and intentions ('honest or rascally') go astray. In the end, the fertile body triumphs over political ideals of non-monogamy, female solidarity and surrogacy. However, these ideological failures invite what Russo calls 'dialogical' or 'conflictual' laughter. In her work on feminist laughter, Russo argues that general laughter '... is coercive, participated in, like much comedy, by the marginalized only in an effort to pass'.<sup>41</sup> Post-feminist comedies talk their way through the dilemmas posed by comedy for women—they invite knowing laughter at the conflicts and failures of feminist ideals at the same time that they leave us with Russo's triumphant final question addressed to Bakhtin, 'Why are these old hags laughing?'<sup>42</sup>

An answer might be found in an aspect of comedy which is foregrounded in these films (literally in *Road to Nhill*): the accident. In Dana Polan's view, comedy relies on a dialectic between the 'comic as aspiration' and the 'ironic deflation of pretension'.<sup>43</sup> In this dialectic, the illusion of self-mastery and control over the world is brought undone by an accidental collision with the material world. As Polan points out, 'Comedy ... comes in acts of materialization wherein the seemingly free human subject or spirit finds itself falling back into mere body, mocked by a body gone mechanical'.<sup>44</sup> This is especially true of those free-spirited female characters in *Waiting* and *Talk* who find themselves yielding to an unexpected turn of events, to do with an unconventionally conceived pregnancy. If the fertile, pregnant body deflates feminist ideals in these comedies of delayed motherhood, it is the post-menopausal point-of-view of the crone that deflates conventional masculine aspirations in *The Road to Nhill*. In this rural film four lady bowlers (post-menopausal by definition) meet



with an accident on a country road, generating a rustic comedy of female laughter at male incompetence masquerading as mastery and control.

Although the four lady bowlers refrain from laughing out loud at the comedy of errors that attends their 'rescue' from an overturned car, pained pauses and wry looks invite laughter from the audience. That the dusty road to Nhill is presided over by a benevolent godfather of the Australian film industry (Phillip Adams as the voice-of-god) adds a further ironic note. In an industry which is tolerant of brazen brides, leery of grotesque daughters and indifferent to old crones, *Nhill* is a sly joke on laconic masculinity as the icon of Australian-ness. Silent female laughter at male mastery relies on comic reversal to assert female superiority over the stronger sex, but the bigger joke is on all of us and the old crones of *Nhill* know it. God is granted a sonorous voice-over in the film, announcing our common, existential dilemma: that we will all die; that we struggle in vain to control our destiny; that our fate is accidental. In *Nhill* post-menopausal hags are in a better position than their 'virile' male counterparts to recognise this common fate and to greet it with dread and with humour. The film's wry, long-winded structure as a bush yarn narrated by the stock and station agent, is violated by a shock ending: the sudden death of one of the lady bowlers. It is this accidental death which dispenses with the conflictual laughter of comedy's perennial 'battle of the sexes', inviting communal laughter at the absurd, frightening, fate of the body.

## CONCLUSION

As Frye points out, comedy is guided by a 'philosophy of providence' which requires a festive act of communion with the members of the audience who recognise the new society as the one they desired all along.<sup>45</sup> However, feminist critics have been quick to point out the ease with which comedy's new society restores the old gender hierarchy. Rowe warns against the too-ready embrace of comedy as subversive, reminding us that '[t]ransgressive women never escape their vulnerability' and that the popular culture of late capitalism has lost the ambivalence of medieval carnival—the female grotesque is now *either* idealised *or* degraded but not both.<sup>46</sup> It may be that the ambivalence of Australian women's film comedies (together with their recuperation of the mother) is their mark of distinction: Lizzie is the perfect, ambivalent bride, utterly luminous and utterly fallen; Sweetie is her father's dream girl *and* his grotesque nightmare; and the pregnant women and post-menopausal crones of post-feminist comedy are figures which express *female* ambivalence towards the regenerative, birthing, ageing, decaying body. However, as Rowe points out, female figures of profound ambivalence (i.e., both idealised *and* degraded) have limited currency in the popular culture of late capitalism. The films discussed here are no exception. The box office fate of Australian women's comedies of the 1990s has already been decided. Their critical fate, their significance for changing feminist thinking about film comedy, is still in the balance.

## Endnotes

- 1 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Atheneum, New York, 1966, p.44.
- 2 *ibid.* p.163.
- 3 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, pp.57-8.
- 4 Frye, *op.cit.* pp.166-7.
- 5 *ibid.* p.170.
- 6 *ibid.* pp.177.
- 7 Kathleen Rowe, 'Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter' in Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (eds.), *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, Routledge, New York, 1995, pp.39-59.
- 8 *ibid.* pp.43-4.
- 9 *ibid.* p.47.
- 10 *ibid.* p.50.
- 11 Steve Neale, 'The Big Romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today', *Screen*, 33.3, 1992, pp.284-99.
- 12 *ibid.* p.298.
- 13 The figure of the grotesque bride (and her suicidal mother) in *Muriel's Wedding* (Paul J. Hogan, 1994) looks back to the grotesque comedy of *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1989) and anticipates the current cycle of romantic comedies which began in 1996. As Frye suggests (*op.cit.* p.167), the ideal young couple featured in *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992), tends to be rather bland -- comic interest lies elsewhere, in the heavy fathers, buffoons, braggarts and tricksters of the genre. Further research might investigate how the brazen bride, grotesque daughter and treacherous mother reinvent Frye's cast of comic characters.
- 14 In *Strange Planet* Doris Day is updated to Meg Ryan, a reference which acknowledges the ascendancy of Nora Ephron as the pre-eminent author of Hollywood's 'new romance' comedies.
- 15 Naomi Scheman, 'Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women', *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn, 1988, pp.62-89. For other feminists, see Fischer and Rowe cited below.
- 16 *ibid.* p.73.
- 17 Sandra M. Gilbert *qtd.* in Scheman, *ibid.* p.70.
- 18 *ibid.* p.69.
- 19 *ibid.* p.73.
- 20 Neale, *op.cit.* p.298. It is worth noting that female characters in Australian romantic comedies take the egalitarian ideal seriously. Romance and career ambitions are negotiated in the context of the media industries in *Dating the Enemy, Love and Other Catastrophes* and *Strange Planet*.
- 21 Scheman, *op. cit.* p.68, refers briefly to Cavell's 'inadequate' idea that the screwball heroines of the 1930s, as daughters of the suffragette generation, were somehow left 'motherless'. The motherless daughter is pervasive in Australian women's films from *Maidens* (Jeni Thornley, 1978) to *Night Cries* (Tracey Moffatt, 1989) to *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998). In my view Australian women's films fall into two broad categories - comedy and mourning - both of which involve the loss of the mother. I have written on the 'mourning' films in 'Bringing the Ancestors Home' in Deb Verhoeven (ed.), *Twin Peeks, Damned Publishing*, 1999, pp. 107-116.

- 22 Lizzie's economic independence is assured by her profession as a doctor.
- 23 Walter Kerr qtd. in Lucy Fischer, 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child: Comedy and Matricide' in A. Horton (ed.) *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, p.73.
- 24 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1968.
- 25 For an influential feminist appraisal of Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque laughter, see Mary Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory' in Teresa de Lauretis (ed.), *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986, pp.213-29.
- 26 Bakhtin, op.cit. pp.308-17.
- 27 *ibid.* pp.25-6.
- 28 *ibid.* p.321.
- 29 Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995, p.31.
- 30 *ibid.* p.33.
- 31 *ibid.* p.44.
- 32 The up-ended hills hoist (rotary clothesline) in *Sweetie* which marks the beginning of Kay's transformative confrontation with her own sexuality, pre-dates the hills hoist as an icon of death and rebirth in *Muriel*. See Jane Landman, "See the Girl, Watch that Scene: Fantasy and Desire in *Muriel's Wedding*", *Continuum*, 10.2, 1996, pp.111-22.
- 33 Scheman, op.cit. p.83.
- 34 Rowe, 'Comedy', op.cit. p.52.
- 35 Bakhtin, op. cit. p.19.
- 36 *ibid.* p.22.
- 37 Although *post-feminist* is a controversial term I have decided to adopt it here because in the films I am discussing there is a sense that, in feminist circles, certain tenets of feminist ideology have not stood the test of time.
- 38 For a succinct account of the paradoxical exclusion of women from comedy despite comedy's origins in women's business, see Lucy Fischer, op.cit. pp.60-4.
- 39 Frye, op. cit. pp.43-4.
- 40 *ibid.* p.44.
- 41 Russo, op.cit. p.226.
- 42 *ibid.* p.227.
- 43 Dana Polan, 'The Light Side of Genius: Hitchcock's *Mr and Mrs Smith* in the Screwball Tradition' in A. Horton (ed.) *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, p. 136.
- 44 *ibid.*, Polan draws on Bergson to make this point.
- 45 Frye, op.cit. p.164.
- 46 Rowe, *Unruly*, op.cit. pp.44-5.

# SCRUBBERS

## The 'great unwashed' of Australian cinema

TERRIE WADDELL

*It just hadn't occurred to me that there was anything particularly arty about the body fluids and garbage left by a slattern.<sup>1</sup>*

I've always been fascinated by those rough-as-guts, oversexed, wild types of women ... *scrubbers*. Although this (peculiarly Australian) fusion of battler-trollop-mole-slut-bogan has made a significant impact in film, rarely has there been any genuine concern for the complexity of this character motif. She's usually reduced to a peripheral piece of light entertainment. There are a few rare exceptions. In *Fran* (1985) writer/director Glenda Hambly peeled the *scrubber* raw to expose the vulnerability of an unruly and highly-sexed woman unable to survive without clinging



DEBORAH MAILMAN IN RADIANCE



to 'the phallus' (literally and symbolically) for physical and emotional sustenance. Since *Fran* there have been a number of variations on the *scrubber* theme—Jane Campion's *Sweetie* (1989), Rachel Perkins' *Radiance* (1997) and John Curran's *Praise* (1998). In their analysis of female sexuality, rage and sorrow these Australian film-makers expose a culture insulated by sexism. They have displaced the stereotype by inverting her skin so that we are forced to confront the spilling viscera.

*Scrubber* is not mentioned in any of the films under discussion but the term is nevertheless relevant because of its etymological ties to dated notions of Australianness and the feminine. Although *scrubber* appears to be derivative of British slang for servants/domestics, it is more closely related to the, '... notion of having to scrape and forage for food or money, rather than to scrub floors'.<sup>2</sup> If applied to women it becomes a sexually demeaning slur, 'a girl who is reputed to be available for free sex ... a girl who is not too clean in her personal habits'.<sup>3</sup> When 'foraging' is linked to notions of the unsanitary and libidinous, the word then epitomises a woman who relies on others (predominantly through sex) for physical/emotional survival. Despite its relocation into the Australian idiom (c.1850s), the *scrubber* is



still associated with the 'great unwashed' of Britain's class system—the *other* through which the bourgeoisie/squattocracy define/d themselves.

The *scrubber* took an evolutionary turn during our convict past where according to George Miller's critique of Australian film, 'our founding mothers were regarded as no better than whores'.<sup>4</sup> In reference to *Sons of Matthew* (Charles Chauvel, 1949) and *The Squatter's Daughter* (Ken G. Hall, 1933), Miller talks about the early trend to document our taming of a 'tough and perverse' land. It isn't difficult to link *scrub* and *scrubbers*—savage and powerful things that must be wrestled into submission. If the word is applied to a man it only means 'wild', 'unbranded' or 'from the bush'; the sexual and aesthetic elements are irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> In *Sons of Matthew*, eldest son Shane (Michael Pate) is never shy about comparing the land 'to a beautiful woman, beautiful to look at, but tough to handle': 'Women and the earth', he later says, 'I've always felt they're much the same, only the earth's more exciting'. This macho bush idea of having to 'break in' unruly things is also related to the domestication of animals. During Australian settlement of the 1850s the term *scrubber* referred to feral farm stock, 'cattle that have run wild or never been branded',<sup>6</sup> 'mares in the outback who mate indiscriminately',<sup>7</sup> and 'any starved-looking or ill-bred animal'.<sup>8</sup> Even the use of the term foraging in relation to *scrubbers* suggests a form of animality. The connection between undomesticated women and animals (a Medieval/Renaissance initiative) once again found its way into Western culture—historical reverberation at its worst.

## SCRUBBERS ON FILM

To varying degrees *Fran*, *Sweetie*, *Radiance* and *Praise* dissect the unbranded nature of the *scrubber*. Each primary character's contempt for social order places them on the margins. I'm interested in exploring how and why Western culture operates (and has operated) to demean women who refuse to collude with customary notions of femininity. I'm also interested in why the *scrubber* is still depicted as a figure of pity. Is she uncomfortable to watch because of her threatening sexuality and/or liminality or because of her irrational dependence on men? Before exploring these questions it's worth taking time to briefly outline *Fran*, *Sweetie*, *Nona* and *Cynthia*'s stories.

*Fran* Carter (Noni Hazlehurst) is a mother of three who lives in a working class suburb of Perth. With an abusive husband 'up north' who returns home only to accuse her of infidelity, she prowls the local bars for company. She is convinced that a man, any man, will solve her problems and provide for her children. Hambly uncovers the intricate threads of *Fran*'s life without reverting to sentimentality or happy endings so that we are exposed to a woman who constantly struggles for survival. *Sweetie* splits the focus between two warring sisters. *Campion* juxtaposes the controlled and passionless character of Kay (Karen Colston) to Dawn, nicknamed Sweetie (Genevieve Lemon), a child/woman addicted to violent, attention-seeking sex and the fantasy of breaking into 'show bizz'. Although Sweetie personifies excess and unruliness she remains dependent on her junkie lover Bob (Michael Lake), father (Jon Darling) and Kay's partner Louis (Tom Lycos). Similarly *Radiance*, based on Louis Nowra's stage play, explores female dependency and the relationship between

sisters—Mae (Trisha Morton-Thomas), who has spent her life caring for their dying mother, Cressy (Rachael Maza), a famous opera singer and Nona (Deborah Mailman), the youngest. The three Aboriginal women have reunited to cremate their mother and uncover childhood secrets. Nona romanticises the mother's flagrant sexuality while Mae and Chrissy feel only contempt for the destructive consequences of her promiscuity. Comparisons are repeatedly drawn between Nona and the misunderstood shadow of *mother*.

I was intending to only look at female film-makers in relation to the *scrubber* but *Praise* proved the exception. Adapted from Andrew McGahan's 1992 Vogel award-winning novel (best unpublished manuscript), *Praise* explores the difficult relationship between Gordon (Peter Fenton), a chain smoking asthmatic and Cynthia (Sacha Horler), an oversexed barmaid with chronic eczema. The film is mesmerising because of Cynthia's presence. She is perhaps the most pure *scrubber* of all the texts under discussion. Shot in sepia tones that evoke the relentless heat of inner-city Brisbane, *Praise* explores Cynthia's inexhaustible sexual energy and Gordon's endurance of it. The sweltering look of the film reinforces Cynthia as a woman 'on heat', unable to escape the demands of her itching skin and overactive libido. Fran, Sweetie, Nona and Cynthia share similar traits yet each is realised in a different but no less intense manner. As *scrubbers* they are culturally linked to notions of pollution, poverty, animality and wantonness.

### THE GREAT UNWASHED

Marginality is the most disturbing quality of the *scrubber*. They are straddlers with one leg fixed over the rim of social order, the other swinging ambivalently, unsure of its position or future direction. Nona, Cynthia, Sweetie and Fran are jammed between stages of development, fighting to realise a sense of autonomy and caught in a tangle of complex drives and obsessions. Perpetual adolescents, dependent on others (and resentful of this) for their happiness and sense of self, they personify the archetypal pattern of *puella* (eternal girl).<sup>9</sup> Watching each character negotiate her way through this liminal site is unsettling. According to Mary Douglas' seminal work on the abject, 'Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one state to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others'.<sup>10</sup> Because the *scrubber* straddles we're left wondering which side of the margin she will favour. Power and suspense hangs at the crossing point.

In *Radiance* Nona manages to transcend her *scrubber* status by acknowledging the importance of autonomy. This of course makes her a no less marginal character. On the contrary, when Nona has grown past the stage of fixing her worth on a male 'rescue' figure, she moves further outside social order. This unattainable fantasy of a male saviour (which I'll flag here but talk about in detail later) sustains the pattern of insecurity that defines the *scrubber*. One suspects that Nona becomes entirely *other*—no legs dangling in a culture grounded in the father relation. The same cannot be said for Fran, Sweetie and Cynthia who, while threatening, are only potential transgressors. All four however, reject the appropriate social rites that enable access to 'acceptable' cultural frameworks. Without these formalised



procedures the uninitiated ‘... remains in the margins, with other people who are similar credited with unreliability, unteachability, all the wrong social attitudes’.<sup>11</sup> But what is it that is unreliable and ‘wrong’ with the attitudes of the *scrubber*? What fixes her *otherness*? Without getting too Kristevian, let’s begin by looking at the abject and filth.

### FILTH & CLEANLINESS

For Douglas, dirt is disorder. Dirt indicates what it is not; what it has disengaged itself from.<sup>12</sup> In *The Powers of Horror* (1982) Julia Kristeva incorporates this central idea into her interpretation of the abject. She maintains that bodily wastes—shit, piss, vomit, blood, afterbirth, sweat, tears etc.—have been understood as abject because they mark the limits of the clean and proper body. Dirt and bodily debris tell us what we *not* in order to recognise what we *are*—contained, regulated, clean and proper, social subjects.

*Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection. Faecal matter signi-*



*fies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become autonomous, distinct from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it.*<sup>13</sup>

Kristeva's theory of abjection aims to describe the process of oedipalization where (supposedly) innate psychological energy drives operate to assist the infant's separation from *mother*. Mother must be rejected or in Kristevian terms, *abjected*. The wastes expelled from the body and rituals associated with cleanliness (to her thinking) symbolise this expulsion of *mother* and the becoming of the subject. It is not the intention of this study to linger for any substantial period on Kristeva's work. I mention it only to acknowledge the context of her research and to point out that the body as a symbol of the social is crucial to any understanding of the *scrubber*. Physical cleanliness and propriety have generally signified socialisation, knowledge, law, containment, civilisation and notions of class, all of which inevitably fall under the rubric of the phallus (the 'acceptable' side of the margin). The uncontained, loose, unclean body that seeps and leaks and reminds us of what we cannot control (assumed to be predominantly female) is therefore marginal. Women who play with or embrace the abject, dirty women like Nona, Sweetie, Cynthia and Fran, are deviant. They point to disorder. They are matter out of place.

To varying degrees each character is directly associated with the abject and/or a site that exposes the abjections of others. In the opening images of *Radiance*, Nona hurriedly checks out her pregnancy test in a public toilet (the ultimate signifier for bodily excreta). The link between dirt, sexuality and the *scrubber* is fairly obvious. This relationship is intensified even further when we learn of Nona's self-conscious emulation of her (*scrubber*) mother. This symbolic death (abject)/ life (pregnancy) synergy that Perkins plays with in the toilet scene establishes the film's narrative trajectory. The uneasy childhood of each sister, bestowed by the mother, gradually gives way to a sense of understanding and liberation. Rather than reject their *scrubber* past entirely, the three sisters find a way to embody the more liberating aspects of their maternal legacy.

Sweetie's play with wastes is much more obvious. She openly pisses beside the family car, regurgitates glass figurines that she has eaten, and with hands firmly parting the large cheeks of her arse, farts in her father's face. The boundaries between inner/outer, waste/containment are blurred throughout the film. Even as she retches blackish blood after falling through her tree-house, the facial close-up is ambiguous—is she still playing or dying? Sweetie's abject acts are statements of social and emotional defiance, impure acts reminding us of the selfishness rarely accorded women. Specific Australian examples of the nexus between women, impurity and disorder are found in our convict past, where according to Damousi, '... [male] ideas about [female] dirt and cleanliness were directly related to ideas about social order and disorder'.<sup>14</sup> Although Sweetie can be associated with the convict *baggage* of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, *Praise's* Cynthia is a more direct throw-back to this *scrubber* gene pool.

Cynthia's body is anarchic. It is inscribed with chaos, sex and seepage. 'They'll think I'm hideous,' she says to her lover Gordon in anticipation of his family's reaction to her, 'this body, this skin'. Throughout the film her skin gives in to various stages of eczema. Crusts of yellowish dead flakes form on and fall from her body. She itches and bleeds. As they bathe together Gordon notices droplets trickling down her back, 'Your skin is bleeding, I can see it in the water'. This bathing scene, set in the dilapidated men's boarding house where Gordon lives, not only reminds us of Cynthia's leaky corporeality but points (as with Nona's toilet episode) to the wastes of others. In a previous shot the empty bath, clearly girdled in a thick layer of grime, sits in close proximity to rows of stained toilets and showers where the older men urinate and masturbate. The space is rich with traces of human refuse. The set mirrors Cynthia's condition—she is never 'purified' of the crusts that cling to her body. The border between life and decay is always smudged.

Cynthia is matter out of place—linked to dirt, sex, impurity and social disorder. She is dependent on alcohol, drugs, sex and Gordon. 'Fuck this body,' she yells after discovering that she has genital warts and is six weeks' pregnant. 'Diseased, pregnant, I don't know why I bother'. Her sexuality, like convict women's, is synonymous with infection: 'The obsession with sanitation not only served to eradicate disease, but also became an effective way of patrolling the borders of working-class women's sexuality, deemed "contagious", "dirty" and impure'.<sup>15</sup> The only way Cynthia can smooth the eczema (de-pollute herself) is by applying

large doses of cortisone cream, a steroid which swells her clitoris and quickens the ageing process. This form of cleanness through the dissolution of femaleness has uncanny links with the practices of early Christian female martyrs, who (as the propaganda goes) found redemption for their 'base' and 'tempting' bodies by 'becoming male'.<sup>16</sup> Gender swapping however, is a purity rite Cynthia resists. She holds on to her female sexuality, relishing the feel of her periods and extended orgasms despite the discomfort of her eczema.

### ANIMALS AND LOWER CLASS SCUM

Not only does the abject suggest a 'polluted' disposition, it also signifies animality.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier the Australian form of *scrubber* was used in reference to wild farm animals, brumbies and promiscuous women. The undomesticated and 'filthy' bodies of nineteenth century convict *scrubbers* were also blatantly linked to the bestial.<sup>18</sup> This blurring of boundaries is still maintained in contemporary film through subtly implied ideas of dirt and literal allusions to the bestial—the word *bitch* is used to describe Fran's sexual behaviour; Sweetie performs a feral type of barking after being deserted by her family. 'If Dawn wants to be a dog it's fine by me', says her mother; and the imagery of sticky swelter endows Cynthia with an untamed 'on heat' sexuality. It's worth taking time to look at the emergence of the woman/animal equation in order to appreciate the still existing misogyny that drives it.

According to Miles' study of the female body in Christianity, the Catholic church rigidly controlled women's bodies, sexuality and social behaviour in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Femaleness was linked to animality and women were restrained from any form of public display. Those who transgressed the church's moral codes by expressing desire were persecuted. The abject also, according to Kristeva, evokes a fearful linkage between humanity and animality that Renaissance thinkers, in their propagation of patriarchy and rationalism, were keen to dispel—according to Zemon Davis, writers and physicians of the sixteenth century believed the womb to be 'like a hungry animal; when not amply fed by sexual intercourse or reproduction, it was likely to wander about her body, overpowering her speech and senses'.<sup>19</sup> This woman-as-beast rationale provided a means of abjecting women from cultural representation. The *scrubber* is similarly ostracised.

As well as gender and animality, poverty also framed ideas of pollution. In their work on transgression, Stallybrass and White discuss this added dimension of *class* in relation to the liminal: 'Transgressing the boundaries through which the bourgeois reformers separated dirt from cleanliness, the poor were interpreted as also transgressing the boundaries of the 'civilized' body and the boundaries which separated the human from the animal'.<sup>20</sup> They elaborate on the relationship of economic deprivation and putrefaction by linking the poor to animals; vectors of infection. Disease itself was considered 'a member of the dangerous classes'.<sup>21</sup> Despite Australia's egalitarian pretensions and supposed dissolution of socio-economic hierarchies, 'lower-working class' is still the milieu of choice when it comes to locating the unruly *scrubbers* of contemporary film. *Sweetie* is set in a working class suburb of Sydney, the shabby beach-house setting in *Radiance* highlights the mother's poverty, and despite Cynthia's middle-class upbringing, she supplants herself a few social rungs below to

become part of the boarding house ambience. Fran is also firmly rooted within the struggling lower classes—images of single mothers with prams, pubescent young women (who may soon become single mothers with prams), flat, wide streets and identical brick veneer homes are instantly recognisable as Australian signifiers of economic underprivilege. The transient nature of the *scrubber* (being shuffled from place to place) is also linked to notions of economic disadvantage. While Nona, Fran, Sweetie and Cynthia are located within one or two central settings, frequent references are made to their nomadic history and bent for ‘going walkabout’.

Fran’s sexuality is directly linked to her social status. She has been shuffled through institutions all her life: ‘They put my mum away when I was five, she was an “alchy” ... I never knew who he [the father] was, always had plenty of uncles around but’. As Stallybrass and White explain in reference to the wantonness associated with lower class ‘scum’ of the nineteenth century, ‘promiscuity was encoded above all in terms of the fear of being touched. “Contagion” and “contamination” became the tropes through which city life was apprehended. It was impossible for the bourgeoisie to free themselves from the taint of “The Great Unwashed”’.<sup>22</sup> Fran’s desire, coupled with her social status, is her dirt. Sexuality is the *scrubber’s* most defining feature. It is her most threatening quality. Sex, dirt, pollution, seepage and women have been uneasy bedfellows since the Middle Ages. The *scrubber* embodies and celebrates this a-temporal dis-ease.

## SEXUALITY

The stigma attached to overt female sexuality may not be as pointed as it was last century but from the films studied here it would appear that the *scrubber* with all her lower-class sexual excess still exists to debunk the socio-sexual order. Even the physical appearance of each character—large (except for Fran), dressed in tight clothing to reveal a voluptuous body wanting sex, flopping and flailing with abandon—indicates a refusal to be categorised according to conventional standards of femininity. As Kathleen Rowe writes in relation to the television celebrity *Roseanne*, ‘Women of ill-repute, whether fat or thin, are described as “loose”, their bodies, especially their sexuality, seen as out of control. Similarly, fat women are seen as having “let themselves go”’.<sup>23</sup>

From the establishing shots of Fran being felt up by a passing stranger, we know she’s a sexual magnet: ‘When you walk down the street it’s like a bitch on heat’, says her friend Marge (Annie Byron), ‘they come out of the woodwork’. ‘I’m used to it’, says Fran in an off-hand sort of brag, ‘they’ve been following me since I was in primary school’. Despite her bravado, Fran’s sexual confidence is always undermined. She is never far from the convict past where, ‘... to obtain a more effective asylum for convict women, Samuel Marsden argued that the release of these women on the streets was dangerous. This was not only because of their drunkenness and loitering but because of the ways in which their sexual deviance and their “pollution” were “contaminating” the town, by inhabiting the male public domain’.<sup>24</sup> Similarly it is the men in *Fran* who are most unsettled by female sexuality set loose on the streets of Perth: ‘Little slut, it’s a good job your husband doesn’t know what

goes on', yells Fran's neighbour Mr Pearce (Ken Smith), 'bloody nympho—blokes coming and going all the time ... slut'. Fran is a menacing presence in the eyes of the male characters who are torn between attraction and repulsion: 'How many blokes did she shack up with, the kids just got in the way', Graham the foster-brother-in-law yells (Colin McKwan). 'Listen slut, I work like a dog up there to keep you and your kids', says her husband Ray (Danny Adcock), ' ... who'd know who any of your kids come from Fran ... little bitch ... slut'. The unsettling potential of erotic desire is the most powerful aspect of the *scrubber*—it disturbs notions of masculine propriety and authority.

'You know what I used to love?' Nona tells Mae. 'Rushing in here after hearing a new man go, throw myself on these pillows and smell him and mum would take a new bloke'. She sees this 'bloke-to-bloke' existence as fundamental to freedom. Nona's child-like joy of sex is anathema to Mae who understands emotional and sexual shutdown as the only means of salvation from men.

**Nona** *What's this thing about men?*

**Mae** *You look cheap ...*

**Nona** *Anyway what would you know?*

**Mae** *At least I don't live off men ...*

**Nona** *What the fuck does that mean? You've been picking on me since I arrived. I've never lived off a man, I've never taken money off a man for sex. That's what you hate about me, isn't it? I like men like mum liked them.*

**Mae** *Look how she ended up, deserted by 'em.*

**Nona** *No No always says Yes Yes ... Mae thinks I'm a slut*

**Cressy** *And aren't you? Only a word, Nona.*

Through Mae and later Cressy we understand the impact of their mother's neglect, sexual appetite and desperation for a married man who brought her silence with a dilapidated beach-house. Sweetie's sexuality is also juxtaposed to the cold frigidity of her sister, and although there is a lightness in her uninhibited sexual play, it is tarnished with the hint of incest (which I'll talk about later). Cynthia is never constructed as naive. She is the most sexually unabashed of all four characters. Initially kicked out of home at 14 because as she says, 'I kept bringing boys home and fucking them, I've got this real thing for penises'. Cynthia, as Gordon later tells her, is ' ... crazy about sex, crazier than anyone I know'.

The *scrubber's* forthright sexuality is not dependent on male desire. This raw intensity is her most liberating quality when we consider that most mainstream cinema still imagines female lust as merely reciprocal to male passion. It is interesting that even though female sexuality was feared by the church as a corrupting influence on the spiritual purity of the clergy, the clitoris, in the Middle Ages, was unknown to medieval physicians.<sup>25</sup> This suggests that female sexuality was theorised more as a means to procreate and corrupt rather than an activity of pleasure. The same might be said for contemporary attitudes toward the sexuality of the *scrubber*. Like pollution, full-on-female-sexual-heat is often seen as misplaced and therefore disruptive (often corruptive) energy. Female screen characters who actually enjoy a hearty



sex life are *usually* treated with suspicion because it is assumed that they are driven by an ulterior motive.

## MADNESS AND DEPENDENCY

Although the *scrubber's* overt sexuality challenges the tropes of femininity it is also associated with emotional instability. This back-lashing aspect of *Fran* and *Sweetie* suggests that madness is the price of an active libido: margin straddling is not a choice but the result of psychological distress/illness. Fran has 'always got problems'; she's 'always upset'. As a young mother she was hospitalised for slashing her wrists during a psychological relapse and is known for frequently abandoning her children. Sweetie's problems are more permanent. 'She's a bit mental', Kay tells Louis, 'She was just born. I don't have anything to do with her'. This aspect of the *scrubber* can be viewed in two ways—as a means of further intensifying ideas about social anarchism or, as I suspect is more likely, to reinforce notions of social order. All that is 'lower', all that has been discussed in relation to the *scrubber* so far, is linked to irrationality. Apparently the Self has no firm place on the margins, it needs to be tied to some kind of established cultural order. The inherent message is that to debunk the rules of official reason is to be mad. While psychotic behaviour is central to Fran's and Sweetie's character development, all four *scrubbers* demonstrate a crippling form of dependency on men and/or the state (read *men* as well). Their needy behaviour merely supports and strengthens the social system that anchors them to a stereotyped form of female helplessness.

Fran not only refuses to be supported (and therefore monitored) by welfare departments, she also refuses to work: 'I don't want them to tell me how to live', she says. This abdication of responsibility contributes to her dependency on others like Marge, her social worker, her foster-sister, lovers and ex-husbands. Because of Fran's fear of living off the state she sees men as her only emotional/financial survival option. Even after her husband beats her she begs him to stay, 'Ray don't leave me here, Ray where are you going?' and although her current lover Jeff (Alan Fletcher) has sexually abused her daughter, Fran is still willing to put her child's welfare on the line to ensure he'll stay. Fran's insecurity undermines the power of her sexuality. Sure she likes to initiate sex but because of her dependency sex *also* becomes a ploy to 'keep' men. She uses sexual bribery and guilt to procure the affirmation and support she needs but never gets.

Although Sweetie's neediness isn't as explicit as Fran's, her father's suffocating devotion contributes to the co-dependency between them: 'You're daddy's little girl, you know that don't you', he tells her. Their relationship is further complicated by subtle suggestions of incest, most obvious in the scene where Sweetie bathes her father. While washing him she deliberately drops the soap between his legs. As she scoops it from the water her hand appears to be rubbing his genitals. This episode is followed by a disturbing shot of Kay who holds bed covers to her chin as she listens to their play with uneasy 'knowingness'. Sweetie's innocent sexuality is undermined by the shadow of her father's unwavering adoration, which in the light of the bathing incident may have contributed to her psychosis.

Cynthia lived with her parents before moving into Gordon's 'room in hell' (as she calls it). For all her sexual effrontery she is ultimately unable to function alone. She merely swaps one form of dependency for another—her family (predominantly the father) for her lover: 'I can't do anything unless you're here', she cries, red-eyed and crouching in a foetal position because Gordon has left her for a couple of days to visit his family, 'I left my parents for you, Gordon, I don't have anyone else'. Gordon becomes her only source of pleasure and self-worth. It seems as if Fran and Cynthia understand heterosexual intimacy as a symbiotic (almost mother-infant) union. Being 'left alone', detached from their partner, is analogous to a loss of identity. While Cynthia remains the naughty child, leaving and returning to her father, Fran deeply believes that you have to 'bend over backwards' for men or else 'they won't stay'. Both behaviours indicate a marked lack of self esteem, a floating identity, given substance only by men.

In *Radiance* Nona moves through the limbo of dependence to realise the emancipation her mother never achieved. Although like Cynthia she refuses to be 'used' by men, Nona initially functions to reflect the sexual neediness of her mother. For Nona this desire for a male figure to provide a sense of wholeness is framed through her 'absent father/lover' fantasies—'Mum called him the black prince'. The sequence of Nona miming to a recording of Cressy's "Un bel di" aria from Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* foreshadows the climatic confession that Nona was the product of Cressy's childhood rape. The themes of sacrifice, betrayal and lost motherhood are implicit in Nona's mimesis. Even allusions to religious imperialism are used to accent how the sister's Aboriginality has been compromised by men; as they burn their mother's house toward the end of the film a picture of Christ that has dominated the living space is clearly shown melting in the flames. This purity rite signifies the women's rejection of a 'male saviour'. The brutality of Cressy's rape, the mother's many boyfriends, Nona's throw away 'fucks' and the omnipresent image of Christ, stress one of the underlying themes of *Radiance*—that dependency on a male hero to rescue you from yourself is a phallogocentric illusion.

## FINALLY

I remain fascinated by *scrubbers*. As precarious margin squatters they are welcome pollutants in a culture hostile to female unruliness and potent reminders of that culture's penchant for quietening dissenting voices. *Radiance*, *Sweetie*, *Fran* and *Praise* expose Australia through the *scrubber*. As a figure tied to notions of our land, our need to domesticate, our blokiess and our (now seemingly permanent) ties with Britain's antiquated class system, she embodies the a-temporal gender frictions of this country. A country that while producing strident female voices also subversively works to silence them. Women who are poor, sexual, loud, excessive, wild, dissatisfied with their domestic cages; women who take up too much space physically and emotionally; women who *have* to assert their wants; potentially threatening women—are *usually* dealt a handicap. They are *usually* lumped together as *scrubbers*. They arouse pity because they ultimately cannot function without men. To misogynist audiences they're heaven-sent instruments of propaganda but to the more reflective spectator they personify the possibility of dissonance and the lessons that still need to be learnt.

I began this chapter with a quote from John Hindle's review of Tracey Emin's installation piece, *My Bed*. With Fran, Sweetie, Nona and Cynthia in mind I'll return to where I started:

*A person whose lifestyle should only excite the interest of the health department offers her grubby existence as art, and is applauded. Too easy. I wonder why Van Gogh didn't think of it. Or Rousseau, or Gauguin, or ... me.*<sup>26</sup>

I don't wonder John – it's a bit obvious, isn't it?

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fto



# VOLATILE VEHICLES

## When Women Take the Wheel

### DOMESTIC JOURNEYING & VEHICULAR MOMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

CATHERINE SIMPSON

*In a country with huge distances and isolated centres of sparse population, cars promise a rabid freedom, a manic subjectivity: they offer danger and safety, violence and protection, sociability and privacy, liberation and confinement, power and imprisonment, mobility and stasis. The way that any one of these oppositions can reverse and swing into new alignment with the others suggests the car's semantic potential for extreme volatility... Dermody and Jacka put the problem more simply: our cars kill us, and without them we would die.<sup>1</sup>*

**T**he cinematic genre that most readily explores the significance of the car is the road movie. Much has been written concerning the connections between the road movie, frontier ethos and masculinity.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the road movie has been described as a 'genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and



GENEVIEVE LEMON IN SWEETIE

the absence of women'.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the critical works on *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), the so-called 'feminist' road movie, the significance of women and cars has been virtually absent from critical studies of the road movie.<sup>4</sup> In order to explore this issue however, I believe we have to move beyond the generic constraints of the purist endeavours of the road movie to a more inclusive type of domestic journeying. One where protagonists do not necessarily engage in the epic transformations or the apocalyptic visions necessarily synonymous with the (masculine) road movie.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter I will discuss alternative visions of journeying that are possible when women take the wheel.<sup>6</sup>

My discussion focuses on cars and those small, seemingly inconsequential micro-journeys between home and elsewhere which depict interaction between the driver, passenger(s) and the car, in films that would not generally be considered road movies. This chapter surveys moments in a series of Australian films directed by women where the significance of the car rarely gets a mention in their uptake by reviewers, critics and academics; *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998), *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1987), *Last Days of Chez Nous* (Gillian Armstrong, 1992), *Hightide* (Gillian Armstrong, 1987) and the short film *Peel* (Jane Campion, 1982).<sup>7</sup> The cars in these films often become highly aestheticized images creating memorable moments that make an impact on their drivers and the audience. Unexpected readings often emerge from the roadscape and the dynamics within the interior cabin of the car, revealing, 'the car's semantic potential for extreme volatility'. As I will show in this chapter, cars can function as a way of creating those extremes of character-character interaction—emotions become magnified and intensified in that volatile capsule. It is not easy to disguise or escape if you are feeling uneasy or claustrophobic in the enclosed cabin of a vehicle. Alternatively the automobile can also provide a utopian sphere in which to reconstitute familial relations. Before moving on to my textual analysis of these films, I want to make a brief foray into the gendered construction of cars and their relationship to the familial within Australian culture and cinema.

Kimberley Webber observes that, contrary to popular belief, surveys done in Australia and overseas reveal that women enjoy driving every bit as much as men do.<sup>8</sup> However Webber argues that a principal difference between men and women in countless societies has been the license to travel far away from home:

*The experiences of men and women behind the wheel remain very different. On average men drive far more and over far greater distances<sup>9</sup>... Men also spend more of their work and leisure time driving beyond the boundaries of their suburb and neighborhood. In contrast, women, regardless of whether they are in paid employment, take shorter trips, principally in their neighborhood and for shopping, ferrying children and taking care of family business. The US historian Martin Wachs argues that the car has therefore done little to overturn the separate spheres of men and women; rather, it has enabled women to expand their domestic sphere while remaining firmly entrenched within it.<sup>10</sup>*

The importance of the car to the domestic sphere in Australian family life was noted as far back as 1928 when a trade journal stated that: 'The home may be deserted, but family life is benefited by the car. It is a family machine which binds the family together although it

MICHAEL LAKE AND GENIEVE LEMON IN *SWEETIE*

takes [it] far from home'.<sup>11</sup> Webber suggests the reason so many people were prepared to make such sacrifices to preserve their place behind the wheel, even during the Depression was that, 'together with the home, the motor car had become an essential part of family life'.<sup>12</sup> The familial significance of the automobile is an issue that comes to the fore in many Australian films. Within the context of Australian road movies, George Miller's *Mad Max* cycle (1979, 1981, and 1985) has attracted by far the most critical attention. While I do not wish to focus on it in this chapter, comment surrounding the films often highlights their significance in relation to the domestic or familial sphere. For example in his discussion of the *Mad Max* films and the iconic nature of the car in Australian cinema, Jon Stratton argues that the car often becomes a repository of the domestic domain: 'There is a tendency not merely to personalize cars but to do so as locations of the domestic domain. In Australia with its huge distances and isolated centres of population this tendency is more pronounced than in for example, America'.<sup>13</sup> Meaghan Morris in her 1989 essay, 'Fate and the Family Sedan', argued that 'the mobile home offers a utopian space to escape or "reconstitute" sexual and family relations' and that we should look at 'cars as mobile, encapsulating vehicles of critical thinking about the family and familial space'.<sup>14</sup>

While Morris's discussion focuses on 1970s and 1980s cinema, I will be pursuing some of the issues she explores within the context of recent cinema, particularly the car's semantic potential for extreme volatility and its ability to convey dystopian or utopian visions. Morris



argues that films such as *Backroads* (Phil Noyce, 1977) and the *FJ Holden* (Michael Thornhill, 1977) engender dystopian visions because they construct political/social worlds which are worse than ours because no one can effectively act. On the other hand, films like *Mad Max* and *Shame* (Steve Jodrell, 1988) have a kind of utopian force as they assert the propensity for action and generating change. While the films I discuss in this chapter concern micronarratives of journeying and an examination of interior vehicular space, rather than outright generic pursuits which involve an epic (anti-)hero narrative structure like *Mad Max* and *Shame*, it is useful to have this vocabulary upon which to draw and illuminate my discussion of these films. Where I want to take up Morris's ideas is in relation to conceiving of the car as a utopian space to escape or relocate the domestic sphere which in turn enables a reconstitution of family relations as in the films *Radiance* and *Hightide*.<sup>15</sup> Jane Campion, as we shall see, seems to rely primarily on dystopian construction of familial interaction in the automobile in her two films discussed below.

#### **DYSTOPIAN REALMS OF DOMESTIC CONTENTION; NEGOTIATING FAMILIAL SPACE ON THE ROAD: PEEL, SWEETIE & THE LAST DAYS OF CHEZ NOUS**

In the case of *Peel*, *Sweetie* and *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, the car itself becomes a site of familial contention, more so than a house would be, because in a house people can always retreat to different spheres as they so desire—the backyard, the study, the bedroom or the toilet. For passengers in a car, there is no chance for retreat or even temporary escape within the confined cabin of an automobile. This is one aspect of the space that makes it so volatile.



*We are not going to leave here until you pick up every piece of that peel!*

Tim to son Ben in Jane Campion's *Peel*.

One of the first significant films with predominantly female creative control<sup>16</sup> to investigate 'cars as mobile, encapsulating vehicles of critical thinking about the family and familial space' was Jane Campion's short film, *Peel*, made at the AFTRS in 1982.<sup>17</sup> *Peel* explores the power dynamics within a family in an aborted journey along a country road. A father (Tim Pye), along with his sister (Katie Pye) and young son/nephew (Ben Martin), are returning from a trip into the country to look at a block of land when Ben starts throwing orange peel out the window. The father stops the car and demands the boy pick up the peel. The following battle waged over picking up the orange peel can be viewed, as Bloustien has argued, as an attempt to have one's own needs recognised as well as the need to gain power and control in a situation where one feels impotent.<sup>18</sup> From the outset, tension is created within the vehicle from the three different characters having opposing desired trajectories. Given that the father/brother, Tim, is driving—he controls the trajectory of all three of them. Katy and Ben however attempt to thwart his control through their different, but often feeble, forms of resistance. After father and son have reunited they return to find Katy now dropping orange peel on the ground. By the end of the film Tim and Ben have forged a pact against Katy, and they're not going anywhere until she picks up the peel. A final long shot from a passing car on the country road depicts Ben jumping on the roof of the stationary HR as darkness descends, paralleling the thumping noise of the orange against the windscreen which commenced the film. The sonic parallelism also emphasizes the circularity or inability to change already established familial relationships and dysfunctional patterns of interaction. When they started they were heading out from home looking for land and the car signified mobility and the propensity to change. By the time the film finishes the car signifies stasis.



GENEVIEVE LEMON AND KAREN COLSTON IN SWEETIE

*This is family business and it'll be handled by the family.*

Gordon (Kay & Sweetie's father in Jane Campion's *Sweetie*)

In *Sweetie*, familial relationships augmented in the pale blue HJ echo themes just discussed in *Peel*. In just a few brief scenes, *Sweetie* explores the often dysfunctional circularity of family relationships and the way familial tension becomes magnified in the interior cabin of the car.<sup>19</sup> On two occasions Gordon's HJ family station wagon is used as a vehicle of escape from the Sweetie/Dawn character, played by Genevieve Lemon. or escape from the abject.<sup>20</sup> In the first instance, even when the car is stationary it seems to act as symbol of mobility and escape. Kay (Karen Colston), Lou (Tom Lycos) and Gordon, Kay's father (Jon Darling), seated together in the parked car, discuss ways to remove Sweetie and her producer/boyfriend, Bob (Michael Lake), from Kay's house. Kay suggests that if they manage to get Bob out then Sweetie will follow: 'Get rid of Bob first—then it'll be easier. Take him to a restaurant or something then afterwards jump in a cab by yourself'. The inability of Gordon to comprehend the domestic dysfunctionality that he has unwittingly been the agent of is reflected when he exclaims to Kay and Lou in the same scene: 'I can't understand what's happening. The family's coming apart like a wet paper bag. People like you two don't appreciate this, but the show world is full of unusual types. What's to say Sweetie is any more unusual?'

While *Campion* maintains the basic temporal continuity of the editing through its shot/reverse shot structure, in spatial terms it is somewhat disorienting. Kay and Lou are placed in the extreme right hand corner of the frame of separate shots and Gordon is depicted positioned in the far left hand corner of the frame, emphasising the emotional distance between each of the characters, especially between father and daughter. During the discussion about Sweetie, a cut-away shot reveals a little toy-bear dangling from the rear vision mirror, pointing to the ubiquitous nature of Sweetie and the fact they can never escape her.

The horizons and feel of *Sweetie* change dramatically when the family—minus Sweetie—heads 'out west' beyond the urban environs to aid Gordon's reunion with his wife Flo (Dorothy Barry), who has been cooking for some stockmen on a station. When they finally get on the road, after waiting hours for the opportunity to deceptively remove Sweetie from the car, the film takes on a distinct shift in pace and mood. In this mini road movie section of the narrative, the mobility, freedom and opportunity on the open road is matched with upbeat music, starkly contrasting with the claustrophobic house they have just left, dominated by Sweetie's ubiquitous and oppressive presence. However the car's semantic potential for extreme volatility is emphasised during the return journey from 'out west'. A telling moment reveals the extent of the family's dysfunctionality. Flo and Gordon have reunited, which was the original purpose of the trip, and the family are singing happily altogether in the car. However Sweetie's absence soon dawns on Gordon and he suddenly pulls off the road and starts sobbing: 'I just want everyone to be together', he cries, evidently attempting to reach out to the family, who are at this point physically close to him, given the interior nature of the space of the vehicle. At this point precisely the car interior changes from signifying a comforting cocoon promising familial renewal to a claustrophobic cabin. As I will endeavour to show further on, the interior cabin of the car can alternatively be a utopian space to relocate the domestic sphere and an opportunity to reconstitute family relations. The intimacy of the capsule can offer the opportunity for reconciliation and understand-

ing, as in *Hightide*, when Lilli and her daughter Ally come to a painful understanding of each other's needs. But for Kay and Flo seeing their father/husband a blithering mess is just too much for them to deal with, and a process of disavowal and denial is set in place.

JP: *Why are you going out there? There's nothing there.*

Beth: *I might find something.*

JP: *You drag this poor old bastard out into the desert... (Father appears at the door.)*  
(The Last Days of Chez Nous)<sup>21</sup>

Throughout *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, the central character, Beth (Lisa Harrow) makes desperate attempts to communicate with the men who are most intimately associated with her by talking to them in environments outside the home; her sphere. She tries at first to salvage her marriage by making an 'appointment' with her husband, JP (Bruno Ganz), in a café. She then invites her cantankerous, sardonic father (Bill Hunter) on a Leichhardtian-journey into the Australian interior, with the intention of developing a closer, more meaningful relationship before he dies.<sup>22</sup> However, as we soon discover, as far as her husband is concerned at least, it is *their* relationship which needs salvaging.

Like the family in *Sweetie* who attempt to achieve some kind of familial resolution through a journey beyond the urban and suburban environs, Beth abandons her family and tries to salvage the relationship with her father with an odyssey into the desert. However home remains a structuring absence and Collins has noted that Beth never escapes its centripetal pull.<sup>23</sup> This is emphasized through the parallel editing which creates a series of contrasting couples in different spheres—Beth and her father on the road, Vicki (Kerry Fox) and JP having their affair in Beth's house, and Annie and Tim finding young love. 'In the early stages of the journey rising tensions between father and daughter, trapped together in a moving car, is contrasted with the release of erotic energies at home'.<sup>24</sup>

As they journey further away from 'home' in Sydney, the car becomes the means through which father and daughter's character traits are paralleled, while also displaying the gulf which exists between them. Beth has evidently inherited her father's stubbornness and his tendency towards megalomania. While a dystopian vision of the family is predominant in *Sweetie*, especially in regards to Gordon's incomprehension of the family's dysfunctionality and Flo and Kay's disavowal of his emotions, the father in *Last Days* is equally impotent in not being able to open up and make a connection with his own daughter, and thus to act. From the outset it seems that father and daughter are making the journey for different purposes. Their trajectories or reasons for being in the car are different. The father sees the opportunity to get out of the city and to travel; the experience itself matters and is seen as a noble endeavour. As far as Beth is concerned, the journey isn't an attempt to go *anywhere* in particular, it's just an excuse to get her father away on his own and in a different environment, without the other members of the family present. Thus from the beginning they are



already on different trajectories, but at the same time on a collision course within the steel cabin. The yellow Falcon which they set out in, owned by the Father, seems to act as an agent reifying the relationship between father and daughter. The Falcon is very much the father's domain and ultimately becomes just another extension of the hierarchical nature of their relationship. It is a space without the potential for their relationship to develop and grow.

When they venture outside the enclosed cabin of the car, the father's domain, it seems as if there is some propensity for new connections to develop between them. During Beth and her father's discussion about God, in which he reveals his resolute commitment to atheism, it seems for a moment that finally Beth is crashing through the barriers he's built around himself. Then Beth asks him: 'What about dying? Are you afraid of it?' and he responds, 'Fair go!' thus limiting any possibility of further discussion and putting up the walls again. Thus the process of disavowal continues.

### **UTOPIAN VISIONS: CARS AS CATALYSTS FOR MATERNAL RECONCILIATION *HIGHTIDE & RADIANCE***

While the automobile can become a repository for dysfunctional domestic spheres, as I have described in *Peel*, *Sweetie* and *Last Days*, it can also be a utopian space to reconstitute family relations. Two cars which do not appear to be that 'practical' but which come to signify a volatile paradox are Lilli's 1963 Chrysler Valiant in *Hightide* and Mae's violet 1977 XC Falcon in *Radiance*.<sup>25</sup> Before Lilli (Judy Davis) drives into the seaside 'resort' town of

Eden, the Valiant symbolises a sense of freedom, independence and relative autonomy while enabling her to lead a life of transience. Mae's Falcon on the other hand, blazing angrily through the Queensland cane fields, is initially an extension of Mae's (Trisha Morton-Thomas) frustration and anger towards the world. By the end of both films, the Valiant and the Falcon respectively have become, quite literally, the vehicles for maternal reconciliation and mobility.

*Ally: I'm going with my mother.*

*Bet: Jesus-God! ... Where are you going?*

*Ally: North. I dunno. She said 'we'll see'.*

*(Hightide)*

*Hightide* revolves around the story of Lilli, a back-up singer for an Elvis impersonation band. After being sacked by Leicester, the band's 'Elvis' (Frankie J. Holden), Lilli's means of escape breaks down and she gets trapped in a coastal town without any money. She discovers her daughter, Ally (Claudia Karvan), whom she abandoned as a baby, living at the Mermaid Caravan Park with Lilli's mother-in-law, Bet (Jan Adele). Initially the Valiant is set up as the differentiating factor between Lilli and the other band members. Her behaviour on the road in the opening scene of the film immediately establishes the pre-existent structure of hierarchy in the band and signals her future sacking by the Elvis Impersonator, Leicester a few scenes later. In this instance, the Valiant functions as a means through which Lilli can challenge his authoritarian patriarchal behaviour by 'playing chicken' with him on the country road.

As Crofts has pointed out, both the car and the road remain significant motifs throughout the film and structure the relationships between Lilli, Ally and Bet. The road enables the reunion between mother and daughter initially and subsequently tears Nan and Ally apart in the final sequence. Collins has also argued that *Hightide*:



DEBORAH MALLMAN IN RADIANCE

*envisions new spatial relations between a mother, her abandoned daughter, and the daughter's paternal grandmother. This spatial re-arrangement ... holds within it the possibility of reciprocal rather than a guilty, punitive or self-sacrificing maternal imaginary.<sup>26</sup>*

The Valiant too is a fundamental agent in reconfiguring this spatial arrangement. Following the disclosure of Lilli's identity to Ally, the two are depicted side-by-side in the front bench seat of the Valiant. Lilli painfully explains why she left her as a baby after Lilli's father died. 'After John died, I didn't want anything'. 'Do you love me?' Ally demands, 'I love you!' 'You don't know me', responds Lilli. The car in this instance is like a mobile home and structures the relationship between the two characters. It also provides a space in which they will not be disturbed by Ally's grandmother, Bet. This also reminds us that cars can be:

*a form of social containment, a mobile suburban living room. While cars can be places of abandon, they can also be refuges from it, and from engagement with society and nature. Cars can also provide a mobile sanctuary in urban contexts ...*<sup>27</sup>

When Lilli drives into Eden at the opening of the film, the road points to a geographical and emotional connection between Lilli and Ally. Later on in the film it is the road which associates Lilli with irresponsibility and finally separates both Ally and Lily from Bet when they leave Eden at the end of the film.<sup>28</sup> The penultimate sequence reveals Bet's absolute despair at losing her granddaughter—whom she has really brought up as a daughter, given the absence of Ally's parents.

While Crofts emphasizes the transience of human relationships in the film's last shot, reconciliation or reunion must be its flip-side. Collins argues that the film envisions an intersubjective relation between mother and daughter. She believes that a reciprocal maternal space underscores, 'the mutual recognition between two subjects'.<sup>29</sup> In this way the film moves to reconstitute family relations and the site for this intersubjective, or reciprocal maternal space is Lilli's Valiant.

Another vehicle that provides a means for a family to reconcile and head off to a new life together is Mae's Falcon in *Radiance*. The film revolves around three Aboriginal women returning to their mother's bungalow on the remote Queensland coast. The significance of the Falcon in *Radiance* of course takes on a totally different meaning to that of the newish Falcon (practical and reliable 'family sedan') discussed earlier in *Last Days*.

Mae's violet Falcon performs several functions in *Radiance*. The image of it blazing through the Queensland cane fields with Mae at the wheel creates a visceral and highly charged, aestheticized vehicular image. Roaring furiously through the environment seems to be the sole way Mae can directly express herself, particularly her anger and frustration towards the world at having to look after her dying mother. On a more functional level, the vehicle is also an agent of reconciliation between the women on several occasions. The first impression created by the vehicle, as the women make their way to the their mother's funeral service, is one which colour-wise at least, is starkly contrasted to the environment. In another way however, the aesthetic and visceral impact of the Falcon seems to construct it as an integral part of the environment. The car journeys down a narrow, one-way dirt track while cane lashes at its exterior shell. The non-diegetic music playing—a traditional

islander tune—creates a sense of coherency within the image and makes the car seem almost autochthonous.

On one occasion, Nona (Deborah Mailman) purposely thwarts their journey to the airport, which would see Cressy (Rachael Maza) fly off back to the metropolis and leave them. During this journey Nona feigns the need to go the toilet, so they are forced to stop and Cressy then misses her plane. They end up dropping her at the outback airstrip anyway, six hours before the next light aircraft is due to leave because, Cressy insists: 'Well, at least I won't miss it!' As Nona and Mae drive off, Nona says to Mae: 'Couldn't wait to get rid of her, eh? Just like you can't wait to get rid of me!' and then a few moments later we see Mae and Nona pulling up beside Cressy, patiently waiting on the abandoned airstrip. Cressy appears to ignore them as Nona opens the door and Mae sarcastically states: 'What d'you want? A standing ovation!' Nona holds the car-door open for the diva and she slides in. This second reunion between the sisters paves the way for the maternal reconciliation between Nona and her newly discovered 'mother', Cressy, to occur after the women have destroyed the house.

Like the function of the road in *Hightide*, the road also functions as a motif in *Radiance* and alludes to the geographical, emotional and familial connection between the three women; Nona, Cressy and Mae. Not only is Mae's character defined by a vehicle—her violet Falcon—but both Cressy and Nona are initially characterised in opposition to each other through their means of transport to the old family house on the Queensland coast. Nona hitches a lift with a truckie, indicative of her wild, spontaneous and transient life. Cressy, in contrast,



TRISH MORTON-THOMAS, RACHAEL MAZA AND DEBORAH MAILMAN IN  
RADIANCE

arrives respectably and orderedly via taxi from the local airstrip. While a vehicle would normally be a motif for transience, and the house an image of stability and connection with one's roots, in *Radiance* the opposite applies. The house in the end becomes the 'transient' object that is destroyed while the vehicle signifies reconciliation and new beginnings.

In the final scene, the Valiant enables the maternal reconciliation between Cressy and her daughter Nona to occur after the women have destroyed the house. In response to finding out that Cressy is really her mother, not her sister as she had thought, Nona, in confusion and despair, escapes across to the island close by. The next morning she returns to the mainland. After Nona disembarks from the boat she walks straight past Mae's violet Falcon, conspicuously parked at the end of the wharf. Cressy and Mae appear in disguise (wigs and sunglasses), crouched down in the front seat of the car. As Nona walks past seemingly unaware, Mae whispers loudly:

Mae: Psst! Nona! (As Nona takes a sideways glance, Mae indicates that it is really them, they're just in disguise!)

Nona: Where the fuck d'you two think you're going?

Cressy: Where d'you wanna go?

Mae: C'mon! (She motions for Nona to get into the car.)

Nona: (Jumps reluctantly into the back seat) There's no fuckin' way I'm callin' you 'mum'! (she says to Cressy).

Cressy and Mae laugh as the three of them take off down the highway in their mobile home. In this instance the intersubjective relation between mother and daughter is emphasized even more so than *Hightide* through Nona's comment that she's not going to call her newly discovered mother, 'mum'. Rather than a hierarchical maternal space, the film emphasizes: 'the mutual recognition between two subjects'. In the beginning the function of Mae's falcon was to express her anger, in the end, it becomes the site for maternal reconciliation. *Radiance* ends on a somewhat lighter note than the ending of *Hightide*, which sees maternal loss as well its flip-side, reconciliation.

### CONCLUSION: NEW BEGINNINGS?

In his landmark essay, 'Genre, Gender, and Hysteria: The Road Movie in Outer Space' (1991), Timothy Corrigan's prescient final comment was that:

*Once the buddy [road] movie has driven itself into outer space, other drivers might take the wheel ... the road might now explore other cultural and gendered geographies.*<sup>30</sup>

In response to Corrigan, I have attempted to provide a glimpse of what happens when women take the wheel and explore 'other cultural and gendered geographies'. Interestingly, it seems that when women do take the wheel familial geographies become central, echoing Webber's comment that 'the car has enabled women to expand their domestic sphere, while remaining firmly entrenched within it'.<sup>31</sup> At the same time however, the films dis-



cussed here also display wider trends and themes within Australian cinema, linking the car to the family, as observed by Meaghan Morris, Jon Stratton and Adrian Martin.<sup>32</sup>

*Peel*, *Last Days* and *Sweetie* all contain journeys beyond the urban environs signaling mobility and a propensity for renewal. However these films end up showing the way in which dysfunctional patterns of behaviour and familial tension become magnified in the interior cabin of the car emphasizing its potential for volatility. Far from being a utopian zone in which to reconstitute familial relations, the interior cabin of the car becomes a dystopian one representing stasis and the inability to act. The dystopian vision conveyed in these films is in direct contrast to that offered by *Hightide* and *Radiance*, where empowerment and reunion are emphasized. *Hightide* and *Radiance* offer radical visions of the family and its relationship to the car and the home. On the one hand they transform the ideal of a conventional family, and they define home as nowhere in particular. Both begin and end on the road, the broken white line fading off onto the horizon, signaling new horizons and new beginnings. The central characters are heading somewhere, but they are not sure where. Home is family in these two cases, which is encapsulated by the vehicle, at least for the moment. In these two films the mobile home offers a utopian space to relocate the domestic sphere and to reconstitute familial relations.

## Endnotes

- 1 Meaghan Morris, 'Fate and the Family Sedan', *East West Film Journal* vol. 4, no. 1, 1989, p. 124.
- 2 Albeit often a kind of hysteria or crisis associated with this masculinity and male subjectivity. See Steven Cohan & Ina Rae Hark (eds.) *Road Movie Book*, Routledge, London, 1997. In their introduction they state that the road movie promotes a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately constrained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment. p. 3.
- 3 Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1991, p. 143.
- 4 Janet Wolff has also argued that the histories of travel make it clear that women have never had the same access to the road as men. 'In many societies being feminine has been defined as sticking close to home. Masculinity, by contrast, has been a passport for travel. Feminist geographers and ethnographers have been amassing evidence revealing that a principal difference between women and men in countless societies has been a license to travel away from a place called "home".' 'On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism' *Cultural Studies* no. 7, May 1993, p. 229.
- 5 I'm thinking here of Australian films such as *Mad Max* (Miller, 1979) and Colin Eggleston's horror road movie, *Long Weekend* (1977). Meaghan Morris has discussed the apocalyptic elimination of the wife and child at the end of *Mad Max* in her article: 'Fate and the Family Sedan', Morris op. cit., p. 117.
- 6 I mean directors here, as well as central female protagonists. Perhaps this will subvert the common perception of cars and the road as an undisputed male terrain.
- 7 This I'd argue, is usually because of their genre—read 'art film' or 'drama'—where the aesthetics of the cerebral and symbolic get prioritised over the visceral and kinetic aspects of cinema.
- 8 As early as the 1930s increasing numbers of women were getting behind the wheel. It is estimated that in 1935 there were over 100,000 women drivers in Australia's major cities. Kimberley Webber, 'Women at the Wheel' in Charles Pickett (ed.), *Cars and Culture: Our Driving Passions*, Powerhouse Publishing and Harper and Collins, Sydney, 1998, p.97. In 1971, 35% of women were drivers as opposed to 46% in 1994. op.cit. p. 98.
- 9 'In New South Wales in 1994, men drove 20,656 kilometres compared to women drivers' 14,284 kilometres.' *ibid.*
- 10 Webber, op. cit., p.99-100.
- 11 From *The Industrial Australian and Mining Standard*, 12 January 1928, quoted in Webber, op. cit., p.97.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 John Stratton, 'What made *Mad Max* Popular? The Mythology of a Conservative Fantasy' in *Art and Text*, vol.9, Autumn 1983, p.55. Adrian Martin also implies that the *Mad Max* films signaled an important tension between domesticity and suburbia in Australian life:

- ‘...the *Mad Max* movies really do tap into something in Australian life and Australian culture, particularly to do with our car culture, and everything that cars mean to us—cars as escape, cars as destruction of someone else, destruction of yourself, ways of the relation between you and your car and you and your home, domesticity, the very fraught relations of domesticity and suburbia in Australian life’. (Adrian Martin in conversation with Robert Dessaix: see Radio National site: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/rethink/rethink09.htm> <accessed October 1998>).
- 14 Morris op. cit., p.124,116.
- 15 Morris op.cit., p.127.
- 16 Or where women take the wheel in terms of creative control as opposed, necessarily, to the characters in the film.
- 17 *Peel* won the Golden Palm Award for Best Short Film at Cannes in 1986. Another short film made in the same year but which hasn’t received the same critical acclaim as *Campion’s*, was Margaret Dodd’s short, *This Woman is Not a Car*. This film raises questions about ‘motherhood, sexual and power relationships in Australian culture, male violence towards women and objectified desire through a strangely humorous yet horrid fantasy about men, their women and their cars.’ Jennifer Scott, ‘Celluloid Maidens: All Teched-up and Nowhere to Go’, in Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed & Freda Freiberg, *Don’t Shoot Darling!: Women’s Independent Film Making in Australia*, Greenhouse, Melbourne, 1987, p. 17.
- 18 Geraldine Bloustien, ‘Jane Campion: Memory, Motif and Music’ in Martin, Adrian (ed.), ‘Film: Matters of Style’, *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, vol. 5, no.2, 1992, p. 29.
- 19 Twice family members are depicted breaking down in tears in the enclosed cabin of the car.
- 20 See my article on suburbia in which I discuss *Sweetie* in relation to the subject: ‘Suburban Subversions: Women’s Negotiation of Suburban Space in Australian Cinema’ in *Metro*, no. 118, 1999, p. 26.
- 21 Helen Garner, *The Last Days of Chez Nous & Two Friends*, Ringwood, Victoria, McPhee Gribble, 1992, p. 56.
- 22 Beth says to JP: He’s old see. I’m scared stiff he’ll die before I can ...  
JP: Before what?  
Beth: Before I can get things sorted out. Garner, *op. cit.*, p. 53. The Leichardtian-journey refers simply to the suburb they come from in Sydney, Leichard.
- 23 Felicity Collins, ‘The Films of Gillian Armstrong’, in *The Moving Image*, no. 6, 1999, p. 59.
- 24 *ibid.*
- 25 And which Beth’s father would most definitely regard as a ‘bomb’.
- 26 Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
- 27 Charles Pickett (ed.), *Cars and Culture: Our Driving Passions*, Sydney, Powerhouse Publishing and HarperCollins, 1998, p. 31.
- 28 Stephen Crofts, ‘Genre, Style and Address in *Hightide*’ in *Metro*, no. 88, Summer 1991/2, p. 19.
- 29 Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
- 30 Corrigan, *op. cit.*, p. 160.
- 31 Kimberley Webber, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
- 32 Brief moments in two recent Australian films, *Feeling Sexy* (David Allen, 1999) and *Soft Fruit* (Christina Andreef, 1999) show female characters retreating from chaotic domestic environments (in fantasy in the case of *Feeling Sexy*) to their cars. In these films the car becomes a sphere in which to explore (or satiate) female sexual desire.

# ENGENDERING THE GREEK

## The Shifting Representations of Greek Identity in Australian Cinema

FREDA FREIBERG AND JOY DAMOUSI

This chapter seeks to discern the ways in which the Australian cinema has defined 'Greekness' over the last 30 years and to reveal the ways in which Greekness has been closely aligned with masculinity at the expense of Greek femininity. However, while this gendered imbalance has remained relatively constant over the years, there were marked shifts in the representation of Greek men and women between the 1970s and the 1990s. Crucial to an understanding of the reasons for these shifts is the entry of Greek Australians into the film industry, enabling them to represent themselves and their own experiences rather than be represented by others. The upward social mobility of the Greek immigrant community—from unskilled factory fodder to the profes-



ZOE CARIDES AND DORIS YOUNE IN *IN DEATH IN BRUNSWICK*



sional middle class—was accompanied by a movement of the second generation into the artistic professions—the literary, visual and performing arts. With the burgeoning numbers of second-generation Greek performers and directors now influencing the ways in which issues are portrayed, we can identify significant changes in perceptions of how Greek Australians negotiate the complex intersection of cultures.<sup>1</sup>

*Kostas*, Paul Cox's paean to Greek identity, is made by an outsider who perceives cultural conflict through the dichotomy of oppression and freedom. The gendered messages in the film are directly shaped by this binary. Kostas Andreopolous (Takis Emmanuel) tells Carol (Wendy Hughes) that Australian men are 'cheap'. In drawing a distinction between 'cheap' Australian men and their responsible Greek counterparts, Andreopolous sets into place a masculine dichotomy which pervades the film. Masculinity and femininity are explored and framed within Cox's romanticisation of 'Greekness', where Andreopolous embodies culture and civilization, as well as the charisma and charm of the romantic lover. But these are not sexualised identities for, paradoxically, whilst the love story between Carol and Kostas lies at the heart of the film, sexuality is marginal to the broader themes of cultural difference, assimilation and ethnic adventure. The Greek is in fact disembodied, for his dominant desire is for his homeland, thereby to reconnect with his 'true' and 'authentic' national identity.

Made in 1979, it is no coincidence that *Kostas* is a sympathetic portrayal of Greek culture. By the late 1970s, Greeks had begun to assert their welfare and citizenship rights. Under the Whitlam government, there was a conceptual shift whereby assimilationist terms like

'migrants' and 'New Australians' were re-placed by the concept of 'ethnicity', which laid the basis of multicultural policies.<sup>2</sup>

The migration patterns of Greeks following the Second World War have been well documented. Suffice to say here, the need for labour in Australia made it an attractive destination for many Greek immigrants after 1952, when Commonwealth assistance was offered to married and unmarried Greek men from the mainland and large islands.<sup>3</sup> The high point of these migration patterns was between 1953 and 1956, when 29,344 assisted immigrants arrived. Another large intake occurred in the early 1960s, peaking in 1964 with a total of 16,766 assisted immigrants.<sup>4</sup> Some of these returned to their homeland during the 1970s, but overall the Greeks who migrated did so to stay in Australia. By 1971, there were an estimated 76,239 Greeks living in Melbourne,<sup>5</sup> where the film *Kostas* is set. Mass immigration created ethnic communities that were concentrated in the inner city and in industrial areas. Chain migration was a feature of these movements as Greek immigrants from various different parts of Greece settled and congregated in particular suburbs. Most Greek men occupied unskilled or semi-skilled jobs, and they were over-represented in the manufacturing industry.<sup>6</sup>

Most immigrant women came to Australia as spouses or children of male immigrants. Very few arrived unaccompanied by a male. Immigrant women moved immediately into the workforce and made a dramatic impact on it. Women provided cheap labour, performing the most onerous and menial tasks in the manufacturing sector. Moreover, women were seen to be providing moral and emotional stability for men and a market for the expansion of goods and services.<sup>7</sup>

*Kostas* not only reflects these migratory patterns and makes reference to them but also amplifies the social and cultural dislocations that lie behind these statistics. As a European migrant himself, Cox is able to articulate the dislocations of the migratory experience with sympathetic sensitivity, but his exploration of cultural conflict is limited, skewed even, by his infatuation with Greek culture. His hero, Kostas, is a romanticised figure: he has the reflectiveness of a contemplative poet and the passion and conviction of a revolutionary. In his relationship with his Australian lover Carol, he is sophisticated and charming, well mannered and refined. Kostas comes to represent for Carol the exotic 'other', an 'ethnic adventure'. Like other continental lovers of the screen, he is an attractive mixture of masculine pride and feminine tenderness.

This feminised ethnic masculinity is placed in sharp contrast to the ugly face of Australian masculinity. Uncouth, rough and coarse, the representatives of Australian masculinity exhibit aggression, alcoholism and irresponsibility. Tony (Tony Llewellyn-Jones), Carol's wayward boyfriend, and Martin (Chris Haywood), a member of her social circle, are the antithesis of the romantic, suave European lover. They are devoid of culture and charm and—especially under the influence of alcohol—rude and aggressive. Even so, Kostas defends his retaliation against Martin's aggression with an assertion of manly pride. He asks Carol rhetorically: 'Is



that a man to you? To be hit and do nothing?' Even the romantic hero has to protect his honour through physical violence.

Another aspect of Kostas' masculine identity is his rugged independence and self-contained life. His cousin tries to convince him to move in with the extended family or another Greek household but he refuses. He is both inside and outside of the Greek community and hovers on the edges of it, as he does with Australian society. Kostas occupies a tenuous position in each, maintaining his freedom and independence. He is also a political activist and hero. As a survivor of imprisonment, torture and beatings (shown in subjective flashbacks), Kostas' masculine identity is tied to his battered heroic body.

In contrast, women in the film are drawn as exclusively domestic characters. The supportive cousin who is concerned about his welfare and well-being is a stereotyped Greek woman, maternal and nurturing but trapped within her culture and circumstances. It is implied that, even as a single mother, Carol has choices her Greek counterpart will never be able to exercise. But even Carol is subordinated to Kostas' personal journey, an adjunct figure. In the way she relates to Kostas, she is shown to be entranced by the 'ethnic adventure' and a voyeuristic pleasure in 'the other'; her superficial and pretentious middle-class values are posed against the purity of Kostas' heritage. Ultimately Kostas needs no women, for his desire and yearning are centered on his 'Greekness', represented here as a pure and unmediated self-identity.

This film is made by someone who is, like Kostas, both an insider and an outsider. An immigrant from the Netherlands, Paul Cox captures the alienation and disconnectedness of the male immigrant experience. Other characters in addition to Kostas ache in isolation. In the boarding house where Kostas lives, lonely single men rent rooms. When Kostas' young Turkish neighbour seeks solace in his company, Cox offers a rather optimistic—and rather romantic—view of how cultural differences can be transcended through music and alcohol. In general, the film is pervaded by nostalgia, by the yearning for home, captured so lyrically in Cox's flashbacks to the Greek islands. We are shown images and moments which capture on film the intensity and romance of Kostas' origins. In the 1990s, when a younger generation of Greek Australian film-makers looked back at the immigrant experience as a theme in their films, their representation of that experience was much darker than Cox's Hellenic fantasy—their approach to Greek culture is more critical, less romantic.

But in the 1970s there was another film that presented Greek culture in a harsher, less romantic, light—*Promised Woman*. Made in 1976, and directed by Tom Cowan, this film poses Australian society as the locus of liberation and emancipation. Based on a play entitled *Throw Away your Harmonica*, it traces the journey of the ostracised and shamed Antigone. Banished from her small Greek community because she had an illicit relationship, Antigone (Yelena Zigon) is bought as a bride by a Sydney Greek entrepreneur, Telis (Nikos Geris-simou). On her arrival in Sydney, the disappointed Telis finds her older and plainer than her photograph suggested, and wants to send her back to Greece. His brother, Takis (again played by Takis Emmanuel), convinces him that this is not the chivalrous thing to do. Antigone is a fallen woman creating havoc because of her sexuality and desire. But her sexuality is not represented as part of her Greekness; she is aberrant, an outcast from Greek society; it serves rather to symbolize the taboos and repression of Greek society.

In *Promised Woman*, the characters of the two brothers represent a dichotomy in Greek masculinity. Takis is the educated, sophisticated and responsible brother who is connected to his Greek roots. Telis is entrepreneurial, pragmatic and ruthless. Like the other Greek entrepreneur in the film who employs Antigone, these men are prepared to exploit their own people for financial gain. In contrast, Takis takes care of Antigone, attempts to protect and provide for her. Like Kostas, he is educated (a photographer) and once again he represents true Greek culture, as he teaches Greek children their language. He worries about Antigone's reputation when she takes a job in a bar. He offers to marry her: 'I will look after you. I will protect you', but she says she is tired of other people's expectations. The final scene is one of liberation and defiance, as she rejects both brothers and breaks out on her own. In breaking with both the misogyny of Greek culture in Greece and with the sexism of Greek men in Australia, Antigone finds liberation in the possibilities offered by Australia.

As in *Kostas*, there is nostalgia in this film but it is tempered by the behaviour of the men in the patriarchal village who shun and disgrace Antigone and eventually exile her. Active female sexuality outside of wedlock is subject to disgrace within traditional Greek culture. Takis is a romantic chivalric character like Kostas, played by the same actor (Takis Emmanuel). But the context of this film is the radicalism of the women's movement, which by 1976 had reached its zenith. *Promised Woman* was released a year after International Women's Year, which brought feminist demands such as access to contraception and abortion, more child care, equal pay and establishment of women's refuges to prominence. The public discussion of these issues created a space for films like this to emphasise a liberatory message for women. In this climate of women's liberation, it is no wonder that Antigone is shown as a victim of patriarchal Greek culture who will find freedom—sexual and otherwise—in her newly adopted and progressive homeland.

While these two films are clearly influenced by the shifts towards discussions of 'ethnic identity', *Toula*, made in 1971 by Oliver Howes, is far more assimilationist in its message. One of a three-part series on the experience of young people, called *Three to Go*, it depicts the difficulties of growing up in a Greek family. It shows the restrictiveness of such families and the restraints placed on Greek girls in particular. They practise deceit and lying as a way

in which they can operate in both cultures. Toulia is constantly devising schemes of how to get out of the house and spend time with her friends or meet boys. To *become* Australian, to assimilate mainstream Australian values and cultural mores, is posited as the ideal in this film. Again, women are victims in their Greek culture. Toulia ponders jobs she could undertake, like being an air hostess, but claims she wouldn't be allowed to pursue it and so is doomed to work in a clothing factory.

Boys are subject to similar restraints. The pressure is on Toulia's brother, Stavros to study hard and pursue an education in order to transcend the poverty and avoid the manual work that his father was confined to. He too is torn culturally when he confronts his father over his future. Cultural tension is encapsulated in a telling moment at the Church during the Easter service when Stavros can't bring himself to say 'Christ has Risen!'

In showing the ways in which teenagers negotiate the tensions arising from living in two cultures, *Toulia* offers a particularly interesting insight into how masculine and feminine identities are shaped. The assumptions about the need to *protect* women from their own rampant sexuality are patronising and create a suffocating home life for Toulia, as it does for Antigone. Greek women's networks, their support for each other and their often influential place in the wider community have no place in these representations: women's role within Greek culture is noticeably absent. Because of the pressure on him to become a breadwinner and protector, Stavros too suffers curtailment of freedom and independence. As in *Promised Woman*, Australian society offers a sexual freedom not allowed within Greek culture for women or men.

In these films of the 1970s, Greek masculinity, femininity and sexuality are understood through a number of dichotomies: protector/protected; freedom/oppression; assimilation/ethnicity; and cultured/uncultured. The tensions which are explored in these films are built around these binaries, as the characters attempt to shape their own individual identities through the tenuous place they occupy between Australian and Greek cultures. Sexual identity—which would become the cornerstone of later films on 'Greekness'—does not find full expression in these earlier representations. Desire is understood rather in terms of a national identity formed through assimilation and multi-culturalism.

At the end of the 1980s, just before the second generation of Greek Australians began to represent themselves in mainstream cinema<sup>8</sup>, Paul Cox once more resumed his romance with Greek culture. In *Island* (1988), Cox returned to the site of his early experimental film-making—an unspecified Greek island. In this exotic locale, full of age-old dramatic and visual colour, foreign tourists seek a temporary haven from the personal and political traumas of the modern world. The film focuses on two foreign women—a Czech-born Australian and a Sri-Lankan political exile—who suffer from angst, fear and foreboding, and suicidal despair. On the island they are nurtured by a caring community of the aged and the handicapped (the remnants of a community whose own able-bodied youth have emigrated) and a matronly bohemian Greek woman artist, played by veteran star Irene Papas. The local Greek grandmothers are work-worn crones but protective spirits, caring for young lost for-



eigners in place of their own absent offspring; Papas is a larger-than-life icon of Greek womanhood. A veteran Greek tragedienne with a deep throaty voice and an imperious presence, she embodies heart, passion and wisdom wrought by experience—a female version of Zorba the Greek. The Greek island functions as a brooding romantic setting—where nature and culture conspire to produce a stormy and steamy mise-en-scene for the melodrama and angst brewing in the hearts of wandering lost souls—epitomised by women. Like some better known European art cinema directors (for example, Antonioni), Cox here uses the figure of a (young and beautiful) woman to embody his own existential angst but also aligns femininity (occidental and oriental) with suffering, enigma and passivity. In this situation, the mature Greek woman stands apart, as a pillar of strength, endurance and wisdom.

There is no equivalent to Papas in the Australian cinema, no mature Greek star to embody the strength and dynamism of mature Greek women.<sup>9</sup> The Greek mothers of more recent Australian cinema are weak characters, powerless against their dominating husbands even when sympathetic to their wayward children. Crucially they lack star quality.

But in the last decade of the twentieth century, a new heroine type emerged—the spunky young Greek-Australian woman, rebellious against parental and community norms, sexually active, and actively in pursuit of the object of her desire. Initially, these young heroines were located in absurd comedies that lampooned everyone, regardless of age, gender, class, or ethnicity. Both *Death in Brunswick* (John Ruane, 1991) and *Nirvana Street Murder* (Aleksi Vellis, 1990) made comic capital out of caricatures of ethnic stereotypes, which had already proved a successful strategy with popular theatrical and television comedy series like *Wogs out of Work* and *Acropolis Now*. The sleazy bar where Sophie (Zoe Carides) works is owned by a ‘greasy Greek’, a spoilt son who treats her as his property, engages in casual sexual harassment and employs a brutal Ocker heavy to do his dirty work for him. The kitchenhand, Mustafa, is a slovenly Turk (played ironically by Greek–Australian actor Nick Lathouris) who engages in drug peddling on the side. Sophie’s father (grotesque in stature and singlet) wallops the Anglo anti-hero (Sam Neill, cast against type as a pathetic loser, tied to mother’s apron strings, infatuated with a girl half his age, always running to his more enterprising mate for advice and practical help) when he asks for her hand, and the lavish Greek wedding is lampooned in the final freeze frame. In *Nirvana*, the policing of Greek daughters is mocked in a silly sub-plot involving the blackmailing of Helen (Mary Coustas) by her girlfriend Elephtheria, who threatens to tell her family that Helen is involved with an Ocker male (Ben Mendelsohn). The ‘greasy Greek’ stereotype is parodied in the ridiculous behaviour of a bunch of young Greek males, who are no more stupid, violent and vain than the Ocker/Irish Boady (Mark Little), who abuses them as Wogs, and the great Greek cultural tradition is turned on its head. While the renegade Greek daughter Helen teaches the Odyssey to Greek children, her traditional Greek mother is shown weeping over an episode of the popular Australian television series, *Homicide*.

In addition to lampooning and caricaturing ethnic stereotypes, along with everyone else, these films show young Greek women in monogamous sexual relationships with Ocker males. They are not promiscuous, but steady, loyal partners, romantically as well as sexually



involved. They may be spunky but they are not independent; their rebellion takes the form of choosing their own man, one outside their own community, one not chosen for them.

*The Heartbreak Kid* (Michael Jenkins, 1993) has a more transgressive heroine, in that she chooses to transgress both Greek community social taboos by having a torrid affair with another man on the eve of her marriage, and general community moral standards by having an affair with her student, but a less transgressive heroine in that she chooses a Greek lover. It is through Christina Papadopoulous' (Claudia Karvan) identification with Nick (Alex Dimitriades) as a fellow Greek, in the battle for the recognition of soccer (the Wog game) against Australian Rules football (the Ocker game) in the school yard and on the sports oval, that she becomes involved with him. Through the representation of Christina's family and fiancé, this film mocks the materialism and ghetto mentality of the middle-class Greek community in Melbourne but does not mock the upwardly mobile pretensions of working-class Greeks, who are sympathetically represented through the portrait of Nick's widowed blue-collar father (sensitively portrayed by Nick Lathouris). This film thus complicates the issue of ethnicity by introducing class differences.

Ana Kokkinos has been even more transgressive. In her two films, *Only the Brave* (1994) and *Head On* (1998) she has queered the pitch, introducing the subjects of incest and lesbian desire (in *Only the Brave*), transvestism and gay sexuality (in *Head On*) into the bosom of the Greek-Australian family, which was hitherto represented in stridently heterosexist terms. Despite the homosocial bonds of a society which was traditionally segregated on the basis of gender (men dance with other men, rather than with women; they also gamble and drink and play soccer with other men), relations between Greek men and between Greek

women have been represented as affectionate but asexual. Kokkinos complicates the rigidly gendered division of Greek bodies into heterosexual males and females by introducing the character of Johnny the transvestite (Paul Kapsis), a man who cross-dresses as a woman, as well as the sexually active homosexual hero, Ari (Alex Dimitriades) into central focus. Through the casting and performance of Alex Dimitriades as the gay Greek, she brings into question the dominant representation of gay males as effete and effeminate, for he has the machismo, the energy, the violence and the potency of the rampantly heterosexual Greek male hero (functioning as a youthful incarnation of Zorba the Greek). In *Only the Brave*, the Greek family stereotypes are overturned too. Vicki's Greek father is portrayed as a sexual abuser rather than an over-protective patriarch and Alex's Greek mother, far from being the loyal subservient wife and mother, has abandoned her husband and daughter. In *Head On*, however, the Greek family is rendered in conventional and stereotypical terms: oppressive father, weak mother, secretly transgressive but overtly compliant children.

*Head On* also retains the tropes used to signify Greekness in the earlier Australian cinema, where it is repeatedly identified with Greek folk music and folk dancing, with weddings, with oppression (both political and cultural), and with the abusive epithet, 'Wog'.<sup>10</sup> The film opens with a scene of a lavish Greek wedding, which figures also in *The Heartbreak Kid* and *Death in Brunswick*. Ari dances in Greek folk style at the wedding (beginning of film), at home (middle of film) and on the wharf (at the end of the film). Scenes involving performances of Greek folk music and traditional folk dancing are presented in *Caddie*, *Kostas*, *Island* and *The Heartbreak Kid* to signify ethnic identity and provide 'authentic' ethnic colour. The oppressive political regime of the military junta in Greece, which Ari's parents are shown protesting against in a flashback, is the cause of Kostas's exile and anguish. Cultural oppression figures even more prominently: policing of daughters, arranged marriages, a taboo on exogamy, and pressure on sons and daughters to marry and reproduce. In *Promised Woman*, *Death in Brunswick*, *Nirvana Street Murder* and *The Heartbreak Kid*, daughters suffer heavy pressure to marry chosen partners and incur the wrath of their fathers by their transgressive behaviour. In *Head On*, Ari is expected to police his young sister's behaviour and prevent her from associating with non-Greeks. He is pressured to marry a Greek girl and bear sons. The drag queen, played by Paul Kapsis, is subjected to ridicule and shame by the Greek community. Most central to the film is Ari's self-hatred, engendered by the oppressive homophobia and racism of the Greek and Australian communities he has grown up in, and exhibited in his outbursts of violent rage and sexual violence, his inability to display tenderness and to accept his homosexuality and his aggressive use of the insult 'Wog' hurled at fellow Greeks as well as Middle Eastern migrants in the street.

The epithet 'Wog' was formerly employed indiscriminately by Anglo Australians to refer to all Mediterranean and Middle Eastern people. Earlier Australian films demonstrate that Anglo Australians could not distinguish between Greeks and Turks, despite the much publicised history of animosity between these two nationalities. Ari and Johnny make joking reference to this history in a pointed scene in a cab when they tell the Turkish cab-driver that 'your great-grandfather raped my great-grandmother', before they proceed to share a joint and get busted by the police. *Death in Brunswick* shows little awareness of this divisive



political history. Paul Cox, as an educated Hellenophile does. In *Kostas* he includes a strained scene between the politically sophisticated Kostas and a lonely Turkish migrant, thrown together by an ignorant Australian landlady, to whom they are all 'Wogs'. Ari expresses his ethnic self-hatred and the racism absorbed from the dominant culture with the term 'Wog!', in much the same way as he expresses his self-hatred about his sexual identity and the homophobia of dominant heterosexist society by abusing his friend as a 'lezzo'.

With *The Wog Boy* (Aleksi Vellis, 2000), there is a return to the earlier formula of gaining comic capital out of ethnic stereotypes. In the vein of the producer and star's (Giannopoulos') earlier work for theatre and television, it attempts to turn the term of abuse into a badge of pride. It has rumbustious energy but its celebration of male narcissism is accompanied by overt misogyny. The 'Wog Woman' is totally absent. There is no Greek princess, as there was in *Acropolis Now*, nor Greek mother; the Italian boy's mother is an off-screen object of abuse, never seen. The ethnic pride of the two 'Wog' heroes is reduced to a desperate search for acceptance by WASP society, the denigration of women in authority and the hot pursuit of blonde WASP girls!

Surveying the Australian cinema of the past 30 years in regard to the representation of the gendered Greek body, one notes certain recurrent tropes and certain clear shifts. The Greek male body in the 1970s functioned both as an agent of patriarchal oppression for Greek women and also as an object of desire for Anglo-Australian women, supplying them with the tenderness and sophistication absent in Anglo-Australian men. In the 1990s, we

find the Greek male body as object of desire for heterosexual Greek women and homosexual Anglo men; with comic and serious versions of the oppressive patriarch and the 'greasy wog' in supporting roles. The Greek female body moves from oppressed victim in Greece (and Greek-Australian society) to liberation in Australia (and Australian society). The transgressions increase over time: from illicitly dating boys (in *Toula*), to sex before marriage with village boy (in *Promised Woman*), sex before marriage with non-Greek man (in *Death in Brunswick* and *Nirvana Street Murder*), sexual relationship with student while engaged to another man (*The Heartbreak Kid*), lesbian desire for teacher (*Only the Brave*), and adolescent sex with non-Greek and lesbianism (Ari's sister and friend, respectively, in *Head On*).

But the Greek body, male or female, is also a suffering body—a masochistic body, an oppressed body. The melodramatic tradition, temporarily abandoned in the comedies of the early 1990s, returns with a vengeance in the films of Ana Kokkinos. Kostas and the *Promised Woman* were both represented as tortured souls suffering nightmares as a result of their oppressive experiences. Unlike them, Vicki, the victim of sexual abuse in *Only the Brave*, finds no way out and is driven to suicide. Ari is another tortured soul who, like Vicki, seeks escape in anti-social behaviour; he suffers from anguish and hysteria as a result of his inability to accept his ethnic and sexual identity in a climate of oppression.

However, if there is gender equality in suffering and sexual desire between Greek men and Greek women in the Australian cinema, there remains an imbalance. The icons of Greek masculinity are more powerful than the emblems of Greek femininity. Takis Emmanuel, who incarnates the suave, sophisticated Greek romantic hero, and Alex Dimitriades, the dynamic hyper-active Greek-Australian stud, have a screen presence, an iconicity, that the Greek-Australian female stars lack. Mary Coustas, Claudia Karvan and Zoe Carides may be spunky, attractive and assertive, but they are not icons of Greek femininity of the calibre of a Maria Callas or Irene Papas. Perhaps they do not wish to be typecast in order to allow themselves more performance options in a fragile industrial climate, and therefore restrain their performances. In the television series *Acropolis Now*, Mary Coustas played an over-the-top caricature of the young Greek princess and became the star of the series, but did not play this role in the cinema. Maybe she did not wish to perpetuate a negative stereotype of the Greek woman. But potent representations are more desirable than positive representations, and satirical stereotyping produces more trenchant and dramatic characterizations than blandly realistic performances.

The Greek mother has suffered even more than her daughters have from a lack of sharp definition. Certainly the absence of food as a signifier of Greekness in the cinema<sup>11</sup> has reduced the role of Greek mothers. We are denied the possibility of domestic wars or power struggles in the kitchen or at the dinner table, where Jewish and Italian mothers dispense powerful helpings of traditional wisdom along with the chicken noodle soup and the pasta. However stereotyped, they are colourful dramatic figures and a force to be reckoned with. The Greek mothers in the Australian cinema are colourless in comparison.

In general, the mainstream Australian cinema has essentialised and masculinised the Greek. A more sophisticated and varied exploration of Greek heritage and identity is to be found in the experimental films of Anna Kannava,<sup>12</sup> the photo-montages of Peter Lyssiotis, the short stories of Zeny Giles, the autobiography of George Alexander, the installations of Elizabeth Gertsakis and the essays of Nikos Papastergiades. These Greek Australians avoid a simple oppression/liberation binary opposition. They explore the specific regional cultures of their backgrounds—Cypriot, Egyptian, Kastellorizan, Macedonian and Pontian and their mothers and grandmothers figure as strongly in their stories as their fathers and grandfathers. Greek culture in mainstream Australian cinema remains untouched by the political, religious and regional differences that fracture the actual Greek community. The Greek community in Australia is far from unified, and the lifestyles of Greek Australians have changed enormously over the past generation, and yet Greek culture in the Australian cinema remains essentially the same, homogeneous and unchanged.

In the mainstream cinema, Greek identity is largely figured in masculine activities: fathers and sons and brothers playing soccer, dancing, drinking, protesting and fighting. Their daughters and sisters only become narrative subjects when they abandon the Greek family and community and become 'Australian'. And Greek mothers, in marked contrast to other 'ethnic' mothers, have a very pale presence.

## Endnotes

- 1 Bill Mousoulis estimates that, over the past five years, Greeks directed seven per cent of all features made in Australia. Given that Greeks make up only three per cent of the population, 'the representation is more than fair'. See Bill Mousoulis, 'Is Your Film Language Greek? Some Thoughts on Greek-Australian Film-makers', in *Senses of Cinema*, <http://www.inner-sense.com.au/sense/contents/greek/html>
- 2 Yiannis E. Dimitreas, *Transplanting the Agora: Hellenic Settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1998, p. 211.
- 3 M.P. Tsounis, 'Greek Communities in Australia', in Charles Price (ed.), *Greeks in Australia*, Canberra, ANU Press, 1975, p.26.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.* p.27.
- 6 *ibid.* p.29.
- 7 Sevgi Kilic, 'Who is an Australian Woman?', in Kate Prichard Hughes (ed.), *Contemporary Australian Feminism*, Melbourne, Longman, 1994, pp.15-16.
- 8 In experimental cinema and the other arts, Australians of Greek descent (e.g. Anna Kannava and Peter Lyssiotis) began to represent themselves earlier.
- 9 Many Greek women have risen to prominence in the professions and public life in Australia. SBS newsreader Mary Kostakidis is one of the better-known faces of a strong, mature, handsome and intelligent Greek womanhood.
- 10 An interest in playing and/or watching soccer also figures frequently as a sign of the Greek.
- 11 'There is no such thing as authentic Greek food ... The origin of modern Greek food lies somewhere between the east and the west. It is a set of recipes which draw from and mix together all the Levantine, oriental, Byzantine and classical traditions'. (Nikos Papastergiades, 'Greek as a Souvlaki', *Artlink* 19/4, December 1999, p. 52). But one could make similar observations about the inauthenticity of Italian and Jewish food, which nevertheless remains a major trope of Italian and Jewish identity, and one strongly identified with the maternal.
- 12 See chapter 12 for Meredith Seaman's analysis of Anna Kannava's work.

# THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

## Meditations on cinema, memory, psychoanalysis and feminism

JENI THORNLEY

*In a dark time the eye begins to see.<sup>1</sup>*

*Endless night ... timeless dark wander-  
ing ... psychoanalysis and film theory are  
drawn to the dark in their quest for ...  
meaning.<sup>2</sup>*

*You have to find out whether film is  
anything more than the search for the lost  
Father.<sup>3</sup>*

**1953.** An early cinema memory. I'm in one of my father's cinemas, the Plaza, Launceston, Tasmania. I am six years old. Most afternoons I catch the bus from school to watch the afternoon film and wait for Dad to finish work. Dad and his family own cinemas in Launceston, Hobart, Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat. They work closely with the American distributors and screen only American



MADENS BY JENI THORNLEY, 'FIRST BONN', c.1923



films. Grandpa Thornley survived the transition from silent cinema to the talkies. He went to Hollywood regularly in the 1930s and 1940s doing the rounds of the studios, visiting the sets, meeting the stars and booking the next slate of pictures for his cinemas.

I'm sitting in the Plaza with Shirley, one of Dad's usherettes. We're watching *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), and I become hysterical at a scene with the bad witch. I'm taken screaming from the cinema. Shirley lies me on a brocade couch in the lobby and brings me a 'blue heaven' milkshake. As soon as I calm down, I creep back in and take up my position next to her; the sound of her knitting needles clacking as she magically knits in the dark. I'm fascinated by the beam of light from the projector and the dance of 'fairy dust' shimmering. Film, on a deep primal layer, takes hold of me.

**1977.** *And you walked through and something snapped. Your life kaleidoscoped and you were really scared ... You started following this woman down a side street. She went into a picture theatre. You followed her. Inside was hot and dark and you couldn't see her. You moved down every row but she wasn't there ... And then you began to look at the screen and you traveled inside the scratchy image and forgot about time.*<sup>4</sup>

These are my lines in a film about memory, love and cinema. I identify with the idea of merging with the screen and later re-print this scene in my diary film *Maidens* (1978). In my next diary film, *To The Other Shore* (1996), a film about psychoanalysis and motherhood, I try to make sense of this merging:

*THE WOMAN stands alone in a white empty space. Superimposed film images flow over her.*



**THE THERAPIST V.O.**

*You were so angry at your mother for making another baby, that you turned to your father. You wanted to make babies with him ... in the dark, in his cinema. Years later you make films, his babies, but it's tortured and painful, riddled with guilt ... and when you make real babies you have to kill them off ...*

**THE WOMAN**

*Don't give me that Freudian crap !<sup>5</sup>*

**1954.** Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip tour Tasmania. My father and mother are the Mayor and Mayoress of Launceston. My sister and I have curtsy lessons and new white organza dresses. My beloved 'talisman' is a pocket-size photocard of the Queen and Prince. Moving the card, I can magically change them from day to evening dress. Later, in Hobart I love going to Dad's theatre, The Tatler, where I can sit and watch newsreels all day. I see the images of the Royal Visit alchemically restored from my magic photocard to Dad's screen.

**1968.** I'm in third year at Monash University majoring in Politics and English. Second-wave feminism hasn't struck yet. There are no women's studies, film or communication departments. The Vietnam war is raging and the campus is alive with debate. I join the anti-conscription movement, Abschol (Aboriginal Scholarships), the Monash Players and Monash Film Group. I 'lose my virginity', discover Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), see *Persona* (Bergman, 1966), *8 1/2* (Fellini, 1963) and *Last Year at Marienbad*, (Resnais, 1961) and I fly to Sydney for an illegal abortion at the infamous Heatherbrae Clinic, Bondi.

*The wound*

*father Freud Jung Klein animus anima apparatus abortion*

*screen dark projection womb labour*

*merging loss liberation hope women transformation*

*revolution*

*flesh image space interiority secrets*

*primal scene*

*voyeurism birth breast*

*mourning*

**1969.** Reeling from this love affair gone wrong, I drop out of my M.A. on Edward Albee and his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and flee to Sydney determined to become an actress. Within weeks, I'm immersed in the Anti-Vietnam War campaign and meet Martha Ansara, my first contact with a 'real' Women's Liberationist. Before long, several of us form Sydney Women's Film Group (SWFG) and set about our vision of transforming woman's place.

**1970.** I join the growing political movement for safe, legal abortion. It seems so foreign now, with three decades of legal abortion, yet I remember this time of guilt and shame when unwanted pregnancies drove us into forced adoptions or to undercover abortion clinics subject to police raids at any time of the day and night.



**1971.** I'm in the midst of 'prac. teaching' English and History at Granville Boys High and making *Film For Discussion* (SWFG, 1974), a film about women and liberation, with Martha on weekends. My brother is suddenly killed in a head on car crash. I keep on teaching but am unable to control my classes. The boys remind me of my brother. The school landscape grows surreal, the sirens ringing to mark the end of each lesson and the loud speaker blaring as the boys line up for uniform checks. I resign. My subsequent years in therapy and my introspective film-making create 'the songlines' between my brother's death, broken love affairs and abortions.

**1999.** Themes of loss and love reverberate through films I perform in during the 1970s. I reprint various scenes in *Maidens*, including a scene from *Woman's House*

(Ann Roberts, 1974), where I 'act' as a young woman seeking abortion counseling, and a scene from *Secret Storm* (Martha Ansara, 1977), where I improvise a dream figure who takes bloody stones and eggs from her vagina and smashes them. This 'cri de coeur' around the maternal is pursued in *For Love or Money: The History of Women and Work in Australia* (McMurchy, Nash, Oliver & Thornley, 1983), with a scene from *Film For Discussion*, where the daughter attempts to confront her mother's crippling passivity. I further explore these contradictions around woman's place and maternal ambivalence in *To The Other Shore*. While making the film, I am struck by these words:

*How could one live with a conscious view that abortion is evil and still be pro-choice? Through acts of redemption, or what the Jewish mystical tradition calls tikkun or 'mending' ... Memorial services for the souls of aborted fetuses are fairly common in contemporary Japan, where abortions are both legal and readily available.<sup>6</sup>*

In a way, making *To The Other Shore* became my way of doing 'tikkun', mending complex feelings around abortion, loss, guilt and shame.

**1977-1996.** From *Maidens* (1978), to *For Love or Money* (1983), it takes a further ten years to complete *To The Other Shore* (1996). My daughter is one year old when I begin the film and ten when I finish it. Both my parents and in-laws die during the film's long production. There is mourning to be done. My film guide is Hans J. Syberberg and his extraordinary epic *Our Hitler, A Film from Germany* (1978), a meditation on the Holocaust and art. Syberberg's premise is that the purpose of the work of art is to express grief:



*... his film is addressed to the German 'inability to mourn' ... it undertakes the 'work of mourning' (Trauerarbeit). These phrases recall the famous essay Freud wrote deep in World War I, 'Mourning and Melancholia', which connects melancholy with the inability to work through grief ... Syberberg found in the notion of Trauerarbeit a psychological and moral justification for his aesthetics of repetition and recycling. It takes time and much hyperbole to work through grief.<sup>7</sup>*

The other guide on this journey is my therapist, Dr S., I am drawn to Klein's ideas:

*Melanie Klein's discovery of the child's early internalisation of its first relation to the mother led to a major revision and expansion of Freud's account of male and female sexuality.<sup>8</sup>*

My therapy journey with takes many years, immersed in the layered process that Freud calls 'remembering, repeating and working through'. Towards 'the end' I begin to experience reparation—a sense of forgiveness and understanding. My film-making, too, at that time, reflects Klein's ideas around creativity, reparation and the maternal:

*The desire to re-discover the mother of the early days, whom one has lost actually or in one's feelings, is also of the greatest importance in creative art ... Similarly the sculptor who puts life into his object of art, whether or not it represents a person, is unconsciously restoring and recreating the early loved people, whom he has in phantasy destroyed.<sup>9</sup>*

The film-making itself becomes part of the therapeutic alliance, Dr. S. reading drafts of the script, intervening not as a script editor, but as an analyst. As well, the analytic insight that 'the wound' is the teacher helps me go deeper into dreams and the dark:

*The wound and the eye are one and the same ... Nursing and sitting with it, dwelling upon it, tracing the invisible mystery in it, letting compassion come for your own chronic disorder—this all slows down your progress, moves you from future thinking to essential thinking about our nature and character, upon life's meaning and death's, upon love and its failure ...*<sup>10</sup>

1999. A student from the University of Western Sydney rings. She is doing a web project on SWFG and could I answer a few questions—who were the members of the group?<sup>11</sup> I explain that SWFG was a collective, we had an open door policy and that any woman could join. I describe the fluid nature of such grass roots women's organisations whose political work was 'raising consciousness'. Our vision was not to slot women into a pre-existing capitalist and patriarchal world system, our aim was revolution—total transformation. A world-wide movement of women's liberation inspired us with groups like SWFG producing and distributing films. If we linked production with exhibition, distribution and education then we could create an independent women's 'counter cinema':

*The development of collective work is obviously a major step forward: as a means of acquiring and sharing skills it constitutes a formidable challenge to male privilege in the film industry: as an expression of sisterhood, it suggests a viable alternative to the rigid hierarchical structures of male-dominated cinema and offers real opportunities for a dialogue about the nature of women's cinema ... it will be from these insights that a genuinely revolutionary conception of counter cinema for the women's struggle will come.*<sup>12</sup>

These were exciting times. The birth of the SWFG was, for a girl of the 1950s, a revolutionary moment:

*The contradiction which appears clearly in capitalism between family and industry, private and public, personal and impersonal, is the fissure in women's consciousness through which revolt erupts ... the moment of women's liberation.*<sup>13</sup>

In the 1960s the iron grip of the conservative 1950s and the split between women's desire and the repressive social reality was at breaking point. In the area of film and television there was little formal training available. No autonomous film schools existed yet. The way to break into the industry for women was to start as a secretary or production assistant at the ABC, or the commercial networks and then a 'lucky' few might cut across into writing, production or direction. The idea of getting access to technical areas was scarcely on the map. Clustered around the SWFG were women keen to find a way into the closed door of the small film industry. Growing numbers of women were also attracted to the idea of a woman's 'counter-cinema'. This dual movement of reformism and radicalism was a distinctive feature of the era.

At the Sydney Film-makers Co-operative, a dynamic women's cinema potentially emerged alongside a spontaneous outburst of independent, experimental and political film-making. There was a demand for our films and regular screenings drew on a growing audience who wanted films that challenged traditional female representation. In the 1970s, with some support from a sympathetic Labour government there was an explosion of activities across the nation: Womenvision, the Women's Film Workshop, the International Women's Film Festival, the Women's Film Fund (AFC), the SWFG's Catalogue of Independent Women's Films, the Feminist Film Workers and a Women's Film Worker at the Co-op to work exclusively on exhibiting and distributing the women's film collection.<sup>14</sup>

The Film Co-op carried on a long established film society tradition of renting 16mm films to educational and community organisations. Its core collection of women's studies, social action and experimental films were widely distributed across Australia. We had a constituency, our films had a place. The era was typified by a strong sense of solidarity—a co-operative for film distribution, a cinema, a newspaper—*Filmnews*—and a sense of continuity and future.

The student from UWS finds it hard to see how these groups worked. I suggest that the SWFG was like a 'mother' film group, its members forming diverse collectives, everyone dynamically moving across fluctuating borders:

*Suddenly it happened ... The encounter became a family, passion, a work of love ... Each of us intermingling and trying on forms of the others, as though attempting to possess each other ... Each of us impregnating first one and then the other of the two in turn ... And that is how we made each of ourselves the mother and the daughter of each of the others, and sisters ...*<sup>15</sup>

**1972.** The Three Marias *New Portuguese Letters* are published, the authors arrested, their book suddenly banned. Later I dedicate *Maidens* to the 'Three Marias' and use their poetry in the



THE FEMINIST FILM WORKERS: 1979 [TOP: L-R] CAROLE KOSTANICH, BETH MCRAE, SARAH GIBSON, JENI THORNLEY [BOTTOM: L - R] MARTHA ANSARA, MARGOT OLIVER, SUSAN LAMBERT, PHOTO: JANDY EDWARDS



film. The collage-like quality of the work and their collaborative way of working creates an inspiring lyric voice.

**1974.** The SWFG initiates the Women's Film Workshop. I film my first 16mm exercise in Acharaya Roy's yoga studio where I am a yoga student. It's sunset, light frames the bodies as the students move gracefully through the asanas. Yoga becomes a life-long companion on the road to liberation. In the workshop I make *Still Life* (with Dasha Ross). Yet, my earlier involvement with *Film For Discussion* affects me deeply. There's alchemy at work here. The impact of being in a film and 'acting' one's self—invoking psychodrama—has repercussions. The family dinner sequence in *Film For Discussion* where the father's alcoholism, the mother's capitulation, the brother's rebellion and the daughter's faltering attempts to confront the contradictions carries forward into the long closing mirror shot. Here the daughter, played by me, searches into the mirror—unknowingly presaging a future journey into the self, a deep questioning via the cinematic gaze into what is liberation and how to be free of the tyranny of the family and its destructive patterns. Yet in *Film For Discussion* I'm still the subject and haven't made the leap from the passivity of being observed to the more engaged action of making my own images.

**1999.** 21st Festival de Femmes, Creteil, France. Seeing *Emporte Moi* (Leah Pool, 1999) reminds me that to give a young woman a movie camera to document her life may be her vehicle to liberation.

**1975.** The Australian Film & Television School (AFTVS) begins its full time course and takes in 50 per cent women, many of them from the Women's Film Workshop. I apply but don't get

a place. It's perhaps simplistic to suggest that the opening of AFTVS cut across the dynamic, democratic grass roots women's film movement, but there's no doubt that, at the same time as broadening the base for women across the industry, it reflected auterism, entrenched specialisation and closed a door on the 'spirit of collectivism'. Some of us turned our energies to co-ordinating an International Women's Film Festival to tour Australia nationally.

*Many years ago, in a decade called the seventies, there used to be women's film festivals, in which extraordinary and previously unimagined films, made by ... women directors against all odds, lighted screens in the dark and changed the lives of women who came to see them. Then everything seemed to settle down.<sup>16</sup>*

Funded by various government bodies and run collectively we screen feature, documentary and experimental films rarely seen in Australia including: *Christopher Strong* (Dorothy Arzner, 1933), *The Cool World* (Shirley Clarke, 1963), *Duet for Cannibals* (Susan Sontag, 1969), *Film About a Woman Who* (Yvonne Rainer, 1972), *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren, 1943), *The Girls* (Mai Zetterling, 1968), *Mädchen in Uniform* (Leontine Sagan, 1931) and *Fuses* (Carolee Schneeman, 1973).

**1976-77.** I apply (twice) again to AFTVS without success. The repeating pattern of my complex, troubled relationship to film and 'the Father' starts to unfurl.

**1956.** Television is introduced into Australia and cinemas start closing everywhere. We move to Melbourne where Grandpa's death forces Dad to take the reins of 'the picture business'. For the first time ever the business starts losing money. Dad and his brother open drive-in cinemas in an attempt to survive. Uncle Jack dies. Dad slides into despair:

*THE WOMAN sits next to an old slide projector searching through 1950s slides.*

## THE THERAPIST

*You've never let go of him. You hold on to him through your film-making. You idealise him ... He's the Mayor, the Prince ... And then you swing to the other extreme ... he's the drunk, the hopeless failure ... And this is you, too. Can you bring the two extremes together, that he's a man, an ordinary human being with failings and strengths? And in you there's the little girl who loves her Daddy ... desires him, too.<sup>17</sup>*

**1976.** Filming breaks down on *Journey Among Women* (Tom Cowan, 1977). I'm the camera assistant, and on one intense day the psycho-drama of the film erupts and some of the cast and crew refuse to participate in what we regard as 'sexist' shots. It's an era of feminism where a deep fissure develops between heterosexual women and lesbian women. Books like *The First Sex* (Gould Davis, 1971), *Les Guerillieres* (Wittig, 1971) and the utopian *Herland* (Gilman, 1919) are published. The vision of a matriarchal society is re-born:

*Those who draw closer to us or spy on us can already hear, between this exercise of ours and the pattern that each of us is tracing in her life, the surging tides of love that are swelling between us,*





*tides not of nostalgia or vengeance, but rather like those between mothers and daughters of one and the same house . . . guarding against the corruption of hierarchies and strict rules, instituting the law of a new sister(brother)hood—do outsiders realize the danger?*<sup>18</sup>

**1977.** I'm inspired by women's film history and the growing reality of making independent feminist films. Who needs film school? Also the feminist notion 'the personal is political' resonates. The avant-garde/experimental mood at the Co-op with the work of film-makers like Brackhage and Mekas circulating, as well screenings of films by locals such as Kit Guyatt, David Perry, Albie Thoms, David Lourie, Leonie Crennan and the Cantrill's suggest a dynamic and creative elision between 'the personal' and filmic innovation. I re-work my Experimental Film Fund drama (exploring illegal abortion) into *Maidens*. Creatively stuck while editing the film and reeling from another broken love affair I plunge into therapy with Dr S. This becomes a long journey culminating in *To The Other Shore*.

*Have Ithaca always in your mind.  
Your arrival there is what you are destined for.  
But don't in the least hurry the journey,  
Better it last for years,  
So that when you reach the island you are old,  
Rich with all you have gained on the way,  
Not expecting Ithaca to give you wealth.  
Ithaca gave you the splendid journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She hasn't anything else to give you.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaca hasn't deceived you.  
So wise have you become of such experience,  
That already you'll have understood what these Ithacas mean.*<sup>19</sup>

**1983.** Senator Susan Ryan launches the season of our documentary feature *For Love or Money* at the Academy Cinema, Sydney. A quintessential feminist film project begun in 1979 within the paradigm of women's counter cinema, *For Love or Money's* long research and pre-production phase develops links with education, trade unions and women's organisations who became investors in the film along with the Australian Film Commission and the Women's Film Fund. This labour history explores women's double day with a class analysis and a perspective on colonialism and its impact on Aboriginal women. To be able to name the place of 'the mother' and the centrality of her unpaid labour—'the work of loving'—and to shift between private and public narrative voices becomes the heart of the film for me:

*The story of the kitchen, the story of the clean house.  
We remember her labour, we remember that she gave.  
What we were to each other.  
What she taught me, that she made words.  
That she fed me, suckled me, clothed me, cradled me.  
We asked what might happen if men learnt*

*The story of women's work.*

*The cries of waking at night.*

*The length of caring, the work of loving.*

*The story of work of equal value.<sup>20</sup>*

On completion, *For Love or Money* immediately finds its place. By the 1980s feminism is no longer a fringe movement and the ideas of the film are widely received. The film (with companion Penguin book and ATOM Study Guide—*Australian Feature Films in the Classroom*) exhibits nationally and internationally and is distributed throughout tertiary and secondary education sectors, as well as television and international distribution.

1999. 21st Festival de Femmes, Creteil, France. A retrospective of Australian women's films is curated and many of us are invited. In a moving ceremony the Festival acknowledges our contribution as Australian women film-makers and as pioneers of an era. The Festival presents an opportunity to screen and discuss our work. It's the first time I've ever seen *Film For Discussion*, *Maidens*, *Secret Storm*, *For Love or Money* and *To the Other Shore* screened together as a body of feminist work and it gives me a sense of continuity and completion. There's a living thread in this film work through the 1960s to the 1990s. I marvel at this unique women's film festival—lively, eclectic and passionate—twenty years old and growing stronger. Yet, I also seem to view the films at Creteil from another layer of self—Dr. S's analytic koan—'you have to find out whether film is anything more than the search for the lost Father', resonating strongly within me.

*Films are magical because the pre-conscious and unconscious motives of their creators slip between even the most carefully controlled images. Who could imagine what ... scene or line of dialogue might waken or engrave in the memory of the person contemplating the film?<sup>21</sup>*

The wheel turns full circle and beyond. The film-making that began in the struggle for women's liberation with *Film For Discussion*, the search for the maternal family and sisterhood in *Maidens*, the journey into women's history and sexual economics in *For Love or Money*, evolves into *To The Other Shore*, a work of mourning. It's as if these films also function as 'rite of passage' works that have the potential to heal wounded feminine and masculine aspects of self.

1996. When I finally complete *To The Other Shore* the film landscape has changed. The defined 'women's audience' of the 1970s and 1980s no longer exists and this interior film 'work of mourning', informed by psychoanalysis more than feminism, enters a void. The strange silence from the 'film world' and 'post-feminist world' seems to repeat the abandonment and rejection I experienced from AFTVS back in the 1970s. I feel like I'm in my father's place when his cinemas crashed.

*The Father! Always the Father!<sup>22</sup>*

The 'wounded masculine'. Is psychoanalysis the turn off? It is a commonly held view that films about psychoanalysis are doomed. J.P. Sartre's controversial script about Freud was abandoned. I seem to identify with Sartre's Freud:

*He is melancholic, has difficulties in regulating his self esteem and is torn apart by destructive impulses and a powerful desire for independence which is constantly thwarted ... he is astonishingly vulnerable ... persistently depressed and lost.*<sup>23</sup>

1998–2001. An academic, Felicity Collins, publishes an analysis of my film-making. She looks at the films seriously and in depth, searching out patterns and meanings over three decades.<sup>24</sup> It comes at a critical moment and gives me renewed energy to distribute *To The Other Shore*. I shift the focus from local film distributors, film festivals and TV networks, who mostly reject the film, and explore educational networks. Distribution slowly builds for the film. In this work of seeking out audiences I chart a familiar territory of creating audiences with a 'film for discussion'. It is a way of working on the margins that is fertile, if fragile, yet deeply connected to the themes of the film. As well as critical discussion, screenings and sales in psychotherapy and tertiary media contexts, international film festivals seek the film out.

In her recent book Ruby Rich approaches what it means to be a woman film-maker today, suggesting that the history of feminist film practice is erased by the 1990s. She argues that what was once a women's audience in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s has been replaced by lesbian and gay cinema and that any vestige of a 'women's audience' has been re-constituted into the mainstream.<sup>25</sup>



TO THE OTHER SHORE: DIRECTOR JENI THORNLEY WITH XENIA NATALENKO (GRETHEL) PHOTO: SANDY EDWARDS

Susan Sontag, however, shifts the terms of reference beyond gender or sexual politics as the defining characteristic of cinema at the close of the 20th century to explore the 'vanished rituals—erotic, ruminative of the darkened cinema'. Sontag mourns the loss of 'cinophilia':

*The love that cinema inspired, however, was special. It was born of the conviction that cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern; distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral—all at the same time. Cinema had apostles. (It was like religion.) Cinema was a crusade. For cinephiles, the movies encapsulated everything. Cinema was both the book of art and the book of life.*<sup>26</sup>

Sontag looks to a decline in the notion of 'film as craft', a general loss of the 'original passionate' film being made and 'the inflation of expectations for profit'.

At the International Documentary Film Festival, Mumbai, India (1998), I screen *To the Other Shore* in competition. My years of yoga, women's liberation and psychoanalysis—a journey towards freedom—come together here. In India, the documentary film arises from the field of an ancient philosophy—*mimamsa*—or deep reflection and enquiry. This provides an ethical foundation for some film-makers :

*The documentary film provides us a testimony ... a means of getting correct knowledge ... this is Pramana.*<sup>27</sup>

After completing *To The Other Shore* an intuitive feeling emerges not to make another film. To stay with this 'process' seems to lead further into 'soul work' and allows me to 'come home' as if for the first time.<sup>28</sup>

It's almost as if each film has its own laws and that film-making, then, is perhaps more like a traditional craft than an industrial technological tool. Working like this also helps me evolve a fluid integration of motherhood and work, sometimes difficult to realise in the 'industry' model:

*The rug may take years to finish, years of dedication to a single intricate design, years of sitting at the loom tying the same knot over and over again, years of giving himself one aim, that of working at the rug. The end product, the finished rug, is too much in the future, too far ahead to encourage him. It requires a different patience from the patience we are accustomed to: the patience of waiting ... The principle in craftsmanship that calls us to work with materials may be the same principle which in a larger sense calls us to work with ourselves.*<sup>29</sup>

I see that my film-making is simply part of a process of self understanding, transformation and liberation. The films may not always communicate to a 'mass audience', but reach out in a personal, intimate and direct way. Making them has been a nourishing experience. Perhaps this is 'pramana', a certain kind of grace.<sup>30</sup>

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# LOOKING AWRY

## The cinema of Monica Pellizzari

ROSE CAPP

*I was born a woman, a wog and a westie, the three worst things you could be in Australia.<sup>1</sup>*  
(Monica Pellizzari)

**W**hen *Cinema Papers* surveyed the 'New Breed of Ethnic Film-makers' in 1992, Monica Pellizzari was identified as one of a group of young film-makers who were documenting the Australian migrant experience in new and provocative ways.<sup>2</sup> A graduate of the Australian Film, Television & Radio School, Pellizzari had at that stage already established herself as a film-maker of note with her three short films: *Velo Nero* (1987), the multi-award winning *Rabbit on the Moon* (1987) and *No No Nonno!* (1990). Pellizzari's internationally acclaimed *Just Desserts* (1993), well-received *Best Wishes* (1993) and AFI-nominated debut feature



MONICA PELLIZZARI

*Fistful of Flies* (1997) have subsequently marked her as a unique voice in the Australian cinema.

Pellizzari's films deal with the specificities of the Italo-Australian migrant experience but equally communicate with a wider audience in the universality of the experiences she presents. Issues of cultural identity, ethnicity and racism are thus interwoven with generational, feminist and other concerns. Pellizzari's films offer a pungent commentary on the history of multicultural Australia from the perspective of characters who are arguably doubly disenfranchised—marginalised by virtue of age and/or gender, in addition to cultural difference.

Pellizzari herself is uncomfortable with the potential limitations of the 'multicultural' filmmaker label.<sup>3</sup> Her films can thus be understood in contexts other than the multicultural one that overtly circumscribes her oeuvre. Most significantly for the purposes of this analysis, Pellizzari's films can be read in relation to their specific address to a female audience. With the exception of *No No Nonno!*, Pellizzari's central characters are troubled and troublesome heroines. They experience everything from the typical vicissitudes of female adolescence to the specific traumas of sexual abuse. Within a determinedly feminist framework, Pellizzari interrogates the patriarchal basis of Italo-Australian society and resolutely tackles proscribed topics including menstruation, masturbation, adolescent lesbianism and sexual abuse. Hers is a cinema of unflinching, if at times brutal and unpalatable, honesty.

Pellizzari's approach suggests interesting connections with other contemporary Australian women film-makers, including Jane Campion and Gillian Armstrong and more recently Christina Andreef and Davida Allen, whose work demonstrates a corresponding commitment to positioning female identity and sexuality centre screen.

Born in 1960 of Northern Italian migrant parents, Pellizzari spent her childhood in Sydney's semi-rural outskirts, an experience that profoundly informed her film-making career. Specific childhood memories and the broader isolation engendered by a cross-cultural upbringing are incorporated into the narratives of her short and feature-length films. 'Quite a lot of my own life is reflected in my films but it's very indirect, a subliminal influence and they're also based on what I've observed and been told'.<sup>4</sup>

If her cross-cultural heritage has informed Pellizzari's vision, she has also acknowledged the formative influence of television in shaping her ideas about the representation of Italo-Australians on screen. As Pellizzari grew up, the unrepresentative nature of what she saw on television became increasingly apparent. The overwhelmingly white and Anglo-defined world of the small screen in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s failed to reflect the realities of post-war Australian society from where Pellizzari was sitting.

*I was addicted to television. I grew up on the stuff but I couldn't understand why everyone spoke with an American accent except in *Homicide* and *Skippy*. For a while I wondered if we were actually*



*part of America. I always wanted to make films where I saw myself reflected on the screen. There are one million of us 'Italians' in this country and we haven't got any representation on television.*<sup>5</sup>

If 'ethnic' characters were occasionally represented on the small screen, they were predominantly male and typically caricatures or crude stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> This firmed the adult Pellizzari's resolve '... to tell stories from my roots about three-dimensional characters, not just Mafiosi or greengrocers with heavy accents and greasy hair'.<sup>7</sup> Pellizzari was equally determined to tackle the glaring gender imbalance, noting that women of Italian or other ethnic backgrounds were doubly absent from Australian screens. 'We hardly see enough stories about women: it's only token representation. Ninety per cent are boys' stories and I want to redress some of that'.<sup>8</sup> This desire to address the conspicuous lack of an ethnic female screen presence informs the provocative nature of Pellizzari's feminist framework and her unequivocal focus on female characters.

Inspired to become a film-maker by Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), Pellizzari landed her first film job working as a production assistant on Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Peter Weir, 1983). It did not take her long to then bring her own distinctive vision of Australian cultural life to the screen. She followed an Arts Degree from the University of New South Wales with a B.A in Writing and Directing from the Australian Film, Television & Radio School, graduating in 1987. While at AFTRS she was awarded an Italian Government Scholarship to attend the renowned Italian film school Il Centro Sperimentale Di Cinematographia. There she gained invaluable experience working with directors Federico Fellini, Lina Wertmuller and the Taviani brothers, and observing other legends of the Italian film industry, including Bernardo Bertolucci, at work.



GIUSEPPINA (AURELIA ENEI) AND GINA (NICOLETTA BORSI) IN RABBIT ON THE MOON

At AFTRS Pellizzari made her first two films, *Velo Nero* (1987) and *Rabbit on the Moon* (1987). Both short dramas, these early works, particularly *Rabbit*, evidence the thematic preoccupations and idiosyncratic visual style that have subsequently characterised her oeuvre. Based on a true story, *Velo Nero* (Black Veil) deals with a young Italian widow's profound social and cultural isolation.<sup>9</sup> Rosa (Rita Zerbini) is 'one of thousands of invisible migrant women eternally mopping footprints in the corridors of power'.<sup>10</sup> In her homeland, her widows weeds—the black veil of the film's title—would have identified her as a figure of sympathy and respect. In the culturally insensitive climate of suburban Australia, Rosa represents an alien and uncanny figure.

Plagued by dreams of herself as a witch, even *she* is convinced of her own strangeness. Rosa is harassed in the street by three youths but one eventually takes pity on her and escorts her home. Of Italo-Australian background himself, this encounter and the subsequent friendship that develops, leads him to question his own cultural identity. Pellizzari's compelling depiction of a small but significant shift towards tolerance and understanding between two individuals, makes a powerful and persuasive argument for cultural sensitivity in the wider Australian community.

When Pellizzari screened the film to veteran neo-realist film-makers during her time at Il Centro Sperimentale, they recognised in the stark imagery, compelling storyline and use of non-professional actors, a fellow neo-realist traveller. 'They saw a distinct and original piece of cross-pollination, neo-realism in an Australian setting'.<sup>11</sup> Encouraged, Pellizzari went on to complete *Velo Nero* in the same year as her graduate film, *Rabbit on the Moon*.

Shot in black and white, *Rabbit on the Moon* is a melancholic rendering of a bi-cultural childhood, a 'small masterpiece, with overtones of the Taviani brothers ...'.<sup>12</sup> The film attracted local and international acclaim, screening in competition at more than 40 film festivals and garnering 17 national and international awards.<sup>13</sup>

*Rabbit* presents a child's perspective of all the small but significant trials of an Italo-Australian upbringing in the exclusively Anglo-Saxon culture club that was Australia in the 1950s. Guissepina's (Aurelia Eneide) vividly imagined Italian homeland is rendered through the magic of songs and stories from older family members. Pellizzari constructs this exotic topography formally through the yellowing photographs and postcards from the fading family archive. Yet the potent appeal of Guissepina's Italian heritage is tainted by the racist slurs of schoolyard peers and undisguised hostility of Anglophilic neighbours. The competing demands of familial and peer loyalties, the generational and cultural tensions to which Guissepina bears witness, gradually effect a comprehension of adult fallibility and a concomitant loss of childhood innocence. This loss is powerfully symbolised by the brutal transformation of Guissepina's beloved rabbit from family pet to the family dinner.

Unusual camera angles and odd point-of-view shots render the idiosyncratic perspective of Pellizzari's youthful heroine. Guissepina wields the box brownie and toy telescope as powerful devices for reframing the world to reflect her own reality, banishing teasing school-

boys and other irritants to out-of-focus obscurity. Guiseppina's skewed vision through these childhood toys also suggests an apt metaphor for the conflicting perspectives and underlying tensions of her cross-cultural environment.

In *Rabbit on the Moon*, Pellizzari establishes the signature themes and distinctive visual style that have characterised her subsequent films. The exploration of generational and cultural conflict inaugurated in *Velo Nero* is expanded in *Rabbit*. In the latter, ambivalent attitudes around issues of cultural heritage coalesce within as well as beyond the family unit. As a child of migrant parents, Guiseppina represents the generation divide. She is both loyal to an ancestral homeland never visited and eager to adapt to the customs and attitudes of her country of birth. A mediating presence in the family, she is an interpreter of language, but perhaps more importantly, of cultural attitudes for family members bewildered by the unfamiliar ways of their adoptive country. Guiseppina's ambivalent bi-cultural experiences and the theme of youthful innocence compromised are issues Pellizzari develops in the dilemmas of her successive heroines: Angelica (*Best Wishes*), Maria (*Just Desserts*) and Mars (*Fistful of Flies*).

In Pellizzari's first two films, the director flags her commitment to exploring issues and experiences specific to women, particularly women negotiating the often difficult terrain of a cross-cultural environment. *Rabbit* foregrounds the constrictions placed upon women within and beyond an Italo-Australian setting. Guiseppina's ambivalent relationship with her mother and her mother's contradictory status within the family suggest how successive generations of women have both resisted and complied with the machinery of their own oppression. These are concerns that reverberate throughout each of Pellizzari's subsequent films. A recurring scene in Pellizzari's oeuvre—mother chases daughter around the table in mock-serious pursuit—suggests both the conflicts and allegiances that characterise that most complex of relations, the mother-daughter relationship.

In *Rabbit*, Pellizzari's reference to the time-honoured North/South Italian divide introduces another consistent theme in her work: the importance of regional distinctions that contribute to the heterogeneity of Italian language and culture. Pellizzari's oeuvre is characterised by the humorous treatment of these distinctions, a treatment that simultaneously critiques the historical representation of Italian culture on Australian screens as unambiguously monolithic.<sup>14</sup>

In *Rabbit on the Moon*, the gently ironic tone attests to the significance of humour in Pellizzari's work. The director's sure feel for the comic possibilities of character and situation, in conjunction with her idiosyncratic visual style, contributes significantly to the appeal of her films. Pellizzari has argued that her work is distinguished from other 'wog whingeing films' in drawing on '... our distinct humour and energy and way of seeing things'.<sup>15</sup> Hers is an often painfully funny, surreally black world peopled with sagacious elderly relatives and full-blooded Italo-Australian adolescents. The broad range of comic styles she employs, from the bittersweet whimsy of *Rabbit* to the irreverent slapstick of *No No Nonno!* enables

Pellizzari to address challenging issues while avoiding the pitfalls of a perceived multicultural didacticism.

*No No Nonno!*, Pellizzari's third short, is a tale of geriatric rebellion and familial farce. *Nonno!*'s broad comic tone and heightened colour represented a deliberate shift away from the style of *Rabbit* in order to demonstrate the director's range.<sup>16</sup> Nonno (Carmine Mirto) is an endearing, if at times infuriating old-timer who lives with his son's family in a Neo-Palladian villa awash in Italian kitsch. Nonno still suffers hot flushes of nostalgia for the halcyon days of Naples under Mussolini and is contemptuous of 'the Northerner', his daughter-in-law Anna (Nicoletta Boris). Nonno's determined resistance to Aus-(oss)ification results in frequent and hilarious misunderstandings and wreaks havoc in a family already marked by cultural, generational and gender tensions.

Nonno's improbable alliance with his petrol-head grandson and shambolic attempts to undermine Anna provide plenty of opportunities to pump up the comic volume. Pellizzari harnesses her distinctive visual style to humorous effect, exaggerating the odd camera angles and extreme close-ups of *Rabbit*, to amplify her superannuated hero's antics and the worst excesses of Italo-Australian kitsch. While Pellizzari milks the comic potential of cross-cultural and generational conflict for all it's worth, the film is underpinned by a measure of pathos. Nonno's persistent attempts to board a bus 'to Napoli' (via Leichhardt!) and abiding fear of nursing home incarceration acknowledge very real issues around cultural isolation, ageing and the disintegration of the extended family. In equal parts pathos and bathos, *Nonno!* has been described as a film that 'shows it is quite possible to deal with social issues like the aged, while being thoroughly entertaining'.<sup>17</sup>

While *Nonno!* is an exception in featuring a central male character, the film is consistent within Pellizzari's oeuvre in its implied feminist sympathies. The humorous travails of the Ciccolone family are thus underpinned by a critique of the patriarchal structure of the traditional Italian family. As with her character in *Rabbit on the Moon*, Boris's Anna elicits both laughter and empathy. She is a woman trapped in a tragicomic domestic nightmare, catering to the demands of three generations of typically wilful Italian men.

While *Nonno!* was successful both locally and internationally, it was Pellizzari's fourth short, *Just Desserts* (1993) that consolidated the director's international reputation. Shot on 35 mm, mixing colour and black and white images in a split screen format, *Just Desserts* is a visually sophisticated and manifestly politicised work that both encapsulated and moved beyond the concerns of Pellizzari's previous three films. Amongst numerous other international awards, the film won the Leoncino d'Argento for the Best Short Film at the 1993 Venice International Film Festival.<sup>18</sup>

In *Just Desserts*, Pellizzari explores some fundamental realities of adolescent female sexuality and the particular vicissitudes of an Italo-Australian upbringing in suburban Sydney in the 1970s. A series of black and white scenarios chart the tragi-comic experiences of teen voluptuary Maria Stroppi (Dina Panozzo), each accompanied by lusciously coloured and

erotically charged images of assorted Northern Italian dishes.<sup>19</sup> Food in *Just Desserts* serves as a witty and sensuous paraphrasing of the action, rendering the proscribed themes of menstruation, masturbation and lesbian teen romance literally palatable. Venetian fritters ('our little vaginas') suggest an edible guide to female anatomy. Maria's defloration atop a beached surfboard finds a comic visual and aural counterpoint in the domestic ritual of gnocchi production.

Pellizzari combines other rituals of adolescence and Northern Italian cooking in similarly contrapuntal fashion to create a complex short film that extends a consistent theme in her work—the complexities of lived female experience. As with her earlier films, this fourth short makes clear the double bind of femininity, particularly as it relates to the position of women in Italo-Australian culture. The Gothic overtones of the opening sequence dealing with menstruation, Maria's struggle for sexual and cultural identity, and the subversive presence of the lesbian, axe-wielding Aunt Angelina, convey the precise nature of this double bind.

In *Just Desserts*, Pellizzari also explores the double bind of femininity through the relationship between women and food. As the director has noted, Italian food functions as the locus of a collective memory which, unlike photographs and other memorabilia, does not fade with time.<sup>20</sup> Pellizzari articulates this distinction formally by contrasting black and white 'recollections' with effulgent colour images of perennial Italian comestibles. Italian women, symbolised by Boris's character, are the primary purveyors of food and are thus both constrained by the limits of the domestic sphere and venerated as guardians of regionally specific cultural traditions.

*Just Desserts* is a witty and incisive analysis of sexual and cultural difference, Catholicism and 1970s-style 'family values', the whole embedded in the visually compelling metaphor of traditional Italian food. The film signaled a maturity in Pellizzari's work, a maturity also apparent in her contribution to the SBS-TV drama series *Under The Skin*. A 12-part series commissioned by SBS/Film Australia, the project was conceived to showcase the work of young film-makers dealing with issues of multiculturalism. *Best Wishes* (1993) is a characteristically confronting Pellizzari scenario. Set in the 1970s, the 26-minute drama depicts the sexual abuse of a young girl, Angelica (Bianca



MARIA STOPPI (DINA PANNOZZO) AFTER JUST HAVING LOST HER VIRGINITY IN JUST DESSERTS



Murdaca) in the three days prior to her confirmation. The film attracted critical and public acclaim at the 51st Venice International Film Festival, where Pellizzari was establishing a considerable following.<sup>21</sup>

Superficially, the drama appears to be a stylistic and thematic return to *Rabbit on the Moon*. Pellizzari's signature preoccupations—the potent admix of Italian and Australian language, culture and sexuality—are presented from the perspective of another youthful female heroine. But where *Rabbit* dealt poignantly with the theme of lost innocence, *Best Wishes* presents a resolutely bleak picture of childhood betrayal. Angelica is abused by her

Uncle Guiseppe (John Lucantonio) with the tacit consent of his wife Maria (Rosalba Paris), Angelica's confirmation sponsor. Her parents' failure to protect her compounds Angelica's sense of betrayal. In *Best Wishes*, Pellizzari develops the theme of culpability into a damning indictment of adult dereliction. And where the striking black and white visuals were used to such expressive effect in *Rabbit*, in *Best Wishes* Pellizzari employs them for more sinister stylistic ends. The claustrophobic interiors, noirish lighting, disconcerting camera angles and uneasy tones powerfully convey the young Angelica's emotional trauma.

*Best Wishes* is arguably Pellizzari's most overtly politicised short work. Where humour tempered her treatment of challenging issues in earlier films, in *Best Wishes* Pellizzari allows only brief moments of comic respite in what is an uncompromising examination of a provocative subject. Angelica's experience implicates not only family members but other adults entrusted with her care. Where references to the shortcomings of Catholicism had received wry treatment in her earlier films, in *Best Wishes* Pellizzari reserves her harshest criticism for the Catholic church, particularly as an agent of distaff oppression. Angelica becomes a victim twice over, when the church both fails to intervene and effectively condemns her as the sinful party.

The rituals of conventional religion are deconstructed to expose the hypocrisies at work in the Church. Pellizzari engages the complex symbolism and sexual ambiguity of Angelica's confirmation ceremony as an overarching metaphor. The 'little bride's ... marriage to Jesus', the confirmation gifts of bed linen and jewellery and the loaded symbolism of the 'white bridal dress and veil' thus make her betrayal by the church all the more acute. Angelica herself makes the connection between her own exploitation and the wider oppression enforced by the church when, in the film's immensely satisfying denouement, she literally bites the patriarchal papal hand that feeds her.

The unforgiving interrogation of the Catholic church is a theme that reaches its apogee in Pellizzari's most recent film, *Fistful of Flies* (1996). Pellizzari describes her first feature as encompassing 'themes explored in her earlier works, particularly those of cultural identity and female sexuality'.<sup>22</sup> Developed over a five-year period, the script draws on her own experiences as an Italo-Australian, but equally, is an amalgamation of stories researched from women with similar backgrounds.<sup>23</sup>

Mars Lupi (Tasma Walton), a feisty 16 year old, lives in the fictional rural town of Cider Gully. Pellizzari's choice of location was influenced by her own adolescence in Sydney's suburban West, then a semi-rural wasteland. According to the director, Cider Gully exaggerates Mars' 'sense of dislocation' and amplifies the tensions within the Lupi family.<sup>24</sup> Mars struggles for autonomy within an oppressive Italo-Australian Catholic family setting. Her abusive father Joe (John Lucantonio) rules the family with a patriarchal iron fist, suppressing his daughter's attempts at self-expression—intellectual, emotional and particularly sexual. In Joe, Pellizzari has created her most unforgiving portrait of masculine tyranny. His wife Grace (Dina Panozzo) is a conflicted character who is both victim of and complicit with her husband's oppressive regime.<sup>25</sup> Completing the Lupi family is the dignified and sympathetic figure of the maternal grandmother Nonna (Anna Volska), who has suffered at the hands of her own violent husband.

*Fistful of Flies* constitutes Pellizzari's most complete statement thus far on the state of Italo-Australian cultural and sexual politics. The opening scene, in which a young Mars is harshly punished for observing two dogs mating, sets up the film's governing themes. The family's repressive attitude to sexuality, the mother's punitive treatment of her daughter, the cross-generational loyalties between grandmother and daughter are all familiar preoccupations from earlier Pellizzari films. The three main female characters represent different aspects of Pellizzari's feminist agenda. She describes the film as a 'coming of age of three generations of women: Mars, her mother, Grace, and her grandmother'.<sup>26</sup> This represents a progression from her earlier works, where, given the limitations of the short format, Pellizzari's secondary female characters were necessarily more perfunctorily sketched.



MARIA STROPI (DINA PANOZZO) AND MONA (ANNE-LOUISE LAMBERT) IN *JUST DESERTS*

In *Flies*, Mars is the principal locus of feminist sentiment, combining many of the experiences and dilemmas of earlier Pellizzari heroines. Where *Just Desserts* explored adolescent female sexuality in a series of short comic vignettes, in *Flies* Pellizzari utilises the feature film length to fully develop issues around sexual and cultural identity, female fantasy and desire. Mars' resistance to her parents, an arranged marriage and the church, symbolised in her determined onanism, has brutal consequences. But as with the series of masturbatory dream sequences, the tampon 'earrings' and other acts of insurrection, Pellizzari affirms through her heroine 'a woman's right to her own body and her own sexuality'.<sup>27</sup>

The respective dilemmas of Grace and Nonna flesh out the complexities of this feminist rhetoric. As with maternal figures in earlier Pellizzari works, Grace is a character of considerable ambivalence. Plagued by her own self doubts and subordinated to her despotic husband, she is in turn both appalled and fascinated by Mars' rebellious stand. Intuitively alive to her daughter's emerging sexuality, she is equally at times the agent of her oppression. In the film's emotionally charged final scenes, mother and daughter ultimately form a distaff alliance and Grace gains a measure of self-knowledge. Nonna's support for Mars also enables her to finally acknowledge the painful truth of her own long repressed emotional traumas.

The highly stylised, at times surreal aesthetic in *Flies* reflects its thematic content. Most of the action takes place in and around the Lupi family home, where the front path inexplicably ends before reaching the house. It is a disjunction that seems to symbolise the emotionally riven Lupi family itself. At the local cemetery, a statue of the Madonna descends uncannily from the sky, a wry homage to one of Pellizzari's formative influences.<sup>28</sup> The flies of the film's title haunt the family and the film text in a disturbing fashion. Unusual camera angles, extreme close-ups, odd point-of-view shots and a series of nightmarish fantasy sequences contribute to the unsettling visual style of the film. The queasily coloured walls and claustrophobic confines of the Lupi house recall the similarly oppressive domestic spaces in *Best Wishes*. And as with *No No Nonno!*, Pellizzari exaggerates the more outlandish aspects of the Lupi's collection of Italo-Australian ephemera—most spectacularly, Joe's collection of abnormally well-endowed garden gnomes—to darkly comic effect.

As with all Pellizzari's films, in *Flies* humour plays a significant role, tempering some of the more provocative scenes and reinforcing the genuinely funny aspects of the Italo-Australian cultural clash. Pellizzari describes her feature as a 'black comedy with a surrealist edge and underlying serious themes', the tone somewhere between *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1994) and *Muriel's Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994).<sup>29</sup> The competing demands of melodrama and black comedy make for an at times uneasy mix, with disconcerting shifts in tone and characterisation. This uneasy mix accounts, at least in part, for the equally uneasy and mixed critical response the film received.

*Flies* resemblance to 'the loud, histrionic Italian comedies of the 1960s' has been noted, while other reviewers have compared the film unfavourably with another blackly comic debut feature, *Sweetie* (Jane Campion, 1988).<sup>30</sup> In their respective depictions of eccentric,



sexually resourceful heroines, both *Sweetie* and *Fistful of Flies* have been described as confronting and difficult to watch. The comparison between the two films is an instructive one, given the broader formal and thematic concerns shared by the two directors.<sup>31</sup>

Pellizzari has been described as ‘one of the generation of young Australian film-makers who tell stories in a different visual way; their films are one short image after another rather than long lingering scenes’.<sup>32</sup> This unconventional approach to narrative, most evident in *Rabbit on the Moon*, *Just Desserts* and *Fistful of Flies*, has a dual function in her work. The episodic structure formally duplicates the fragmented nature of memories, fantasies and dreams, a consistent and significant trope in Pellizzari’s oeuvre. Equally, these selective ‘fragments’ or episodes always serve to elucidate the eccentric heroine’s point of view. In this, Pellizzari has a natural counterpart in *Campion*, whose own idiosyncratic approach to narrative arguably inheres from her corresponding interest in depicting the experiences of equally unconventional heroines.<sup>33</sup>

Both directors are committed to the representation of complex female characters. Both women foreground issues of female sexuality and desire in an uncompromising fashion, their choice of subject matter arguably contributing to the censure they have attracted from discomfited, male critics.<sup>34</sup> This critical unease can perhaps be understood in relation to what Kathleen Rowe has identified as the disruptive figure of the ‘unruly woman’ in twentieth-century popular culture.<sup>35</sup>

Rowe has argued that the rituals and imagery associated with early modern European carnival culture represented the ‘world turned up-side down’, playing out inversions of conventional power structures, dominant practices and beliefs. Characterised by unconstrained speech, laughter and spectacle, these practices have been interpreted as a way of critiquing the dominant institutions and beliefs of the period, even if only for a day. One of the central motifs of European carnival was the figure of the ‘woman on top’. A transgressive figure in terms of her appearance, speech, behaviour and/or sexuality, the ‘woman on top’ represented a literal inversion of gendered power but more significantly, a symbolic inversion of social, cultural and political gendered hierarchies.<sup>36</sup>

Rowe has argued that this early modern European ‘unruly woman’ has certain counterparts in that contemporary equivalent to the carnival marketplace—popular culture, particularly film and television.<sup>37</sup> Citing amongst other examples, actor/comedian Rosanne Barr, Rowe argues that the latter day ‘unruly woman’ is an equally disruptive presence, challenging conventional representations of female identity, femininity and female sexuality. She is typically associated with the ‘genres of laughter ... from romance to satire to the grotesque ...’<sup>38</sup> As with her medieval counterparts, she interrogates dominant social, cultural and political hierarchies, and has the potential to permanently destabilise those hierarchies. In this way the ‘unruly woman’ is distinct from other representations of female power on the mainstream screen—the femme fatale, the female detective, the action heroine—in that she is a genuinely subversive figure.<sup>39</sup>



The 'genres of laughter' are omnipresent in Pellizzari's oeuvre, her comic register ranging from satire to unabashed grotesquerie.<sup>40</sup> Her heroines can be understood as exemplary representations of the 'unruly woman' who effect a form of visual, textual and political disruption. Their transgressive qualities are figured in terms of a collective feminist discourse that refuses to be silenced and an assertive sexuality that resists suppression. As with her earlier European counterparts, Mars is a genuinely subversive figure. Provocative, unsettling and disturbing, her transgressive presence accounts in no small measure for the widespread critical (male) unease that greeted the release of *Flies*.

The female characters in Pellizzari's films can also be situated within the broader tradition of 'unruly women', which has arguably characterised the contemporary Australian cinema in

recent decades. Campion's entire oeuvre is defined by the presence of unruly women, from her earlier works such as *Peel* (Jane Campion, 1982) to her most recent feature *Holy Smoke* (Jane Campion, 1999). Seminal films from the New Wave of Australian cinema feature archetypal 'unruly women'. The respective heroines of *My Brilliant Career* (Gillian Armstrong, 1979) and *The Getting of Wisdom* (Bruce Beresford, 1977) are wilful, unconventional and independent characters who contest the dominant conventions and beliefs of their day. A decade on, Dawn's disruptive presence in *Sweetie* was reinforced by the triumvirate of equally unruly women in *High Tide* (Gillian Armstrong, 1987), *Shame* (Steve Jodrell, 1988) and *Evil Angels* (Fred Schepisi, 1988).

More recently, Mars Lupi has been complemented by a series of 'unruly women' at the centre of provocative Australian feature films directed by women: *Only the Brave* (Ana Kokkinos, 1995), *Oscar and Lucinda* (Gillian Armstrong, 1997), *Soft Fruit* (Christina Andreef, 1999) and *Feeling Sexy* (Davida Allen, 1999).

Pellizzari's oeuvre thus encapsulates some of the central debates and concerns that have defined the Australian cinema over the last two decades. Pellizzari's films track shifts in the representation of both ethnicity and gender and the concomitant figuring and reconfiguring of notions of cultural and sexual identity on the contemporary Australian screen. Her films should be understood not merely with respect to the multicultural context but equally importantly, in relation to a contemporary Australian cinema increasingly defined by the presence of forceful female characters and the contributions of equally forceful women film-makers. As Pellizzari has remarked of the issues and concerns presented in her films, 'You don't have to be Italian to understand'.<sup>41</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 *Sunday Telegraph*, October 16, 1988. No author or page number available. Sourced from AFI clippings file.
- 2 Pat Gillespie, 'The New Breed of Ethnic Filmmakers', *Cinema Papers*, 90, 1992, pp. 24-28.
- 3 Jo Litson, *The Australian*, November 22, 1989, p. 66.
- 4 Denise Overton, 'Fight of Her Life', *Illawarra Mercury*, May 31, 1991, p. 2.
- 5 Jo Litson, op. cit. p. 66.
- 6 Sadya recent Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance survey (*Report on casting in Australian Commercial Television Drama [2000]* Harvey Kay, Terry Flew, Christina Spurgeon, Centre for Media Policy and Practice, School of Media and Journalism, Queensland University of Technology) reveals a disappointingly small increase in the number of actors from non-English-speaking backgrounds working in commercial Australian television drama over the last twenty years. One reason for the continued failure of commercial television to genuinely represent the cultural diversity of the Australian community is the relentlessly homogenising drive of advertisers and producers, who remain firmly convinced that 'Asians and accents are a turnoff for audiences'. See 'Pale Reflections', Today Section, *The Age*, January 28, 2000, pp. 1, 3.
- 7 Mary Colbert, 'Flying in Face of Film Form', *The Age*, EG, June 13, 1997, p. 6.
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Pellizzari has scripted all her films, including the AFI-Best Original Screenplay-nominated feature film script *Fistful of Flies*.
- 10 Anna Maria Dell'Oso, 'A Slice of Aussie Pizza', *Filmnews*, November 1990, p. 17.
- 11 Monica Pellizzari, 'A Matter of Representation', *Artlink*, Vol. 11, nos. 1 & 2, p. 80. In the same article, Pellizzari claims AFTRS staff were critical of both her student films because of their perceived narrow ethnic focus.
- 12 Anna Maria Dell'Oso, op. cit. p. 17.
- 13 The awards included an AFI Best Director (Non-feature) and selection as a finalist in the short film category at the American Academy Awards.
- 14 Pellizzari has criticised the way in which Italian culture and language has been monolithically represented in Australian film and television, erasing important regional distinctions. See Production Notes, *Fistful of Flies*, p. 4.
- 15 Jo Litson, op. cit. p. 67. and Monica Pellizzari, op. cit. p. 80. respectively.
- 16 Pat Gillespie, op. cit. p. 28.
- 17 Monica Pellizzari, op. cit. p. 81.
- 18 In winning at Venice, Pellizzari competed against the work of internationally acclaimed directors including Kenneth Branagh and Hal Hartley. In addition to Venice, other major awards for *Just Desserts* included the Rouben Mamoulian Award at the 1993 Sydney Film Festival and the Special Jury Prize at the 1993 Kobe International Short Film Festival. Pellizzari was also thrilled to receive a personal letter of commendation for the film from idol Martin Scorsese.
- 19 Pellizzari wrote the script for *Just Desserts* based on an idea developed in collaboration with Panozzo, with whom she shares a specific Northern Italian heritage.
- 20 Rose Capp, Interview with Monica Pellizzari, July 1993. Pellizzari was inspired not only by the more obvious historical connections between Italian food and female sexuality, but also by the numerous linguistic connections between the two subjects she discovered in the course of researching *Just Desserts*.
- 21 Pellizzari was the first Australian film-maker to be invited to screen her short films at Venice in successive years.
- 22 Production Notes, *Fistful of Flies*, 'Director's Statement', p. 2.
- 23 *ibid.* Pellizzari has been puzzled by the criticism of the film's overtly bleak subject matter, noting that the incidents depicted are far less shocking than many of the stories she heard in the course of researching the film.
- 24 *ibid.*
- 25 Panozzo's performance is a nicely ironic reversal of her role as the adolescent Maria Stroppi in *Just Desserts*.
- 26 Production Notes, *Fistful of Flies*, p. 3.
- 27 *ibid.* p. 2.
- 28 The scene recalls the classic opening to Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (Frederico Fellini, 1960). In addition to Fellini, Pellizzari nominates Peter Weir, Martin Scorsese and Lina Wertmüller as significant cinematic influences and also acknowledges the support and encouragement of Weir and Paul Cox in the development of her career.
- 29 Mary Colbert, op. cit. p. 6.
- 30 Adrian Martin, 'Self-loathing at its worst', *The Age*, June 12, 1997, p. B4. For other reviewers referred to see: Tom Ryan, Review *Fistful of Flies*, *The Sunday Age*, 'Cue', June 15, 1997, p. 9.
- 31 Interestingly, Pellizzari and Campion are both graduates of AFTRS and Campion worked as a directorial consultant on *Rabbit on the Moon*.
- 32 Julia Overton, Production Notes, *Fistful of Flies*, p. 4.
- 33 An analysis of Campion's *Holy Smoke* (Jane Campion, 1999) suggests the director's fundamental indifference to notions of conventional storytelling. See Adrian Martin, 'Smokescreen for wispy plot', *The Age*, December 24 1999, p. B4. This is something Campion herself has long acknowledged. The '... normal seamless way of film-making that's basically American in origin has totally eluded me; I'm obviously barking up some other completely separate tree'. See Robert Seibenberg 'Sweetie', *American Film*, January 1990, p. 59.
- 34 The local response from male critics to Campion's films, particularly *The Piano* and more recently *Holy Smoke* has been overwhelmingly negative. *Fistful of Flies* received similar treatment at the hands of male critics, compared with the generally positive response from female reviewers. See Adrian Martin, Tom Ryan op. cit.
- 35 Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1995.
- 36 *ibid.* 'Feminism and the Carnavalesque', pp. 25-49.
- 37 *ibid.*, 'Introduction', pp. 19-20
- 38 *ibid.*, p. 8.
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 10.
- 40 The 'grotesque' elements in *Fistful of Flies* attracted particularly harsh criticism from local critics. See Adrian Martin, op. cit.
- 41 Ruth Hessey, 'All the buzz', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Metro', May 23, 1997, p. 15.



# FRAMING STRATEGIES

## Floating Life and the Limits of 'Australian Cinema'

RAI JONES

If the Australian nation is, to use Benedict Anderson's insightful term, an *imagined community*<sup>2</sup>—reproduced historically in highly discursive, yet none the less real ways—then Australian national cinema can be seen as an *imagined cinema*—a site of articulations of inclusions and exclusions that both inscribe cinema production in the national space and re/produce discourses and images about this national space.

I intend to test the imaginative practice of Australian national cinema through an examination of the inclusion of film-maker

BING (ANNIE YIP) IN *FLOATING LIFE* CLARA LAW, 1996

Clara Law and her film *Floating Life* (1996) within this frame. I argue that this inclusion necessarily excludes other ways of engaging with the film—namely, that which engages with spaces outside of the Australian national space.

*Floating Life* is a text that engages with issues of place and displacement. It tells the story of the Chan family as they negotiate different narratives of migration. It is the first film made by director Clara Law after she migrated to Australia from Hong Kong with her husband Eddie L. C. Fong, with whom she co-wrote the film.

*Floating Life's* relationship to the national space of Australia and Australian national cinema is a complex one. Now residing in Melbourne, Clara Law has been claimed as an 'Australian director'. Her film can be claimed as Australian through its support from Australian funding bodies (AFC, NSW Film and Television Office and SBS). Moreover, through the narration of Mum and Pa Chan and their youngest son's migration to Australia to join Second Daughter Bing, the film spends a significant amount of time within an Australian national space. Yet if Law can be called an Australian film-maker, it must also be asserted that she is not only that. As a director she has a place both in Australian film production and in Hong Kong film production. Having made five features and one short in Hong Kong before directing *Floating Life*, Law's skills, styles and concerns can be traced across the Australian and Hong Kong film industries. At the same time, Law expresses a certain ambivalence about this relationship, stating her desire to move away from the commercial and entertainment imperatives of film production in Hong Kong.<sup>3</sup> Emerging from this ambivalence, *Floating Life* has both discontinuity and continuity with Law's work in Hong Kong. In this way, Law can be seen as simultaneously creating an Australian and a transnational text. While *Floating Life* is locatable within the Australian national space, it simultaneously lays claim to multiple national spaces through the structuring device of its 'chapters': 'a house in Australia', 'a house in Germany' and 'a house in Hong Kong' (which are in turn complicated by the other chapters). Further, the film's representation of Australia suggests a tense position of both insiders and outsiders, 'caught athwart the frame'<sup>4</sup> of the national landscape.<sup>5</sup>

Strategies of framing inform my project. The term 'framing' has particular resonances for a discussion of a film text. The framing strategies employed in *Floating Life* contextualise my own reading and refer to the wider implications of framing as a critical strategy. Two complementary framing techniques dominate the interior shot compositions in *Floating Life*. Firstly, doorways, windows, archways and walls inscribe frames within the frames of the film. This often combines with static camera shots to suggest a refusal to move in on the characters and action and instead marks out a certain distanced position for the viewer to occupy. Secondly, walls, doors and banisters often dominate the frame, cutting in on, and obscuring, the space in which the drama and characters occupy. These two framing strategies perform a reference to the framing imperative of the cinematic apparatus, inscribing a certain textual self-consciousness into the film. The inscription of frames within frames, and the partially obscured frames, perform the constructed nature of film production and point to the situated vision of cinema. These inscriptions, through their self-referentiality, both refer out to

what is not contained within the frame and refer to what is obscured by the frame itself. In this way, *Floating Life* can be seen to take up the partiality of vision as a textual strategy.

This partiality of vision offers up a particular challenge for a critical engagement with *Floating Life*. It demands that the limitations of the critical frame(s) inscribed around the film be more than just acknowledged—they should be allowed to resonate. Just as vision in *Floating Life* is framed, situated and always partial, so too is critical analysis. I offer this discussion of framing and vision in *Floating Life* to contextualise my interrogation of critical framing strategies and my performance of a context-dependent reading of the film. The partiality that a context-dependent reading acknowledges, and the disjunctures that emerge in such a reading, suggests that the situated and intersecting meanings produced are not necessarily involved in the production of coherence and do not necessarily work towards the articulation of ‘a cinema’.

Taking up Arjun Appadurai’s assertion that cultural processes are ‘radically context dependent’,<sup>6</sup> I intend to perform a context-dependent reading of *Floating Life* to examine the ways in which the national, the transnational and the diasporic intersect in complex and mutually informing ways in the film. I argue that these three terms contextualise each other to such an extent that any situating of one term as the privileged site of meaning is impossible. Such an approach disrupts a national cinema paradigm, where the nation is one such privileged site of meaning.

### **TRANSNATIONALITY, DIASPORA AND THE NATIONAL**

The contextualisation of transnationality in *Floating Life* causes disjunctures that disrupt any common meanings that the term may imply. Crucial here is an understanding of the means whereby *Floating Life* situates each character in narratives of migration.<sup>7</sup> The transnational meanings which emerge in *Floating Life* arise not just from the process of migration but through the continuing relations between family members. These relations are informed by each character’s specific negotiations of transnationality and national spaces. Multiple factors converge to structure these relationships, including generational differences, sibling relations, position in the family, their particular time of migrating, and the different tensions that emerge from, and the different ‘successes’ each has with, their negotiations of both transnationality and the national spaces into which they migrate. The differences that emerge from the intersection of all these informing factors work to disrupt any notion of a common meaning of transnationality. Further, any commonalities that emerge from conditions of transnationality are marked as much, if not more, by differences than by sameness. *Floating Life*’s engagement with national spaces and its exploration of other informing differences and relations cause disjunctures within the term transnationality as an operative term. The disjunctures that emerge in the intersection of differences, relations and national spaces suggest the possibility that transnationality may not necessarily reconcile into common meanings, points of connection or mutual understandings. This is explored quite poignantly in the relations between the three elder siblings, relations that are marked by conflict and missed connections.

Gar Ming, in his voice over narration, evokes a time when the whole family was together in the one house. The nostalgia that this implies remains ambivalent in the film. Gar Ming and his sisters, Yen and Bing, are, for the most part, kept geographically and narratively separate. Not only are they located in different national spaces, but their narratives (of migration and transnationality) operate on separate trajectories. Even when the film places them together in the same space, these placements are marked by missed connections and conflicts that are not resolved within the film. A disjuncture emerges between their various voice over narrations and their dialogues. Gar Ming articulates a desire to 'open [his] heart to First Sister [Yen]' but in their dialogue this does not happen. When Yen and Bing are brought together in the film their dialogue explodes with multiple resentments, with Yen accusing Bing of treating their parents harshly, while Bing articulates resentment towards their parents for allowing their brothers to become 'louts' and accuses Yen of 'playing at filial devotion' while she does the 'dirty work' of supporting their migration. The film does not resolve their conflict, and instead allows it to resonate. Yen goes back to Germany, and Bing, through voice over narration, articulates a desire for her understanding. Her question, 'Will she understand if I tell her my story?' is not answered in the text. In fact, her story is not told to Yen at all (in dialogue) but is instead told to the film's audience (through voice over narration and filmic storytelling, in the chapter 'a house without a tree'). In this way, understanding must take place outside of their relationship, in fact, outside of the film itself. The viewer is asked to stand in as the agent of understanding, because Yen has gone back to Germany. Interestingly, Bing and Gar Ming never interact during the film. Even when they are in the same national space they are not brought together. The film refuses any resolution of the siblings' conflicts and missed connections and does not offer any kind of climactic coming together. It is this refusal, and the disjunctures that emerge between their dialogues and their voice over narrations, which suggests that the intersection of sibling relations, geographical dispersal, and trajectories of migration create a multiplicity of differences and tensions that cannot be brought together under any common meaning of transnationality.

Similarly, diaspora is also evoked in *Floating Life* and then contextualised in such a way as to make a singular understanding of it untenable. The idea of a Chinese diaspora is evoked by Mum when she asks, 'Why, after all these years of not having a homeland?' However, this idea of a Chinese diaspora is a highly complex and fraught term as it is played out in the text. Ien Ang allows us to see that 'being Chinese'<sup>8</sup> is contextualised by the national spaces within which it is performed.<sup>9</sup> *Floating Life* uses a number of strategies to perform this contextualisation, and suggests that cultural identity and ethnicity take on different meanings in different contexts.

One of these strategies is the foregrounding of language as an issue in conflicts around cultural identity and migrancy. Yen's efforts to teach Mui Mui Cantonese can be read as a strategy to pass on a Chinese identity to her daughter. These efforts are partly undermined by her husband's suggestion that Cantonese is not 'real Chinese'—a suggestion that mobilises questions of authenticity in the relations between language and cultural identity.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Bing's efforts to force her brothers to speak English, which begin upon their arrival





BING (ANNIEYIP) EATS ALONE WATCHED BY LONE (DARRENYAP)

in Australia, work at the expense of their Cantonese. Her efforts are informed by a sense that speaking English is a necessary strategy to 'succeed' in Australia. However, they also evoke a discourse of assimilation, whereby migrants are asked to 'forget' their 'pasts' and embrace an 'Australian' identity defined by an Anglocentric norm.

Another strategy that *Floating Life* uses to contextualise cultural identity within the national space is to contrast the ways in which these identities are articulated. Yen articulates the problem of 'being Chinese' when she identifies with both Germany and Hong Kong. In contrast, Bing and Chau both articulate themselves as 'Asian' within the Australian national space. This suggests that the performance of identity is contextualised by the discourses that inform their social landscape. Their articulation of themselves as 'Asian' is revealing. It suggests the taking on of a 'new ethnicity'—Asian—one that is informed by dominant (Anglo) Australian perceptions of Asian ethnicities. These perceptions can be read as de-differentiating strategies that submerge cultural specificities under an inclusivist term. However, this new ethnicity is not simply imposed from 'outside'. It emerges in the space of ambivalence between self-articulation and ethnocentric categorisation. Audrey Yue writes:

*... the temporality of the 'Asian' people, as an objectified historical presence in Australia, is injected into a self-generative, self-constitutive (filmic and otherwise) space of production. This site of emergent consciousness ... is crucial as a point of departure towards writing the ethnography of a post-ethnic historicity, a historicity where being 'Asians in Australia' is a space caught in ambivalence between 'telling' and 'told', and 'here' and 'somewhere else'.<sup>11</sup>*

Bing's and Chau's articulation of themselves as 'Asian' can be read as an ambivalent strategy of, to borrow from the title of Yue's article, 'becoming Asian-Australian' in order to engage with the ethnocentric processes that place them in this category.

From Yue's writing another frame emerges: the process of inscribing 'Asians' into the national space of Australia. *Floating Life* can be positioned as such an inscription. I contend that *Floating Life* mobilises textual strategies that perform the inscription of Asians into this national space and further argue that this inscription engages with extra-textual discourses and histories as a highly fraught and ambivalent strategy. Further, *Floating Life* engages with and contests Anglocentric strategies of inscribing 'Asians in Australia'. I will examine this through two partial readings of Bing's anxieties.

Informing my readings are two premises. Firstly, cultural difference is always encoded in texts, even if it is not foregrounded as an 'issue'. Secondly, discourses that operate in the national landscape inform texts produced in this space, even if they are not explicitly articulated. I intend to examine the complexities of these two premises through the double move of looking for traces of these discourses and traces of their resistance through calling up a significant 'absence' in *Floating Life*: the absence of Anglo-Australians.

The absence of Anglo-Australians could be dismissed by the simple statement that the film is not about Anglo-Australians, but about the Chan family. Indeed, there are no significant individual Anglo-Australian characters. Anglo-Australians are backgrounded, forming a part of the social landscape that the Chans must negotiate. The backgrounding of Anglo-Australians could be read as a narrative strategy of de-centering Anglo-Australians by marginalising them in the narration of an 'Australia'. However, it is interesting to probe this absence further, situating it as a presence in the film—a presence that produces a number of possible meanings. This absent presence can be felt in Bing's negotiations of the Australian social landscape.

It is necessary at this point to refer to the few scenes where Anglo-Australians do appear. In most of these scenes, the Chans' encounters with Anglo-Australians are fairly innocuous: Chau flirts with the girl next door and is bemused by his sports class method of 'warming up'; Pa and his friend are served ice-cream by an Anglo waiter. Even Bing's workmates are shown to be friendly, and their encouragement (or pressuring?) of her to join them for drinks could be read as harmless behaviour, even though it is obviously threatening to her. The relatively innocuous encounters with Anglo-Australians contrast with Bing's perception of Australia as a dangerous space—articulated through her litany of dangers in the environment and her persistent evocation of a diseased society threatening to engulf her brothers. Given that Bing's perceptions are not backed up by narrative encounters, one could dismiss her perceptions as symptomatic of a paranoia or neurosis, or read them as psychic tensions produced in the space of liminality.<sup>12</sup> However, the disjuncture that emerges between Bing's perceptions and her encounters is revealing of both Bing's anxieties and the national space she negotiates, and suggests that the specificities of this national space—the informing discourses and histories—inform the specificities of her anxieties. Such a reading can open

out into a contingent re-reading of the Australian national space, and particularly the 'place' of 'Asians' within it.

Bing's perceptions of a threatening, degenerative, and hostile Australian society that does not correspond with (the representation of) the 'reality' of her encounters could be read as a representational reversal of the narrative of invasion, constituted by anti-Asian sentiments, that informs the construct of 'White Australia'. The historical reproduction of 'White Australia' mobilises a perceived threat of Asian/Chinese 'invasion' that has varying degrees of correspondence with any 'reality'. See, for example, Pauline Hanson's statement that Australia is being 'swamped by Asians'<sup>13</sup> when 'Asian-born migrants currently represent four percent of the population, hardly a case of 'swamping'.<sup>14</sup> However tenuous my reverse reading may seem, it articulates the disjuncture that emerges between 'reality' and its perception, and locates mobilised racism within this disjuncture. This disjuncture is enabled by the intersection of Bing's transnationality and her location in the Australian national space.

Another way of reading the disjuncture between Bing's perceptions and her encounters can take place through bringing in other discourses that inform her narrative. Bing's desire to succeed in the workplace—of 'doing so well in the white company' (Chau)—is in part motivated by economic insecurities that are contextualised in racial terms. In a revealing moment in Bing's voice over narration, her desires for a safe space are linked with these racialised economic insecurities:

*This is my second house. This is a one hundred per cent clean, tidy and secure house. I am saving up. I'll have two million Australian dollars so that even if the government goes bankrupt, and has no pension for us Asian immigrants, I'll have enough money 'til I am eighty. I won't have to beg for help. There isn't anyone to turn to for help.*

In spite of the seeming absence of Anglo-Australians in the film, Anglo-Australian presence, and histories and discourses of racialised discrimination, can be felt in Bing's evocation of 'Asian immigrants' as an economically marginalised category. This, in turn, can be seen to inform Bing's perceptions and the insecurities they generate. The significant impact that Bing's perceptions has on her mobility in the Australian landscape—culminating in her 'depression' that leaves her confined to her room—suggests both the restrictiveness that can emerge from transnational negotiations of space<sup>15</sup> and the restrictiveness that can emerge as a response to the pervasiveness of racialised, marginalising and racist discourses that operate in Australian society. The backgrounding of Anglo-Australians in the text can be read as a refusal to give a 'face' to these discourses. This refusal creates a disrupted and discomfiting position for Anglo-Australian viewers in that they/I am not given a 'representative' of Anglo-Australian racism from which they/I can distance them/myself. Such a desire for distance is present in David Stratton's assertion that, 'The film is made before the ignorant bigotry of racism became a political factor in this country'.<sup>16</sup> Presumably the figure of Pauline Hanson et. al. provides a face of racism that allows for 'well intentioned' distancing—distancing that produces an amnesia in Stratton that effectively effaces the historical operation and consolidation of racism in the production of the Australian nation (for

example, the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, the policy of taking indigenous children from their families, the colonisation of Australia itself ... ).<sup>17</sup> By refusing to give a face to racism, the disjuncture between Bing's perceptions and her encounters suggests that racism, or racialised discrimination, can be both more diffused, implicit in the social landscape, and structural (for example, locatable in government economics).

The subtle codings of racism that Bing negotiates are contrasted in *Floating Life* by the more overt racism that Yen, literally, faces. Yen's silent confrontation with a neo-Nazi skinhead in a carpark resonates with both the history and currency of Nazi thought and action which, although connections can and must be traced, takes on different meanings in Germany than it does in Australia. Juxtaposing this scene with Bing's anxieties draws attention to the textual strategies *Floating Life* employs that contextualise racialised and racist discourses within specific national spaces.

As I have argued, the idea of a Chinese diaspora is evoked in *Floating Life*, then contextualised by the national spaces within which the characters articulate their identity. I would now like to argue that China is a doubly inscribed site in the film that works to complicate the notion of a Chinese diaspora and suggests Hong Kong as an 'already transnationalised' site. The narrativisation of the movement of Mum and Pa from China to Hong Kong, and theirs and their children's movement from Hong Kong to Australia and Germany, complicates any singular notion of a homeland, or point of origin. Instead, this suggests a series of displacements that operates both as an historical trajectory (China ↔ Hong Kong ↔ Australia/Germany) and as a co-temporal operation of location and displacement. 'China' in this complex intersection is evoked as both an irretrievable site of originary displacement and as a displacing force in the present/future.

China is evoked as a site of originary displacement through Yen's voice over narration of her mother's journey from China to Hong Kong to meet her future husband, and through Pa's narration of his story of walking seven days and seven nights with his parents to Hong Kong (a journey which is placed in the larger context of refugees from mainland China). Pa's narration takes place in the chapter 'a house in China', where Pa talks with his 'Hong Kong friend' about their ancestral houses in China. While the two men's access to their ancestral houses are contextualised in legal terms (whether they still have legal rights to their houses), the film's access to Pa's house in China only takes place via a photograph of his friend's ancestral house. Multiple displacements are referred to here: through a discussion that takes place in a Sydney restaurant, about a house in China that can only be accessed through a photographic image of another house. In this way, the textual strategies of *Floating Life* displaces China through a series of displacements. This, and Pa's statement that he does not think he or his offspring will ever go back to the house in China, suggests that 'China' is irretrievable. This sense of China as irretrievable is partly resolved by its strategic translation into Australia. Pa's plans to establish a lotus pond and build a greenhouse to grow tea leaves in the garden of 'a big house', and Mum's calling upon the ancestors to help Bing, can be read as narrative strategies of performing strategic translations of traditions to effect a 'healing' from the psychic costs of displacement.<sup>18</sup>

'China' is evoked as a displacing force in the present/future through the references to the 1997 'hand over'. Gar Ming's question, 'Where will I be in 1997?' not only articulates his indecision over whether to join his parents in Australia, it also resonates with what could be called an 'ontological' question of 'What/will Hong Kong be in 1997?', if he were to remain in Hong Kong. Yen's attempts to articulate her cultural identity are met by refusals that emerge from the fraught intersection of language, physicality and national space:

*I don't even know if I should think of myself as Chinese. I was born in Hong Kong. I don't speak Mandarin. And soon Hong Kong won't be Hong Kong. The colour of my skin is yellow, not white. I speak German with an accent. I live in Germany ... but I'm not really German. Where is my home?*

The sense of a possible 'loss' of the 'homeland' of Hong Kong that is evoked by Gar Ming and Yen suggests the complexities and ambivalences of relations between China and Hong Kong. The contestations over the national space of Hong Kong within the context of inter/national transactions (a 'hand over' from British colonial 'ownership' to China) suggests that Hong Kong is 'already transnationalised'. Chris Berry, in a discussion of films made in Hong Kong and Taiwan in 1991, contextualises Hong Kong cinema's 'transnational hybridity'<sup>19</sup> within Hong Kong's position as a contested and competing site of negotiations of 'the forces of Chinese socialism, British imperialism and international capitalism'.<sup>20</sup> These intersecting forces contextualise Gar Ming's preoccupation with quantifying his experiences. His calculation of dates, the stockmarket and his ejaculations can be read as a desire to 'fix' meanings in a national landscape that is marked as an unstable, and soon to be transformed, site.<sup>21</sup>

The complexities and ambivalences of the characters' relationships to Hong Kong and China, and the complexities of the relation between these nations that they evoke, as well as Law's own complex history of migration<sup>22</sup> and her preoccupation with displacement in her work that bridges the two production spaces of Hong Kong and Australian cinema, both open out and situate the meanings of transnationality, diaspora and the national in their complex intersections.

## AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL CINEMA

Tom O'Regan's *Australian National Cinema* offers itself as an interesting example of the problems that emerge when a film like *Floating Life* is placed within the paradigm of a national cinema. *Floating Life* is located somewhat awkwardly in O'Regan's discussion of multicultural cinema, a sub-category within the larger frame of Australian national cinema. Law's place in O'Regan's discussion is revealing of a number of problems that emerge in placing Clara Law within the category of multicultural cinema. Having discussed at length Tracey Moffatt's work as 'exemplary' of multicultural cinema,<sup>23</sup> O'Regan writes:

*Film-makers like Pauline Chan, Monica Pellizari [sic] and Clara Law (Floating Life) are also creating a diasporic multicultural cinema—but they suffer the same problems as the mainstream—they can*

only ever be another instance or a significant variant of a larger international whole. Chan and Law of the diasporic Chinese/Asian cinema of North America, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Pellizzari [sic] of the Italian-American.<sup>24</sup>

There are a number of obvious problems with O'Regan's assertion of the 'larger international whole' of 'the diasporic Chinese/Asian cinema ...'. These include the undifferentiating strategy of grouping all the nations of Asia under this umbrella term; the metonymising strategy of conflating Asia and China, thus centralising China and rendering it as the primary signifier of Asia; ignoring the significant differences in film production in the US, Canada, Taiwan and Hong Kong, the places of 'Chinese/Asian' film-makers within these production contexts, and both the film-makers' and the nations' relationship to 'China'; and, further, the ignoring of the impossibility of such a 'whole' that is implicit in these differences. These problems aside, the afterthought status of this paragraph cannot be overlooked. While the joining of 'diasporic' with multicultural cinema could be read as a specifying move,<sup>25</sup> what follows is an effective dismissal of Law, Chan and Pellizzari within the category of multicultural cinema on the basis of their diasporic status.

This dismissal reveals two important tensions. Firstly, it suggests the resistance of multicultural cinema (and, in turn, Australian national cinema) to conditions that refer outside the national space. In their transnationality it would appear Law, Chan and Pellizzari disrupt the integrity of the national. It must be emphasised that this shared transnationality between the film-makers is an assumed one on O'Regan's part. His failure to look at any of these film-makers at length overlooks the significant differences between them. Secondly, the dismissal of these film-makers because of their diasporic status reveals a tension between the terms 'diasporic' and 'non-English speaking background' (NESB). Earlier in his discussion, O'Regan positions NESB peoples as the privileged producers of new cultural identities and multicultural cinema.<sup>26</sup> His dismissal of film-makers on the basis of their diasporic status suggests a disjunction between the 'non-English speaking background' and the 'diasporic', where *backgrounds* are more appropriate to the category of multicultural cinema than *location*, especially where it implies a *current* transnationality. This suggests the NESB is more easily assimilated into the national space (in that the non-English speaking can be left in the background), while the diasporic traverses this space. This is symptomatic of the ambivalence of multiculturalism, which, as Pugliese writes, marks both a break from, and a continuation of, assimilationist logic and policy.<sup>27</sup>

O'Regan asserts multicultural cinema as a productive space for the representation and negotiation of cultural difference and the foregrounding of hybridity in the production of these representations and of Australian cultural identity. This foregrounding of hybridity is disruptive of Anglo-hegemonic cultural representations and Anglocentric constructions of national identity.<sup>28</sup> O'Regan locates this disruption in his construction of a coalition between migrant, second-generation Australian and indigenous film-makers. However, I suggest that such a coalition is ambivalent in that it runs the risk of conflating these film-making positions.

The problematics of coalition and conflation of cultural differences are evident in O'Regan's writing on multicultural cinema, and are revealing of the tension between making explicit relations of power—that center Anglo-experiences, representations and identities—and submerging cultural difference. While O'Regan is careful to assert that multicultural cinema includes indigenous film-makers with migrant and second generation film-makers, not to subsume but to accommodate,<sup>29</sup> he does not unpack the implications of such an 'accommodation'. While indigenous film-making is significantly foregrounded through his discussion of Tracey Moffatt's work,<sup>30</sup> his analysis does not account for the specificities of indigenous film-making. These include subject matter, access to funding and technologies at the levels of production, distribution and exhibition, the tensions inherent in film technology as an appropriate media for indigenous storytelling, and the regional and cultural specificities within the term 'indigenous film-making'.<sup>31</sup> He also does not account for the specificities of indigenous film-making's marginalisation within Australian film production as it differs from migrant and second generation film-making. Further, migrant and second generation film-makers are conflated under the term 'diasporic'—which, I have argued, O'Regan uses to dismiss their significance—in a way that does not allow for the specificities of their particular experiences of migration and displacement, their particular cultural identities as well as the very different concerns (thematic and stylistic) that each take up in their films. These concerns point to the need for readings based not exclusively on their ethnicities and migrant status.

The effacement of specificity and the subsuming of difference that I have identified could be attributed to flaws in O'Regan's arguments and not the category of multicultural cinema he offers. However, I argue that the flaws in O'Regan's arguments are symptomatic of the problems of this category. This is evident in the containing imperatives of multiculturalism from which it emerges. Just as multiculturalism uses cultural diversity as an enunciative strategy to contain cultural difference and its enunciation,<sup>32</sup> multicultural cinema is a critical frame that delimits the ways in which certain texts and film-makers can be read and strives to make commensurable the differences within and between them.

The example of O'Regan's problematic coalition between migrant, second generation and indigenous film-makers (where something is always in excess of the frame) suggests the possibility of multicultural cinema operating as an umbrella term of convenience that submerges or effaces the specificities of ethnic, cultural and other differences and reads simply as shorthand for not-white. The excesses of indigenous and diasporic film-making—the specificities of indigenous storytelling that cannot be accommodated or accounted for in O'Regan's discussions; and the diasporic film-makers' references outside the frame of Australian national cinema and Australian national space—reverberate to call the category of multicultural cinema into question. They reveal the containing impulses of the category as it frames certain film-makers and texts.

By implication, this brings the category of Australian national cinema into question. I have argued that *Floating Life* does not fit the frame of Australian national cinema through its references to other national spaces and the conditions of transnationality and diaspora. Placing

*Floating Life* within the critical frame of Australian cinema not only reveals the limitations of reading *Floating Life* as an Australian text (and, by implication, Clara Law as an Australian film-maker), it also calls into question the containing imperatives of the category of Australian cinema. *Floating Life*'s disruption of the frame of Australian national cinema suggests that the imperative of critical frames based upon ideas of the national (in this case 'Australian') is one based upon the inscription of coherence—into both the national space and the national cinema—a coherence that elides and effaces difference and restricts critical engagement with texts that disrupt or transgress national borders.

## Endnotes

- 1 This chapter was originally part of a larger research project. Restrictions of space have prevented me from fully exploring the contextualising aspects of this work here. I would like to acknowledge Chris Berry, Leela Gandhi and Felicity Collins for their invaluable feedback on the original paper. I would like to thank Brian Flanagan for his critical insights and practical advice during the drafting of this chapter.
- 2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (rev. ed.), Verso, London, 1991.
- 3 Clara Law, 'Floating Life', interview with Chris Berry, *Cinema Papers*, no. 110, 1996, p.11.
- 4 Homi Bhabha, 'Interrogating Identity', *The Real Me: Postmodernism and the Question of Identity*, ICA Documents 6, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1987, p.5.
- 5 This is exemplified in the opening scenes. The film begins in a restaurant in Hong Kong as Mum, Pa, Chau and Yue prepare to leave for Australia. The yellowed interior of this scene set in Hong Kong is juxtaposed with an exterior shot in Australia, where the expansive outer suburb is saturated in harsh sunlight. While this shot establishes the family as having arrived in Australia, it also establishes Australia as significantly in contrast with Hong Kong. The juxtaposition of the two national landscapes that these two scenes effect suggests a strangeness about Australia – a strangeness that works to mark out at least one subject position of the film as other to, and othering of, the Australian landscape.
- 6 Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p.337.
- 7 Yen (Annette Shun Wah) moved away from Hong Kong ten years ago, settled in Germany with her German-born husband, Michael (Julian Pulvermacher), and has a child, Mui Mui (Claudette Chua). Bing (Annie Yip) moved to Australia seven years before. She establishes herself in a corporation and establishes a house for herself and her husband, Cheung (Bruce Poon), who joins her from Hong Kong three years later. Mum (Cecilia Lee) migrates from China to Hong Kong in 1949 to join Pa (Edwin Pang), her husband-to-be, who also migrated from China in 1949. *Floating Life* begins with Mum, Pa and their youngest sons Chau (Toby Chan) and Yue (Toby Wong) preparing to migrate to Australia to join Bing and Cheung. Gar Ming (Anthony Wong), the eldest son, remains in Hong Kong. He is to arrange the sale of his parents' house before joining his family in Australia.
- 8 Ien Ang, 'The Differential Politics of Chineseness' in Ghassan Hage and Lesley Johnson (eds.), *Identity/Community/Change, Communal/Plural*, no. 1, 1993, p.21.
- 9 *ibid.* pp.21-23.
- 10 Ang provides a useful discussion of the complex relations of language and cultural identity.
- 11 Audrey Yue, "'I am Like You, I am Different': Beyond Ethnicity, Becoming Asian-Australian', *Artlink* vol. 13, no. 1, 1993, p.20, emphasis added.
- 12 Hamid Naficy's analysis of phobic space in transnational films allows us to read Bing's anxieties as liminal panics arising from her experiences of transnationality (Hamid Naficy, 'Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre', *East West Film Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1994, pp.1-30).
- 13 Pauline Hanson, quoted in Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, 'Racial Suicide': The Re-Licensing of Racism in Australia', *Race and Class*, vol. 39, no. 2, 1997, p.4.
- 14 Perera and Pugliese, *op. cit.* p.4.
- 15 Naficy enables a reading of space in *Floating Life* as phobic in that external space is articulated by Bing as dangerous, hostile and ever-threatening to the inside spaces, while her attempts to control her inside spaces are examples of the ambivalence of claustrophobic space – her creation of 'a one hundred percent clean, tidy and secure house' becomes a space of entrapment.
- 16 David Stratton, in his introduction to the screening of *Floating Life* on SBS on 25 September 1997.
- 17 Clara Law comments on the fact that *Floating Life* was made before Pauline Hanson's infamous first speech in Parliament, yet she is often asked to respond to Hanson's rhetoric (Mark Naglazas, 'Law on Exiles', *West Australian*, 6 December, 1995, p.5). *Floating Life* was screened on SBS on 25 September 1997 as 'the movie of the week' in a week of



- programming entitled "I'm not a racist but..." This, and Stratton's comments, locates *Floating Life* as a text that circulates extra-textually in the production of meaning about Australian society. My engagement with Stratton's comments and the wider context of racism in Australian society is both an intervention in, and contribution to, this economy.
- 18 Rey Chow's unpacking of the relations between translation and tradition, enable us to see tradition as a 'handing over', a translation of culture (or particular cultural understandings) across generations. Tradition, understood in this way, is a process, and this process is dynamic. Tradition derives its meaning from its reproduction in the present, not from a fixed point in the past, thus it destabilises notions of 'traditional origins'. (See Rey Chow, 'Film as Ethnography; or, Translation Between Cultures in the Postcolonial World' in *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, pp.173- 202.)
- 19 Chris Berry, 'Heterogeneity as Identity: Hybridity and Transnationality as Foundational Myths in Hong Kong and Taiwan Cinema', *Metro*, no. 91, 1992, p.51.
- 20 *ibid.*, p.48. The idea that Hong Kong is already transnationalised is explored in Law's short film *Wonton Soup* (1994). This film explores the relationship between Ang, a woman from Hong Kong, and Adrian, a 'Chinese-Australian' man from Melbourne. In response to Ang implying that he is "not Chinese enough", Adrian learns ancient Chinese lovemaking techniques. The comic play of accessing 'Chineseness' through sex positions is contextualised by issues of displacement. The architectural landscape of Hong Kong evokes the complex intersection of British imperialism, international capitalism, and the question mark of the impending Chinese 'handover'. While Adrian is marked as obviously not belonging (by his Australian accent and loud 'surfie' fashions), Ang also expresses an ambivalence in her relationship to Hong Kong, suggesting it is not her place. Further, a sense of transnationality emerges through the fact that many of her friends and family have dispersed to other places. Interestingly, her transnationality emerges from her remaining in Hong Kong, and from the sense that Hong Kong is an unstable site of transforming meanings.
- 21 Meaning emerges for Gar Ming through the fear of a loss of generational connections – a fear that his parents may die before he sees them again, a fear that is realised symbolically in the abortion of his child.
- 22 The fact that Law has lived and/or worked in Macau, Hong Kong, London, New York and Australia undermines an understanding of Law's migration to Australia as the primary source of her transnationality.
- 23 Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, pp.326-30.
- 24 *ibid.* p.330.
- 25 Earlier in the same chapter, O'Regan examines the idea of Australia as a diasporic society and discusses the cinema that emerges from a 'diasporic logic' (pp.310-317). The restrictions of space prevent me from exploring the possibilities and problems with this aspect of O'Regan's project. Given that Clara Law appears in O'Regan's discussion of multicultural cinema, it seems appropriate to focus my discussion there.
- 26 O'Regan, *op. cit.* pp.324, 325 & 327.
- 27 Joseph Pugliese, 'Assimilation, Unspeakable Traces and the Ontologies of Nation' in Suvendrini Perera (ed.), *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities, Meridian*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1995, p.235.
- 28 O'Regan, *op. cit.* pp.324-26.
- 29 *ibid.* p.326.
- 30 *ibid.* pp.326-30.
- 31 In her essay for the Australian Film Commission, Marcia Langton examines the complexities and importance of these issues. (See Marcia Langton, 'Well I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television...': *An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking By and About Aboriginal People and Things*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney, 1993.)
- 32 See Homi Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, in particular pp.34-35. See also Homi Bhabha, 'The Third Space', interview with Jonathan Rutherford in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1990, pp.207-209.



# MOVING IMAGES

## The Films of Tracey Moffatt

### ... so far ...

CATHERINE SUMMERHAYES

**T**racey Moffatt works with secrets. She questions the secrets of story telling: who is telling, who is listening? She questions and confuses the secrets of aesthetic pleasure: who is looking, and why and how are we looking? She explores the secrets and riddles of artistic forms: when is a photograph a film? Am I the artist or my very art itself? Moffatt brushes up against all these secrets in her work and moves through them in her approach to a social secret which is very hard in the telling—how it is to be indigenous in Australia. This chapter draws a relationship between how Moffatt manipulates the story of this social secret through the texts of her art, and her acute understanding of how her own body and self can translate this secret, mimetically and sensually, across cultural boundaries. Moffatt not only works in the two media of film and photography but also watches for the places where the formal constraints of photography and film move towards each other and where this movement ends with a startling



UP IN THE SKY, TRACEY MOFFATT



apprehension of difference. Moffatt seems to look for the places where these forms work at their best and when they stumble. In Jean-Louis Comolli's words on the art of cinematic representation: 'what makes it falter makes it go'.<sup>1</sup>

In order to explore the secrets contained in Moffatt's work, secrets often held within narrative and where narrative is exploded as overwhelming image, this chapter discusses Moffatt's films in the context of her photographic art. There

is an ease in doing this because Moffatt herself talks about her art in terms of both media always informing each other: 'I am constantly thinking composition in a photographic sense, and framing and photographic textures are very important in my movies'.<sup>2</sup> And to quote Patricia Mellencamp: 'Every frame of her films is a composition, a portrait, a still life'.<sup>3</sup> Moffatt's films and photographic art work at the boundaries of vision: they ask many questions and provide few answers—so far.

'So far ...'—these two words are part of Moffatt's answer when asked about the nuns who hold up in the air a dark Aboriginal child in one image from her photoseries *Up in the Sky* (1997).

**Interviewer** 'This is just a purely visual thing? It has no deeper ... ?'

**Moffatt** 'Yes, so far. Well, people can read into it what they want ...'

**Interviewer** 'So it's the shape?'

**Moffatt** 'Maybe like mountains?'

This interchange appears in the 25 minute documentary by Jane Cole, *Up in the Sky: Tracey Moffatt in New York* (1999). Cole's short film centres around an exhibition of four of Moffatt's works at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York. *Up in the Sky* (1997) is a series of staged photographs using outdoor locations in rural Australia. *GUAPA (Good-looking)* (1995) features staged images of models playing 'Queens of the Roller Derby'. *Night Cries: - A Rural Tragedy* (1989) uses theatrically contrived studio sets and a heavily textured soundscape to tell a story of cross-cultural adoption. *Heaven* (1997) is a 28 minute video shot on hand held 8mm, featuring staged and unstaged footage of 'good looking' male surfers removing wet suits and otherwise 'changing' their clothes. Moffatt is the first Australian artist to exhibit in this prestigious venue, and to quote Anthony Grant of Pace Gallery, New York in Cole's film, this exhibition meant she was '... coming in at the top'.

Ever in control of any medium within her reach, in the interview quoted above, Moffatt addresses a look to the camera after the words 'Yes, so far...' which also 'speaks' volumes, an 'if he believes this, he'll believe anything' kind of look—which makes a visual image of



what she goes on to say, in other words—‘well, what do you think?’ This exchange makes very clear one of the secrets Moffatt will not ‘tell’. She will not tell you the ‘ending’. She will set the stage for you, give you the people, but she will not provide narrative closure. Moffatt’s visual and audiovisual images invite the viewer to tell the story. In her photographic work this invitation, although demanding, can be taken in the viewer’s own time, with eyes able to roam back and forth over a series of framed pictures, with images often described as if ‘stills’ from a film, but a film which has never been made. Stylistically, the ‘clues’ to the secret are presented both as internal montages of colour, landscape (both ‘found’ and artificial), objects, people and parts of people which are placed within every frame, and also through the moving montage of these images in film and in the serial placement of her photographs within photoserries. Her photoserries link images which are rich in the many suggestions of narrative film.

Moffatt plays with another secret—the much theorised gap between the ‘represented’ and the ‘real’. Michael Taussig<sup>4</sup> explores this gap in his work on Cuna and Embera spirit figures in Central America. He conceptualises these figures through a detailed discussion of the ‘mimetic faculty’, which he describes after Benjamin<sup>5</sup> as two fold i.e. ‘... a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived’. Taussig’s description offers an understanding of Moffatt’s work as an exercise of the ‘mimetic faculty’, where images provoke a sensual way of ‘knowing’ the secrets which lie in the gap between the ‘real’ people and things which she photographs and films, and the ‘really’ staged settings of both photographs and films which constitute the ‘represented’, rich with the stories she asks you to tell yourself. And Moffatt often fills this gap between



the 'real' and the 'represented' with her own body. She re-presents her own self as artistic content. Via interviews and published diary excerpts<sup>6</sup> she also employs a carefully controlled presentation of her own words and images in order to describe herself and her work. Moffatt explicitly uses her own body as model in the photoseries *Something More, Pet Thang* (1991) and *Scarred for Life* (1994) and 'plays' the young Ruby who is based on her own mother, in her feature film *beDevil* (1993). Moffatt is a 'performance artist'<sup>7</sup> in the sense that she uses her own explicitly recognisable body in her artistic practice. In her discussion of performance artists, Rebecca Schneider draws on both Taussig and Benjamin in order to describe this experience of viewing the explicit body in performance as follows: 'The secret is that the viewer and viewed are entangled in sensuous contact, sensuously complicit in the scene—bodies are engaged'.<sup>8</sup>

In Jane Cole's documentary we see a billboard advertising Moffatt's exhibition at the Dia Center. This billboard features Moffatt depicted as a war correspondent, in her own words:

*And it's all about life being a battle. There is swamp, and I'm carrying everything, and I'm dodging bullets. Life's a battle. Don't you think?*

Again Moffatt has placed her own body as photographic model. Her work is not, even in this last instance, simple self-portraiture. It verges more towards the artistic practice of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo who painted her own image over and over. Harjit Kaur Khaira describes Kahlo and her work as '... a nexus of diverse currents and multiple identities, being *herself* a product of interacting histories and colonialisms'.<sup>9</sup> Such a description can



also be applied to Moffatt with similar implications for understanding her photography and films. Moffatt's persistent use of self as model also recalls the photography of Cindy Sherman who uses her own body to inscribe the conflicts and conversations about gender which exist in patriarchal society. Like Sherman, Moffatt often works as a feminist 'performance artist' using her own 'explicit' body in performance. But in Moffatt's work, as in Kahlo's art, we are watching (and 'hearing' in Moffatt's films) the work of an artist who frequently uses her own actual body to mark the existence and history of a particular colonialism. Moffatt's uses of her own Aboriginal woman's body persistently confronts the viewer with a 'literal' presentation of indigenous Australia, and in Schneider's words: 'To render literal is to collapse symbolic space'.<sup>10</sup> After Benjamin, Schneider describes this 'collapse of symbolic space' as producing 'dialectical images', and she names the problems involved with using such images as follows:

*The challenge in engaging dialectical images seems to lie somewhere between—a space at once exceedingly private, full of located and personal particulars of reading, and radically public, full of socially inscribed dreamscapes, pretexts for reading. The crack of this space between the personal particular and the socially inscribed is a fraught space.<sup>11</sup>*

This 'fraught space' is claimed by much of Moffatt's work—not only through the use of her own body but in the sense that she also uses other people's bodies as she uses her own—as 'props' and 'faces'. In talking about making the film *beDevil*, where she takes the part of the younger Ruby, Moffatt says that she conceived of '... people almost as props in this movie. I used myself as a prop too'.<sup>12</sup> Before reaching further into the films and photography of Tracey Moffatt, it is necessary then to make some biographical comment in order to make clearer the stories and images of 'self' which Moffatt uses to create the dialectical images, the open narratives, which form her art.



Moffatt's mother was Aboriginal and with three of her siblings she was fostered by a 'white' woman who already had a large family. This fostering was an amicable arrangement, according to Moffatt, who is quoted by Sebastian Smee as saying: 'My real Mum lived in town and would come and visit occasionally. But she wasn't one for looking after kids, for raising her own kids at all'.<sup>13</sup> Smee goes on to say: 'She has described both her mothers, however, as strong role models who grounded her in Aboriginal and white culture'.<sup>14</sup> Moffatt's own words describe best how she places herself and her art within the traffic of cross-cultural exchange between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia:

*I was always very—I still am, kind of—political. But I wanted to make my own images, and not work on political documents. I always had my own stories to tell. I remember a few radical Aboriginal leader-types in the early days saying to me, 'Do what you want.' And I just needed to hear that.<sup>15</sup>*

John McDonald who reviewed her photoseries *Up in the Sky* remarks on her explicit ambition to seek acceptance '... as a contemporary artist, not as an exponent of Aboriginality. Yet all her work seems to have a strong autobiographical component, no matter how fictionalised the final product'.<sup>16</sup> It is surely a truism to say that all art is informed by the autobiography of the artist, but I think McDonald is referring to more than the fact that Moffatt's art is informed by her own history. He is commenting on how Moffatt explicitly uses her own history to make her narratives.

In *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987), two young Aboriginal women get an older white man drunk and take his money, and Moffatt says, 'I used to do it, I used to do it with my sisters ... we're not little angels'.<sup>17</sup> This film also says about Aboriginal women—'We're not always victims either'. Moffatt describes the evolving story of *Night Cries* as follows:



*I was raised by an older white woman and the script became quite a personal story. The little girl who appears in some of the flashback sequences looks a lot like me. That was quite intentional.*<sup>18</sup>

Moffatt says about *beDevil*: 'The stories are inspired by family ghost stories I heard as a child, stories which come from both sides of my background—my white relatives as well as my black relatives'.<sup>19</sup> The relationship between the video *Heaven* and Moffatt's explicit use of self is more complex and less successful.

In Jane Cole's documentary Moffatt describes the genesis of *Heaven* in a house in a beach-side suburb where she was writing a film script, and was left alone during the day while her companion went to work:

*... I was, just like, bored? So I started to film these guys taking their clothes off just out the window ... I shot it on video 8, home video, very shaky camera, I wanted it to look like a bored housewife shot it.*<sup>20</sup>

In this video, the camera operator is 'staged' in Moffatt's words as 'a bored housewife'. But who is looking? Sexual violence is implicit to this film, with its visual comments on and intrusions into male bodies which are completely anonymous and possibly non-consenting as far as the viewer is concerned. There is also a violent collapse of viewing categories, reminiscent of the 'cooking segment' in *beDevil*, and which can be understood in terms of the question—is an 'outside' viewer intended for this work? Who is this work meant for: the film-going public, the 'art world' or just the people who made this film? These questions are better situated in *beDevil* where they lie integrated in a larger work which takes many viewing positions. *Heaven* was produced as a project for the Dia Center for Art in New York. Ronin Videocover has released it. With no credits assigned to camera-operators or to the participating male surfers, this film certainly 'falters' from Moffatt's intention to 'stage' the camera operator as a 'bored housewife'. It is not clear from the film itself whether or not the camera operator is male or female. This confusion invites much other confusion about the power relations involved in the making and viewing of this film. *Heaven* points not to Moffatt's exploration of the nexus between photography and film so much as to an uncertainty about the meeting place between film, with all its history and conventions (which include the *avant garde*), and audiovisual work which is more usually understood as 'video installations'.

The 'telling' of the stories in Moffatt's films is often dominant to narrative. The people who tell the stories seem more interesting to Moffatt, and in her own words: 'Clever plots with twists and turns are never what I go for. *BeDevil* is like this: we are with these characters, we are going to hang out with them for a while and we see what they get up to'.<sup>21</sup> There is little character development in Moffatt's films, they are simply there doing things. Motivation is often a mystery. Moffatt focuses on *what* people are doing, rather than *who* they are. In this sense, her characters are wearing 'masks', the 'masks' of their own actions and their relationship with other people, things and landscapes. And these characters might want to show us something quite different from the ending of the story. In *beDevil*'s second story,



we are taken on a picnic to the site of the now abandoned house of Ruby's haunting and introduced to the older Ruby's netball team. This sequence, filmed on location in Charleville, is styled around the popular cliché of the television 'cooking segment'. The story of the haunting continues to be told but seems secondary to the vibrancy of the 'bush cooking segment'—why? What other stories are being told here? Moffatt largely disregards and subverts the traditional progression and tension of narrative and playfully explores

the difference between those two traditional narrative devices in film, edited montage and deep focus within a shot. There is a wonderful image in the 'cooking segment' where she extravagantly plays with montage within the shot as a narrative vehicle by using a zoom lens to provide deep focus on one of the distant images within the shot. The wriggling snake can only be distinguished as that when the camera mimics the action of the human eye and changes focus. Using internal and edited montage, deep focus, changing focus and continuity shifts which recall Gilles Deleuze's description of 'aberrant movements and false continuity shots' in his discussion of 'the time-image' in cinema,<sup>22</sup> Moffatt layers story over story over story.

Jean-Louis Comolli describes 'the capturing power of a fiction' as relying 'on the fact that its fictive character is known and recognised from the start, that it is above all an apparatus of deception and thus that it postulates a spectator who is not easily but *difficultly* deceivable ... one who is complicit, willing to "go along"'.<sup>23</sup> In her films and photoseries, with their many juxtapositions of the 'real' (address to camera, 'found' sets) and the 'unreal' (obviously constructed sets, fantasy sequences), Moffatt seems to seize on Comolli's performative view of the spectator to persistently ask over and over again that the spectator play what Comolli describes as 'the game' of the spectacle.<sup>24</sup> This persistent questioning draws the spectator eventually past the spectacle towards another kind of question, a question about content and finally about the communication implicit in Moffatt's work i.e. why this particular spectacle? Towards what communicative act is this extravagantly styled work moving? Many have described the luxurious use of colour, movement and sound through which Moffatt 'paints' all her artistic canvases. Gael Newton speaks of 'the allure of her rich and generous surfaces and scenarios'<sup>25</sup> but it is both beyond and with style that one must proceed from Moffatt's work as text towards the historical world upon which she comments with her work. Moffatt works through what Adrian Martin calls 'a variety of excessive economies'<sup>26</sup> where the very excesses themselves are necessary in order to understand what Martin describes as 'the *communicative* function of style'.<sup>27</sup>



In order to more closely describe the ‘communicative function’ of Moffatt’s stylistic practice, it is interesting to consider how Rey Chow understands the anthropological device of ethnography as a new way to open up the way fiction films can be understood as discourse about society/culture. Using Benjamin’s insights on literary translation<sup>28</sup> Chow conceptualises a ‘new ethnography’ based on the ‘translatability’ which belongs to a culture. In Chow’s words this new ethnography ‘... is possible only when we turn our attention to the subjective origins of ethnography as it is practiced by those who were previously ethnographized and who have, in the postcolonial age, taken up the active task of ethnographizing their own cultures’.<sup>29</sup> Chow develops this argument further using Laura Mulvey’s seminal concept of feminine ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’<sup>30</sup> to say that the way a culture which has been ‘ethnographized’ by another culture comes to talk about itself is in the very terms in which it has been previously described/ethnographized. Chow asks the following question: ‘How are the “subjective origins” of the previously ethnographized communicated in *visual* terms?’<sup>31</sup> She answers this question by describing how cultures use ‘... the visuality that once defined the “object” status of the ethnographized culture and that now becomes a predominant aspect of that culture’s self-representation’.<sup>32</sup> People from all over the world have ethnographized Australian Aboriginal culture almost ad nauseam. Moffatt’s work makes direct allusion to this in the film *beDevil* in the ‘cooking segment’ when a reclining woman with a glass of cool white wine shoos away the camera with ‘shoo, don’t do that!’ Although ethnographic film-making seems the most obvious target, this admonition can be directed towards the intrusiveness of any ethnography which does not engage in a dialogue between the language and culture of the ‘viewer’ and ‘viewed’, ‘translator’ and ‘translated’.

If in sympathy with Chow's work I replace the word 'languages' with 'cultures' in the following quote from Benjamin's essay, translation becomes a particularly poignant process in relation to Moffatt's films: 'Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages'.<sup>33</sup> Translation is a poignant process and concept in terms of indigenous cultures because it is directed outwards to other cultures and inwards towards a reconceptualisation of the translator's culture, and this act of translation is performed from within a very unequal set of power relations often named 'postcolonial'. I would rather call this set of power relations, specifically as they occur in contemporary Australia, 'because of colonial'—they are the inescapable set of relations set up through colonisation, and they continue to be played out. As Taussig points out: 'Colonial history too must be understood as spiritual politics in which image-power is an exceedingly valuable resource'.<sup>34</sup> This observation is critical in considering Tracey Moffatt's visual and audio-visual work as a process of cross-cultural translation.

In *Night Cries*, Moffatt explores the tragedy of the 'stolen generation'<sup>35</sup> via a simple presentation of characters that are engaged in the 'universal' drama of a daughter looking after a dying mother. But the mother is white and the daughter is black and such a relationship cannot happen without an adoption between races and, in Australia, the reference to Government assimilation policies is inescapable. Moffatt says she started out with an idea of presenting this film as an aftermath from the story of Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda* (1955), where Jedda does not topple over a cliff with her lover but lives to reconcile/put up with her relationship with her adoptive white mother. Despite her decision to concentrate more on the complexity of mother/daughter relations with specific reference to her own experience, the different-race characters are still there and need to be accounted for in any interpretation of this film. Moffatt's powerful use of 'translation' is never more clear than in this film—the movement between two cultures is actually the simultaneous act of the telling of two stories. The movement between cultures can be described more as an over-laying or blurring, where the blurring becomes the image of movement itself, calling to mind Moffatt's use of blurring to suggest movement in 'Mother's Day, 1975' in *Scarred for Life* (1994) and *GUAPA (Good Looking)*, where the image of movement turns the idea of photographs as 'film stills' into photographs as 'still films'.

In *Night Cries*, the autobiographical story of mother and daughter belongs to indigenous and non-indigenous Australia, and is told at the same time as the story of what it is like to be on the indigenous side of the equation of race relations in Australian society. Meaghan Morris writes of the characters in this film:

*The mother here is not a wicked, selfish woman, or a cruel stepmother : she's been a loving mother, her whiteness is not a fault or a personal crime, and the nation-building history that has forced these women's lives together has also created bonds of love and dependency at the core of their shared existence ...*<sup>36</sup>

Morris describes how this film uses women's lives and domesticity to tell '... how the burden of history actually feels, and where it falls, most of the time'.<sup>37</sup>

Moffatt throws the vulnerability of her characters back at the viewer, often using what Paul Willemen calls the 'fourth look' of the cinema, 'the look at the viewer',<sup>38</sup> where the filmed person looks back at the camera, in a way that is analogous to the 'direct address' of the theatre. Moffatt's use of this 'fourth look' is so sophisticated and stylised in *beDevil* that it is not even clear that it is the viewer who is being addressed. This 'look to the camera-operator' rather than to the viewer perhaps constitutes another look<sup>39</sup> in film, a 'look' which is most prevalent in



ethnographic forms of documentary film-making. Another parody? Probably, but one which calls into play all the notions of voyeurism that have bedevilled the theorising of film and photography. In the film *Heaven*, with its explicitly intrusive camera work, it is possible that Moffatt takes this parody of ethnographic film to an extreme. Felicity Fox's soundscape with its 'new age' renditions of male ritual music, presumably both 'found' and composed, short-circuits the viewer into an interpretation of 'surfing' as contemporary 'men's business', an interpretation which can and should be challenged, although not in this article, but which certainly feeds the process of parody. Fox's contribution in *Night Cries* provides a much more complex marriage of image and sound than the simplistic evocation of menace and ritual in *Heaven*.

In all her work, Moffatt draws us inexorably into her own act of translation between cultures, gender and class. Moffatt uses her own private body in the public sphere of her art, and similarly she exposes her use of the camera as a device to speak in public about very private things. This setting of the private sphere against the public sphere calls to mind Timothy Corrigan's conception of political 'terrorism' with regard to film. Corrigan, after Erving Goffman, claims that 'embarrassment' is a device that can unsettle the viewing situation via misappropriation of the categories 'private' and 'public'. In Corrigan's words: 'Unlike public shame or social shock (especially of the avant-garde kind), embarrassments, for oneself or for others, suggest the emotional pain or awkwardness of not knowing about a socially hidden part of oneself or about some unknown public truth or mores'.<sup>40</sup> Moffatt is usually a gentle terrorist, allowing one to laugh at one's own embarrassment rather than cry. This can be a wise manoeuvre in the task of cultural translation—with laughter the distress is manageable and the viewer still capable of different ways of 'looking'. Moffatt has two heritages, one white and one black. She needs and uses both heritages particularly to create her translation of indigenous culture towards non-indigenous culture. Moffatt shows through her visual art, films and spoken and written texts that there is more than one way of looking at representations of people and culture. This 'more than one way of looking' which she offers to the receivers of her work, is achieved stylistically in several ways, all of which are underlaid with humour. Cultural *diches* are turned on their heads by visual and verbal means as exemplified by *beDevil*'s 'shoo—don't do that!' to the camera. Stereotypes

are disallowed through a mockery in *Nice Coloured Girls*, a film which explicitly plays with the binaries involved in the act of making up cultural stereotypes, using what Karen Jennings describes as '... a dynamic interplay between a number of binary oppositions: nice girls/nasty girls; white culture/black culture; the past/the present; predator/prey; exploiter/exploited'.<sup>41</sup>

The stories of colonisation, which underlie Moffatt's first three fiction films, are full of what Taussig calls 'the virtual wordlessness of pain'.<sup>42</sup> *Nice Coloured Girls* layers photographs and maps and body-parts (black women's legs climbing a rope ladder) with filmed sequences of the girls having a good time and 'fleecing' the white man—and it is obvious he is having a good time too. Of Moffatt's three films, this first one most clearly says that 'this has happened before, in some way, and it happens now'. In all three films Moffatt challenges the role of Aboriginal as victim in history by giving positive, sometimes eccentric, agency to all her characters, whilst exposing the chilling terror in which this agency had to operate. It is this agency of the individual of Aboriginal heritage which impresses the first time viewer of Moffatt's three films, and with the exception of the young and old Mr Chuck in the first segment of *beDevil*, this agency is also gendered as woman. In Tom O'Regan's words: 'In remembering and foregrounding Aboriginal white sexual and familial relations in *Nice Coloured Girls* and *Night Cries* she claims a positive heritage, an identity and Aboriginal women's agency snatched from this awful history'.<sup>43</sup>

Moffatt's work meets what Edward Said describes as a need to place individual stories and identities within '... a geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict'.<sup>44</sup> Moffatt's work is not didactic, it invites the imagination, and it tells a story but never the ending. How can there ever be an ending to what Nicholas Thomas calls 'cross-cultural traffic'<sup>45</sup> when this term expands to describe so much of human interaction? Tracey Moffatt's work is a glorious celebration of the human form and the human capacity to tell stories, often stories emerging from a concept named Aboriginality, which in Marcia Langton's words is '... a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation'.<sup>46</sup> Her images and sounds have running through them a meta-story of how it is to live in a 'settler' nation. This meta-story may be one reason why her work calls so strongly to that other mega settler nation, the United States of America.<sup>47</sup> This story is about 'unsettlement', and to quote Nicholas Thomas: 'If the settler nations have been persistently "unsettled", they are more so, and irreversibly so, today'.<sup>48</sup> Moffatt's work inscribes the migrations and encounters which Australian society continually processes, and her work well meets the challenge that Said describes as follows:

*The fact is, we are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of. To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is, I believe, the intellectual and cultural challenge of the moment.*<sup>49</sup>

There is no invective in Moffatt's exploration of race relations in Australia, and no short, sharp shocks. The shock is cumulative and it reaches far into the task of destroying racial and cultural stereotypes, the *cliches* which Australian society has used to describe itself and over which battle those fair and dark skinned people who want to explore the cultural satisfaction and aesthetic beauty which is inscribed as the difference in the colour of their skin. Moffatt uses the camera explicitly in its function as Benjamin's 'mimetic machine', where, in Michael Taussig's words, the camera can create '... a roller-coasting of the senses dissolving science and art into a new mode of truth-seeking and reality-testing',<sup>50</sup> words which remind me of Moffatt's claim on the avant-garde: 'Yes I am Aboriginal, but I have the right to be *avant-garde* like any white artist'.<sup>51</sup> And in this space created by notions such as *avant-garde* we can trace in Moffatt's work the 'flexing of muscles', the awakening of spirited artistry already 'at home', comfortable and yet impatient with technologies which have allowed new ways of un-telling old stories. Moffatt makes the strange become familiar, recalling again the words of Michael Taussig recalling Walter Benjamin: 'And it is here, in this transgressed yet strangely calm new space of debris, that a new violence of perception is born of mimetically capacious machinery'.<sup>52</sup>

## Endnotes

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- 3 Patricia Mellencamp, 'An Empirical Avant-Garde. Laleen Jayamanne and Tracey Moffatt' in Patrice Petro, (ed.), *Fugitive Images. From Photography to Video* (ed.), Indian University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995, p. 179.
- 4 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: a particular history of the senses*, Routledge, New York, 1993, pp. 19-32.
- 5 Taussig understands this ability in terms of Walter Benjamin's concept of the 'optical unconscious' described in Benjamin's essay, 'A Small History of Photography' in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edward Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, New Left Books, London, 1979 pp.240-57. Also see the essay 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (1933) in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, Peter Demetz (ed.), trans. Edmund Jephcott, Schocken Books, New York, 1986 pp.333-336.
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- 19 Tracey Moffatt in Conomos and Caputo, op.cit. p.28.
- 20 Tracey Moffatt in Jane Cole *Up in the Sky: Tracey Moffatt in New York* (1999).
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# FEMINIST ALLEGORY and Queer Australian Cinema

## INTERVIEWS WITH ANN TURNER

SALLY HUSSEY

‘It’s exciting to show a multiplicity of sexualities’! Ann Turner affirms the somewhat new relationship of queer sexuality and Australian Cinema. Not only pointing to the lacunae of lesbian representation in mainstream Australian Cinema, Turner’s enthusiasm to represent ‘a multiplicity of sexualities’ also signals an appreciation of the active exclusion of lesbianism in Australian screen narratives. Poetic refractions of the normal and the everyday, Turner’s narratives engage parable and parallelisms to bring into question the unmarked status of masculinity and heterosexuality in Australian cinema; a cinema where an emphasis on myth and masculinity has largely excluded representations of queer sexuality. Inasmuch as Turner’s films seek to explore, to use her words, ‘female worlds’ through a feminist lens, they also share in a critique of iden-



ANN TURNER

tity, a critique which resonates with the aims of queer theory—to distrust and disrupt all identity categories.

While I cannot adequately address queer theory in a chapter of this length, I would like first to address two key ‘defining’ points.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, queer theory reveals the arbitrariness of the mirrored relation of gender, sex and sexuality within what Judith Butler has called a ‘heterosexual matrix’. In effect this exposes the mutual construction of homosexuality in the formation of a ‘seamless’ and supposedly ‘natural’ heterosexual identity.<sup>3</sup> In other words, a heterosexual identity is only ever constructed by and through the homosexual ‘other’ and *vice versa*; as such, queer theory asserts that all identities are exclusionary, as the shadowy ‘other’ seeks to undermine the claim to a seamless ‘whole’. Secondly, queer film theory no longer questions how a lesbian *looks* within the strictures of sexual difference, but more *how* she looks. As Teresa de Lauretis has importantly argued, the question is not merely the emphasis on lesbian visibility in the cinema, as it is to question and extend conditions of visibility.<sup>4</sup> This chapter seeks to forge a link between queer theory and Ann Turner’s allegorical narratives. By questioning the exclusion of homosexuality in Australian Cinema<sup>5</sup> and by inserting the lesbian within the so called national, rather than affirm an explicit lesbian identity, Turner’s films *question and extend conditions of visibility*.

Exploring personal interviews with Ann Turner in concert with her films, I will discuss her emergence from a feminist filmmaking aesthetic, exemplified by her first feature *Celia* (Ann Turner, 1988). Through her shift to embrace queer issues in *Dallas Doll* (Ann Turner, 1994), I want to explore the emergence of queer from *and* within feminism.<sup>6</sup> More than a rhetorical strategy, my focus on the allegorical construction of these narratives will suggest that less than collide, queer extends feminist concerns with the cinema, a point which is often overlooked in feminist criticisms of queer theory.

## FEMINISM

Before discussing Turner’s films in relation to queer theory, it is first necessary to map the feminist beginnings of her film-making and the feminist theme of her narratives. In her approach to film-making, Turner states, ‘one of the things that has been really important to me is putting women on the screen as central characters and telling their stories’.<sup>7</sup> The strength of these characters is their resolute self-belief in a world that seeks to distrust such notions. For example, Rosalind (Victoria Longley) in *Dallas Doll* and Pat (Mary-Anne Fahey) in *Celia* move from their stifling positions in their suburban family lives to resolute and bold figures, albeit in the historical surroundings of 1990s and 1950s respectively. Rosalind abandons her inner Sydney middle class suburb for her Aunt Mary’s (Alethea McGrath) farm. This shift echoes, to use Turner’s words, her ‘discovery that she is a lesbian’, but more importantly, that ‘she is someone who has found her own voice’. Alternately, in *Celia*, Pat questions the anti-communist and anti-feminist politics her husband Ray (Nicholas Eadie) embodies. She forms a friendship with her neighbour Alice (Victoria Longley<sup>8</sup>), a member of the communist party who challenges its own problematic relation to women.



The bonding between women provides the impetus for challenging the existing, unequal structure of the ‘family’.<sup>9</sup>

However, these narratives not only question the position of the feminine within the family, but also open up the possibility of finding her voice within a national cinema. It could be argued that much of Australian cinema has tended toward the view of history as a universal, masculine prerogative. Indeed, this view of history is evident in Turner’s own adaptation of Alan Marshall’s short stories in her second feature as director, *Hammers Over the Anvil* (1992).<sup>10</sup> Under the weight of a colonial history, the mythologisation of the land has marked national identity in film. The colonial landscape and narrative setting of *Hammers Over the Anvil* easily segues into this defining metaphor of the national. Set during the turn of the last century, the story of a crippled boy, Alan’s (Alex Outhred), struggle with the idea of becoming a great horseman provides the necessary difference from which an Australian masculinity—one which overcomes the exigencies of a harsh land and distant empire—is forged. What *Celia* achieves, by contrast, is not only the possibility of the feminine to find a voice amongst a largely masculinist genre, but, more importantly, suggests Turner’s ability to re-read the trope of history in Australian film. Turner states:

*I like the sort of complexity that history can have but particularly re-reading history. In a sense something like [Hammers Over The Anvil] is a lot straighter because there’s not hard history in that film. It’s the setting of the film [that makes it historical], I mean it’s an historical film but ...it doesn’t critique history in any way. Whereas Celia ...is a retelling of that history. It looks at such a personal view of the fifties, which is far more one, I think, that becomes a history of childhood too.<sup>11</sup>*



Turner draws out the distinction between official narrative—history—and personal narrative—biography—as a way of retelling history in Australian film.<sup>12</sup> This is marked in *Celia* by the girl's relationship to her father. In the narrative setting of 1950s Australia, Celia's family attend matinee feature films, previewed by newsreels. As Celia watches footage of a rabbit that has contracted the myxomatosis virus—a virus introduced to quell the rabbit population—she asks her father, Ray, 'Why is it blind?' The newsreel narration asserts the successful eradication of the 'vermin' in the 'battle to save our precious land', a success her father lauds in the narrative (drawing a metonymic relation of the paternal/masculine to the national). Celia's vision, however, reveals a pivotal axis through which the film redefines such history through a personal lens.

The reworking of history and auto/biography is achieved in the film largely through the theme of secrecy. Having the ability to signify an intimacy between women—a theme which, as I will later discuss, is reworked in *Dallas Doll*—a secret between women compounds the connection between auto/biography and history or, personal and political narratives. Celia sinks a treasure chest full of her granny's (Margaret Ricketts) belongings, which Turner suggests, represents Celia's 'world away from what she sees as a rather cruel environment in her home'. For, as she elaborates, 'secret places are ones where the outside world can't hurt you as easily'.

The narrative follows Celia's journey from the loss of her grandmother, to the loss of her neighbour, Alice, to the loss of her pet rabbit, Murgatroyd. Illustrating the convergence of personal/political narratives, Granny is represented as an avowed communist and feminist, evident in the photographs Celia keeps of her attending a rally of the 'International Women Against War'. Alice echoes these identifications in the narrative revealed by the intimacy she shares with Celia and by her political views. Speaking to the marginalisation of women in the communist party, Alice stands against a male member's viewpoint at a group meeting in her home. Celia's pet rabbit, Murgatroyd, moreover, metaphorically represents the fear of a communist invasion—the 'red plague' that threatened the national psyche in the 1950s—exemplified by the newsreel footage of the successful rabbit cull.

In light of this, after the confiscation of her rabbit by her Uncle, the authoritarian Sgt John Burke (William Zappa), Celia and her mother confront the government to reclaim Murgatroyd. On a broader scale, what this achieves is to expose the Bolte government's hypocrisy in the confinement of pet rabbits to eradicate the 'plague'. In expanding the narrative's feminist theme, Turner here re-signifies the usual understanding of the untroubled veneer of Australia's suburban expanse during the 1950s. She states:

*I see the mother as [representative of] that very middle class Australia of the fifties where everything difficult was just ... swept under the carpet. So it is her story of actually at one level having to communicate enough and face things enough to be able to protect her child. The mother changes when she actually protests to get the rabbit back. She starts to change, she starts to break out of that conformity.*

It is through this 'unconformity' that she is able to keep the ultimate secret, Celia's murder of her Uncle John. Turner continues:

*By the time she realises what Celia has done, she's well down that path of actually finding her voice and finding her position and not just playing the good wife and the ineffectual mother role. She's actually playing a much more radical role. That allows her to keep that secret.*

'[Making] women feel empowered when they leave the cinema', Turner's feminist film-making engages in retelling of Australian history where a secret is 'definitely a place of strength.'

## ALLEGORY

The allegory of the Hobyahs extends the feminist discourse in *Celia*. The Hobyahs are creatures that surface at night; slimy and dark, they carry off a 'little old lady' in a sack. A dog barks, which sends a signal of her capture to her husband, the 'little old man'. Yet, to stop him from barking, the little old man quite promptly lops off the dog's tale. But the dog continues to bark as the Hobyahs return and burn down the old man's house. So he 'took off [the dog's] head'. The dismemberment of the dog rather barbarically signifies the man's destruction, the loss of his wife and his home brought about through his failure to listen. Upon, realising this, he then reassembles the dog and saves the old woman from her capture.

Capture and invasion: the fairy story finds its parallel meaning with the confiscation of Celia's rabbit in the eradication of the 'plague'.<sup>13</sup> Celia returns to claim her rabbit but finds Murgatroyd drowned in a drinking trough in the overpopulated zoo enclosure. Yet, she refuses the gift of a dog from her Uncle John, responsible for stealing away her rabbit during the night. Cannily resembling a Hobyah, John's dark blue police uniform takes on a slimy spongy surface as Celia pokes a rifle tip into him. As his monstrous head turns toward Celia, she shoots him. Dressed in her mother's clothes and make-up, Indian stripes across her face and draped with 'stolen' jewellery—an assemblage of both western and noir fantasies that

she consumes at matinee film screenings—Celia runs from the crime with Heather (Claire Couffie). She takes the dog to the quarry, ties it to a tree and leaves it barking.

Unlike the parable, Celia's mother hears the barking dog and understands her daughter has committed the murder. In contrast, then, Pat protects Celia from the investigating (male) authorities—the policeman and the doctor. After they depart, she attends to Celia's bruising from the gun barrel.

The original parable's question of the man's ability to listen is brought to the fore through the bonding between mother and daughter. By extension, Turner sites the feminine as an active narrative space through the implicit allegory:

*The fairy tale is one story where there is a little old man who's in control, whereas in the main story Celia really is about the women, it's not about the little old man. It's not about the man saving the woman, it's about the mother saving the daughter and very much [about] the female world. Whereas the fairy tale that it is invoking is not about the female world at all. The little old woman is just this rather pathetic creature who gets carried off in a sack. It's very much about the female world becoming the world where [women] are empowered and [are] the site of action, rather than it being male controlled.*

As a feminist allegory, then, Celia fits neatly into the genre of films in which the murder of a paternal figure represents the symbolic murder of patriarchy.<sup>14</sup> Thus, protecting Celia from investigating male authorities, Pat seeks to undermine both medical and legal discourses that have, quite literally, disembodied the female voice in narrative cinema.<sup>15</sup>

However, Turner's use of Celia's fantasy perspective here echoes surrealist attempts to represent the 'marvellous', a subjective dreamlike state that is presented through elliptical and random imaging.<sup>16</sup> Often presenting Celia's dream states, Turner, translating the marvellous, melds reality and fantasy; the quarry represents this world that Celia actively inhabits. For as Turner states:

*The quarry very much operates as the unconscious. That space is very much that free world of childhood. But it's also where fantasy is allowed to blend with reality whereas elsewhere fantasy and reality have to be separated ... Celia loves Granny so much she still feels Granny's presence. She still plays with her so to speak, in the quarry. I think that ... [a child doesn't] impose those boundaries... A child will talk about people who have died ... Even though Granny's dead and the fact that elements of [Celia's] ... life are lost, she also feels the presence and also still communicates with her.*

But it is the allegorical structure of the narrative that permits Turner to fuse fantasy and reality: although Turner suggests that 'the moral fabric is questionable' as to how Celia uses fantasy to survive. She states:

*At that moment that she shoots [what she sees as a Hobbyaah], fantasy and reality blur and straight after she sees reality, which is that she's shot the cop [her uncle] dead. And she immediately*

*imposes fantasy as a way out. But in the quarry, those two things can sit very comfortably. She can go and play with Granny who seems very real, but she knows is dead. And there is no judgement which is why I think it's like the unconscious. It's in the dream states where you can have things that are both fact and things that are totally and purely imagination.*

In this way, however, Turner presents a complex look at the construction of girlhood. Celia is irreverent of boundaries. She breaks through locks and barriers, particularly those that her father puts up to divide her from Granny's memory and from the intimacy she finds with the neighbour, Alice Tanner. (Ray locks the dead woman's bungalow, burns her communist books, and buys Celia a rabbit on the condition that she will not see the Tanners.) Celia's disregard for his authority, in turn, disrupts the neat parallel between girlhood and innocence.<sup>17</sup> This is

at once purifying, freeing her from her father's world of rigidity and mistrust, and representative of her ability to 'learn to lie' and to live in a world that rewards deceit. Turner states, '*Celia* is about, really, a little girl that learns to lie to protect herself and survive'. Covering up her crime, Celia escapes into fantasy as a morally dubious world overtakes the narrative. By undermining the normative notion of girlhood 'innocence', Turner states that Celia's escape 'metaphorically translates into an innocence that isn't all good either'.

Turner formally challenges representations of national cinema and critiques the construction of history in film, which defines the exclusion of the feminine. However, through what she calls a 'magical otherness' and 'the unconscious',<sup>18</sup> it seems to me that what Turner suggests is an amalgam of two opposing worlds which are no longer separable. Turner's emphasis on the inseparability of opposites suggests that all binaries rely on a certain contingency. For Celia, fantasy is only constructed through the real. And, as I believe the narrative indicates, understanding history as a masculine prerogative in Australian film is only ever constructed through the exclusion of the stories of women and girls.

### QUEER ALLEGORY

The allegory of the rabbits symbolically representing a communist threat in *Celia* draws on the paranoia surrounding migrant invasion at the time. This is referenced by the insertion of the news headline, 'New Australians have been breeding rabbits to eat'. Yet, the implicit



critique of national identity in *Celia* is made explicit in *Dallas Doll*. The allegory of the interloper, Dallas Adair (Sandra Bernhard), rephrases the notion of invasion. 'Playfully harking back to Greek myth', to use Turner's words, Argus (Bobby), the Sommer's dog, does not recognize the return of the figure of Odysseus, but signals the unwelcome invasion of the American golfing 'guru', Dallas. Argus attacks Dallas and, in the narrative, is presented with a dream sequence where he symbolically rips a doll to shreds. The dog, for Turner, not only plays on the myth, but also 'on the cliché that an animal can tell what a person is like'.

However, Turner redoubles the allegory of invasion within a neo-colonialist discourse. As she states:

*The whole of Dallas Doll is an allegory. It's completely about Australian cultural identity ... I think, by and large, that things segue into two things here; I think in terms of what stories we're able to tell, we're getting more and more crunched as film-makers ... [and] I think, as a comment, broadly, on culture in Australia, that what emerges is [that Americans] are swamping us and we are accepting it with open arms ... Metaphorically we invite all of that culture into our lives.*

The notion of invasion that neatly paralleled the historical surrounding of *Celia* is turned instead toward a comment on both the position of film-makers in a global (Americanised) marketplace and the dissolution of an Australian cultural identity. The secrets that were a symbol of feminist strength in *Celia* are here seen as a neo-colonialist opportunity to weaken and invade. For Dallas's self-help 'spiritualism' works to expose the sexual secrets of the golfing community as she gains control and ownership of the golf course.<sup>19</sup>

The creation of her Japanese invested golfing empire, 'Doll Links', parallels her sexual conquest of the Sommer's family. In addition to this, through the sexual irregularity associated with the interloper genre,<sup>20</sup> Dallas' seductions of the father, Stephen (Frank Gallacher), mother, Rosalind, and son, Charlie (Jake Blundell), resemble her efforts to manipulate and control the golfing community. As Dallas prompts her acquisition of Aunt Mary's farm, Rosalind opens her home to the wife of the Japanese investor, Mrs Ozu (Yukimiko Iwanaga), playfully named after the Japanese film-maker. Yet, reworking the feminist sentiment behind a secret between women found in *Celia*, Rosalind discovers that her husband not only knows of her affair with Dallas, but he himself is involved in a sadomasochistic relationship with her. This 'very much rips at [Rosalind]', Turner says, as 'it is that secret world that is being trampled on by Dallas ... [who] uses secrets [not just] to manipulate and ... to weaken, to get control over people, but to trash people'.

In Turner's signature style, the narrative involves an ironic mix of genres.<sup>21</sup> However, by examining the deployment of allegory in the narrative, it is notable that Dallas' entrepreneurial self-help spiritualism acts as a thematic counterpoint for the Sommer's daughter, Rastus' (Rose Byrne) belief in UFO's. For Rastus, says Turner,

*is looking for something more spiritual so the UFO's stand in for something 'other'; the 'other' that's not the material. Rastus has the purity to be searching for it but it's something greater than our-*



*selves, which is what Dallas is on about as well, but when she talks about it, it's just to feather her own nest. And she doesn't have a clue what she's saying. That's why she gets such a shock when she sees the UFO; that she's been talking about that sort of thing in a sense and doesn't for a minute think it exists. And yet it does. So I suppose I am trying to say there is something greater out there, whatever you want to call it. There is more than just material culture.*

**What Turner suggests through this narrative parallel, however, is that identity is not fixed. She states:**

*Dallas is saying, basically, that there's nothing that you don't know, everything is known and fixed and so you can find everything from inside you ... [whereas] Rastus is saying [that] ... she's not afraid to face the unknown and ergo a form of spirituality.*

**If, in the allegory of *Celia*, the extended metaphor points to women's place in both history and a national cinema, in *Dallas Doll* the parallelisms reveal that no identity is sustainable. Japanese investors in Dallas' golfing empire are pitted against the councillor war veterans. In Dallas' meeting with the council to discuss her proposed 'Doll Links', a member declares, 'I fought the bloody japs in the war, I'm not having them in my home'. Turner states:**

*I was actually aware that [the representation of the Japanese] may look xenophobic or racist ... [but] I didn't want closure of any sort so I didn't want one reading ... So on the one hand, you get the elderly Australian diggers' point of view [and] on the other hand you get Dallas, who wants to basically trash everywhere and just to be American imperialist and the Japanese are just pawns for her.*

**The anti-Asian rhetoric of national mythology, however, is exposed through this parallel. As a symbolic protection against further 'invasion', Dallas persuades the council members to 'merely relocate' the memorial as she displaces the Gallipoli statue from its central prominence in the community to a cliff top where it is submerged by incoming tides. The representation of national mythology in film—what Graeme Turner has identified as the retrojection and nostalgia implicit to its representation in national fictions<sup>22</sup>—has no referent in *Dallas Doll*. Dallas refuses to valorise the past, not simply through the evacuation of the town's history—represented by the war memorial's relocation—but also her own past. Charlie reveals this by opening an unread letter from Dallas's mother in America, in which an inserted newspaper clipping uncovers Dallas' secret suburban shame: 'Marriage Clinic Guru Fails'.**

**While the 'colonial cringe' toward Americans was 'the big starting point' for Turner's writing *Dallas Doll*, it was also the exploration of the intrinsic incoherency of 'identity'. She states:**

*I wanted it to be about a national identity as well as a personal identity ... about people's sexual identity, the identity within family, the identity of what family is and then extrapolating from that the idea of what a national identity is and how all those things shift constantly.*

While Turner redoubles the national with the sexual conquest in *Dallas Doll*,<sup>23</sup> through the dissolution of the usual association of the national with the masculine, she critiques the imposition of heterosexuality onto a national identity. Dallas's sexual conquests parallel her surveying the land. More specifically, sweeping shots of Dallas and Charlie horseriding across the landscape prefaces Dallas' seduction of Charlie. Immediately following his defloration, Dallas and Charlie are foregrounded on horseback by a flag on a golf green overlooking the vast expanse that is to become Doll Links—more than a passing hint at colonial claims on the 'virgin' land.<sup>24</sup>

However, Charlie's desperation to overcome the landscape during his attempt to penetrate Dallas suggests something of an exposé of heterosexuality in representations of a national cinema. The environs threaten Charlie's sexual prowess as onlooking birds mimic his sexual penetration.<sup>25</sup> Turner states:

*With the birds that was very much also sending up how [early] Australian films [e.g. Squatters Daughter; Ken G. Hall, 1933] put in the cuddly koalas and kangaroos. There are lots of films that try and incorporate Australian animals so this is sort of just a bent on it where the animals are ... making him completely paranoid ... In Dallas Doll they're used very much as a point of disruption and very deliberately a twist [on the national].*

The 'twist' is that Turner weakens the hold of both masculinity and heterosexuality on the national as they are defined by the metaphoric use of landscape in Australian film. As I will discuss, in the absence of defining masculinity, 'aberrant' sexualities and identifications can take hold.

## QUEER AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

It is important to state that in interview, Ann Turner does not overlook the question of gender in cinema. But, and as I believe queer theory seeks to do, she pivots such questions through the lens of sexuality.<sup>26</sup> Just as *Dallas Doll* engages allegory to expose the implicit, if not explicit racism and homophobia of a national identity, Turner uses queer sexuality to suggest further that there is no coherent status to a lesbian identity. She states:

*In terms of queer, I think that again it's really wanting to put those stories in screen. And ... in Dallas Doll that was really important for me to do. [Dallas Doll] is not [representing] a fixed sexuality, it's far more queer ... I guess what I'm saying is that there's a multiplicity of sexualities as opposed to heterosexuality, or even that you're just heterosexual or you're gay.*

However, in forging a link with queer theory, I do not wish to overlook the somewhat anxious perception that may and, indeed, does surround the relationship between queer theory and feminism. In brief, often read as dividing rather than extending feminist concerns, queer's so-called conceptual complexity and focus on pleasure and sexuality has been seen to evacuate the political, historical and social significance of the signs 'woman' and 'lesbian'.<sup>27</sup>

Interestingly, in his book, *Australian National Cinema*, Tom O'Regan applauds Turner's problematisation of gender in a national cinema. However, his reading of lesbianism in the film is pivoted through the lens of sexual difference. He states that *Dallas Doll*:

*is self-consciously affirmative. It insists on unconventional choices. Women are agents not just victims of circumstances beyond their control. As in influential contemporary feminist thought (Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray), the lesbian provides a utopian space in which women can define themselves and their sexuality for themselves rather than in relation to men.*<sup>28</sup>

In response to my questioning, Turner states:

*I don't see lesbianism as just utopian, as a utopian 'other'. I see that [Rosalind] is someone who has found her own voice, which is a much broader issue than discovering [that] you're a lesbian.*



VICTORIA LONGLEY AND SANDRA BERNHARD IN DALLAS DOLL

At first glance, the empowerment of a female subject through the narrative of self-discovery does appear to confirm O'Regan's claim. Utopia versus empowerment: Turner's representation of Rosalind's finding her voice would appear a tired concept that would accommodate earlier questions of a feminist cinema, or, as B. Ruby Rich defines it, cinefeminism.<sup>29</sup> While I do not want to suggest this is irrelevant, to read this empowerment as utopic, and to couch it in the aims of feminist theory espoused by French feminists like Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray, is more a misreading of the queer concerns that Turner attempts to take issue with in the narrative.

As mentioned earlier, I want to acknowledge the feminist origins of Turner's films, and also suggest that *Dallas Doll*, in keeping with queer theory, seeks to disrupt the modes of representing the national which by and large seek to exclude lesbianism.<sup>30</sup> Acting against convention and expectation, Rosalind's 'lesbianism' thereby would represent less a plea to a utopia than a signification of a sexuality released from cultural boundaries of the national and the external 'truths' that confine it to a heteronormative corporeality.

In her movement from feminist beginnings in the cinema, we find in *Dallas Doll* that women *do* construct their own sexuality. But, rather than through a utopic 'self-definition', which would assume that the overriding structure of a sex/gender system is held in place, and in

keeping with aims of queer theory, it is through a *reconceptualisation*.<sup>31</sup> By reworking settler narratives in the course of Rosalind and Dallas' relationship, more than a passing hint at Australian cinematic history, I would suggest in conclusion that what Turner presents is more in line with what Judith Mayne has coined 'lesbian irony'.<sup>32</sup> Re-reading Doris Day's 'Woman's Touch', Dallas's seduction of Rosalind after they have settled at aunt Mary's farm is prefaced by the game of strip mini-golf to Day's tune.<sup>33</sup> As the alliterative naming of *Dallas Doll* testifies to its indebtedness, and as Turner herself gestures, Doris Day has:

*Got such strength, she's got guts but she's the girl next door. And I think she undermines most of her roles, she's so strong. She's really subversive. [Dallas Doll is] a homage to her subversion of stories.*

## CONCLUSION

Turner's feminist allegory exposes those erasures of female worlds in the construction of a universal and masculine history in Australian film. However, what is often displaced by questions of gender in the cinema is the pragmatic reality of representing women; and this for Turner, remains paramount to any representation. As she jests, 'I don't think I ever get asked that question, except by feminists'. It is in this way that Turner deconstructs the filmic conditions of the national, which exclude not only female worlds, but also so-called 'aberrant' or queer sexualities from representation. Through the use of allegory and parallel narratives—the child's parable of the Hobbyaahs in *Celia* and the notion of alien cultures in *Dallas Doll*—Turner exposes the rhetorical nature of identity in Australian cinema. Although female empowerment is an antiquated concept in a so called 'post-feminist' milieu, in Turner's films it is an empowerment found through the recognition of the mutability of the categories of gender and sexuality, and also of fantasy and reality. To me, this is where her work informs queer film study.

By suspending 'truths' of a national identity as it were, suspending the presumed causal relation between sex, gender and sexuality within a heterosexual imperative of the national, Ann Turner does not seek to represent either a national identity or a lesbian identity. The fact that Turner does not seek to affirm a lesbian identity, ironically, is the necessary condition for its representation. In *Dallas Doll's* dissolution of identity, Turner opens the possibility of representing lesbianism in the national and deconstructs signifiers that define it solely as heterosexual and masculine. This for Turner, is a 'thing of joy'.

## Endnotes

- 1 Ann Turner, interviews with author, 5.4.98; 6.6.98; 7.12.99. All subsequent quotations are taken from these interviews.
- 2 I am problematising the word 'define' for if there were to be any unifying principle to queer theory, it would be the

continual critique and commitment to defy definition. For an outline of queer film criticism and theory see Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993.

- 3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism*

*and the subversion of identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p.151. Following Foucault, queer theory has suggested that there is no universal truth to sexuality, in either a heterosexual or homosexual form. Thereby, seeking to express the repudiated categories of sexuality,

- as gay and lesbian identity groups have done, can achieve no liberation. See also Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*, Routledge, New York, 1993.
- 4 Teresa De Lauretis, 'Film and the Visible', in *Bad Object Choices* (eds.) *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1991, p. 224-225. The article appears in the collection taken from the first conference of the same name to address, and indeed coin 'queer' in cinema studies, *Anthology Film Archives*, New York, October 21-22, 1989.
  - 5 It could be argued that homosexuality has indeed been represented in Australian cinema in films such as *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephen Elliot, 1994) and *The Sum of Us* (Kevin Dowling and Geoff Burton, 1994). While beyond the scope of this paper, to summarise, the superimposition of sexuality onto landscape and family in these films does not bring into stark relief the workings of the national and the necessary exclusion of homosexuality. By contrast, *Priscilla* subsumes a masculine ethos in parody and drag and, like *The Sum of Us*, tacks the issue of sexuality onto a prefigured logic of family and nation. The representation of homosexuality, imbricated by male bonding, sits neatly within the iconography of a national psyche and the defining narrative trope of 'mateship'. See Sally Hussey, 'Whose (w)hole?: *The Sum of Us* and the Dis/Avowal of Lesbianism', *Critical in Queeries*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1997, pp. 77-102.
  - 6 This follows the argument that 'sexuality' and 'gender' have been disarticulated as theoretical objects of inquiry in lesbian and gay studies and feminism respectively, where certain methodological approaches to queer have been seen to have emerged from the former. In separating 'sexuality' from feminism, a misrepresentation has been enacted. As Judith Butler has argued, a certain 'amnesia' is performed in the construction of 'gender' as the terrain of feminism and 'sexuality' as that of lesbian and gay studies. The complexity denied in such theoretical separatism is addressed by Butler in 'Against Proper Objects', *Differences: a journal of feminist cultural studies*, vol. 6, summer-fall, 1994. For a discussion of the theoretical interstices of feminism and queer theory see the reprinted collection of the *Differences* special issue, (eds.) Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor, *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Indiana University Press, Indiana, 1997. See also Steven Angelides, *A History of Bisexuality*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001, p. 162-89.
  - 7 Turner notes the influence Chantal Ackerman. She states, 'Ackerman was so inspiring because she was using film in a completely different way. [The pacing of the film, the time and rhythm] is very much a woman's domestic space', interview with author.
  - 8 Victoria Longley won an AFI award for best supporting actress for this role.
  - 9 Although an adaptation, *Hammers Over the Anvil* also pivots some concern on the woman's position within the family through the character of Grace McAlister (Charlotte Rampling). Grace abandons her husband and thus her colonial privileges. She steals away with the dependent East (Russell Crowe), her young lover who is mentally atrophied by a riding accident.
  - 10 Anne Turner re-wrote the original screenplay by Peter Hepworth. In this paper, I distinguish Turner's films as writer/director from her adaptations, including Blanche D'Apulget's *Turtle Beach* (Ann Turner, 1992) and her short films, including the short made for the BBC series *Picture Box, Bathing Boxes* (Ann Turner, 1995).
  - 11 Turner states, 'I found people in Scandinavia saying it was just like their childhood and people in Israel were saying it was like theirs. So I think that when you use specific history it can actually have all sorts of resonances ... Whereas something like *Hammers* ... is a much more generalised history', interview with author.
  - 12 Turner discusses the autobiographical allusions of her film in interview with Ron Burnett, 'Take the Bunny and Run: Memories of Childhood and Ann Turner's *Celia*', *Cinema Papers*, no. 72, March 1989, pp. 6-10.
  - 13 In fact, the allegory informed a Jewish audience response. Turner states, 'In Israel people were looking at it very much from a holocaust perspective too, when the rabbits were rounded up ... and taken to the zoo', interview with author.
  - 14 Arguably, this originates in Marleen Gorris' film, *A Question of Silence/Stilte Rond Christine M. De* (Marleen Gorris, 1983).
  - 15 For a discussion of the disembodiment of the female voice in narrative cinema see Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988. Silverman importantly reworks Laura Mulvey's argument in her now famous article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1989. Silverman argues that the objectification of the female image circumvents her ability to speak, often conferring authority to a male figure such as psychoanalysts and doctors.
  - 16 In fact, Turner states that at the time of writing the script she 'loved the films of Luis Bunuel', interview with author. Bunuel directed *Un Chien Andalou* with Salvador Dali (Luis Bunuel & Salvador Dali, 1928), which marked the birth of surrealism in the cinema. Herbert S. Gershman states that the marvellous or, more appropriately, *le merveilleux*, is 'the wonderland of revelation and dream [which permits] chance to run rampant in a wasteland of bleak reality', in Ann Arbor *Surrealist Revolution in France*, University of Michigan Press, 1974, p. 1. For a discussion of film theory and surrealist motifs see Ramona Fotiade, 'The untamed eye: surrealism and film theory', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 4, Winter 1995, pp. 394-407.
  - 17 This is quite unlike the view held by Stephen Crofts, 'Public and Private in *Celia*', *Metro Magazine*, no. 87, Spring 1991, pp. 27-30. Crofts states that 'Celia is not represented as seeing Uncle John till he is dead on the kitchen floor. The innocence of childhood is thus preserved', p. 30.
  - 18 This is an issue that became clear as Turner discussed the unconscious at various points in the interviews.
  - 19 'Clothes are the privilege of truth', Dallas declares to Mayor Tonkin (Douglas Hedge) as he tentatively removes his clothes before his council constituents. Further, in a circle of women golfers, Dallas urges Mrs Winthrop (Elaine Lee) to divulge the circumstances of her losing her virginity, 'Mrs Winthrop, you've omitted details ... you had a hot cock inside you for the first time and you can't remember

- what happened?' 20 For example, *Poison Ivy* (Katt Shea, 1992), involves quasi lesbianism and incest; *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (Douglas Hickox, 1970) involves homosexuality and psycho-sexual incest; and *Teorama Theorem* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1968), involves the seduction of each family member. The allegory here symbolises the destruction of the bourgeoisie. In fact, *Dallas Doll* was compared to *Teorama* by Lizzie Francke, *Sight and Sound*, vol.5, no.2, Feb 1995, p. 43 and David Stratton, *Variety*, May 30-June 5, 1994, p. 46. In response, Turner states that Pasolini's figure of the interloper is 'a much more Christlike figure than Dallas', interview with author.
- 21 See William D. Routt, 'Ann Turner' in (eds.) Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer, Ina Bertrand, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p. 507. Routt asserts that *Celia* is a 'landmark film of the 1990s revival in Australian film-making...[which] foreshadowed the quirky and unpredictable blends of comedy and melodrama, sentiment, and irony that were to characterise the best Australian work of the 1990s, p.507. In the framework of the interloper genre, *Dallas Doll* infuses comedy, melodrama and B Grade science fiction.
- 22 See Turner, *National Fictions*. In particular, Ch. 5, 'Representing the Nation', pp. 107-123. Ann Turner states that in sending up the war memorial 'I was also sending up [a national mythology] ... Whereas I think that war memorials, for instance, are really important and they are an important reminder of our culture ... *Dallas Doll* does have that sense of history albeit that Dallas herself sends it up and treads on it. And I suppose that's kind of what I was saying ... that she actually doesn't see that Australia needs this kind of sense of history, [that it] needs its memory ... If we import culture, then we are importing our memories in a sense,' interview with author.
- 23 Fiona Nicoll, "'Up Ya Bum?': Queer(y)ing Australian Nationalist Subjectivity', *Critical inQueeries*, vol.1, no.3, 1997, argues that in *Dallas Doll* 'seduction leads inexorably to the unravelling of gender, sexual and national identities' and as such suggests an anti-homophobic critique of the national, p. 72.
- 24 In reference to indigenous dispossession of the land, Turner includes a scene where Charlie wanders through the 'bush'. Aborigines laugh at his *faux* spiritualism as he watches the birds overhead for a sign. Employing the interloper genre to question national identity, Turner indicates that 'in fact all the whites are interlopers', interview with author.
- 25 Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1996, states that the 'copulation scene [is] designed not to eroticize but to render heterosex bestial and unnatural' as chirping 'birds become voyeurs interrupting and objecting to an unnatural and scarcely erotic coupling', p. 299. It could be argued that Turner parodies the idea that the loss of male virginity signifies his entry into manhood. Indeed the film begins with Charlie's sexual anxiety, which is followed by his 18th birthday celebration.
- 26 This is not to suggest the mutual exclusivity of gender and sexuality. See note 6.
- 27 See Suzanna Danuta Walters, 'From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can't a Woman Be More Like a Fag?)', *Signs*, Summer 1996, pp. 830-869. See also Weed and Schor, op. cit., 'Until recently, however, feminist discourses on the cinema have excluded queer desires. Shoring up narrative cinema's objectification of woman by the male gaze, feminist film theory has produced an equally limiting discourse in its inability to recognise lesbian spectatorship and sexuality. Inasmuch as lesbian theorists have addressed this limitation within a feminist framework, queer theorists rephrase the question of sexuality and the cinema and radically rework issues of lesbian visibility. For an elaborate discussion of queer and feminist film theory see the special queer issue of the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol.15, no.1, 1993.
- 28 O'Regan, op. cit. p. 298.
- 29 Rich defines cinefeminism as 'a term that was sometimes used to describe the broad field of feminism and film that began in the seventies with the flourishing of film festivals and the simultaneous invention of theoretical approaches to classic Hollywood representations of women', B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1998, p.1.
- 30 It can be argued that independent cinema has gone some way to redress this in films such as *Love and Other Catastrophes* (Emma-Kate Croghan, 1996) and *The Well* (Samantha Lang, 1998). However, I would argue that these films avoid a confrontation with the specificity of lesbian sexuality. An exception, however, might be *The Monkey's Mask* (Samantha Lang, 2000).
- 31 Importantly, Teresa de Lauretis uses the term 'reconceptualisation' as a way of rereading the implicit misogyny of psychoanalysis to enable the possibility of a lesbian fantasy scenario. See Teresa de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994.
- 32 See Judith Mayne, 'Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship' in *How Do I Look?*, op. cit., p. 133.
- 33 This song features in *Calamity Jane* (David Butler, 1953). Calamity (Doris Day), a tomboy, 'pretties up' her log cabin with the feminine, Katie (Allyn Ann McLerie), which ironises the western genre through their inferred 'lesbian' cohabitation. Doris Day has been a popular topic of discussion amongst lesbian film theorists. It is notable that *Calamity Jane* also features the song, 'Secret Love', which has suggested Day's lesbianism. See also, Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood cinema and female spectatorship*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 138.

# SHARED VISIONS AND CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

## A 'team' approach: Sue Brooks, Sue Maslin and Alison Tilson.

LISA FRENCH

In my final year at school, the honour of being one of a triumvirate was bestowed upon me. What this meant was that I was part of a team of three girls, the head and two others—the key idea behind this structure being the team—'the triumvirate'. We were responsible for being responsible, for being role models, mentors and champions of the school ethos. The idea of a triumvirate came from ancient Rome and referred to a board of three ruling men. I liked the play on this given that I attended a school for girls. I was offered a freethinking and feminist education (for which I will be eternally grateful). I can still remember a teacher telling us not to compete with each other, to work together and support each other. I've been a team player, committed to team approaches, and interested in them ever since.

Film-making is a process that necessarily involves a team working together; it is by nature collaborative, but it is also generally hierarchical. This chapter considers a way of working which is genuinely collaborative and non-hierarchical. It explores the idea that when people form collaborative partnerships over a body of work, the work is influenced by this process. It investigates creative partnerships, the 'team approach', and takes up some of the issues for this way of working with particular focus (following the introduction) on the team from Gecko Films: Sue Brooks, Sue Maslin and Alison Tilson.

## INTRODUCTION: CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS

At the 1999 AFI Awards Baz Luhrmann and Catherine Martin jointly won the Byron Kennedy Award for their work as a creative team; they acknowledged the other members of their film family—people with whom they had consistently worked. Byron Kennedy after whom the award was named, was himself part of a legendary team (Byron Kennedy with George Miller). Overseas teams provide strong models for the team approach; English director Anad Tucker (*Hilary and Jackie*, 1998) has claimed that ‘if there is a strength in the English film industry it is that there are these teams—producing, directing, writing teams that believe in each other and stay together and that’s how you produce films which have a distinctive voice’.<sup>1</sup> An English example of a strong team is the one that made *Trainspotting* (1995) and in 1994, *Shallow Grave*: producer Andrew MacDonald, writer John Hodge and director Danny Boyle. Successful teams in Australia include Working Dog Inc., who produced the features *The Castle* (1997), *The Dish* (2000) and many other creative outputs.<sup>2</sup> Working Dog appear to exemplify ‘true collaboration’<sup>3</sup> with the team working across all projects in a variety of ways. Jane Kennedy has said that ‘there is something about a group dynamic that is really healthy ... there is no hierarchy within the company. If someone is passionate about an idea, the rest of the group will be supportive’.<sup>4</sup> The way in which they work is that ‘on all the major projects two people write and the other two edit. Directing duties are shared’.<sup>5</sup> Kennedy also points to a key problem for collaboration, that of finding and maintaining collaborative partnerships, saying that: ‘In the entertainment world, not too many partnerships last 15 years’.<sup>6</sup>

Finding the right balance in a team is notoriously difficult. Producer Sue Milliken characterised industry relationships at the 1999 WIFT Conference saying that, ‘a large percentage of producer/director relationships “don’t work” and this is more of a problem, or happens more frequently, with larger, fully funded features’.<sup>7</sup> Choosing the right collaborators is important, but difficult, and it is not always smooth sailing. While film-making involves collaboration, there is a difference between collaborating and working collaboratively in the ‘true’ sense that this chapter seeks to discuss.

Writer and director Jackie McKimmie has described the difficulties of the collaborative process with the example of her first film experience on a film she wrote called *Madness of Two* (1981). She worked collaboratively on the script with the director (Hugh Keays-Byrne), and his partner (who became the production manager). She recalled that they ‘opened my eyes to what real film-making was about. Passion and commitment ... They’re real collectivists ... Hugh involved me in everything ... we’d have all night sessions sitting up rewriting it’. McKimmie described it as a ‘a truly wonderful process. But when we got into production it all changed’.<sup>8</sup> She was left disillusioned because the film was not made the way she thought it should have been and she vowed to have more control with her next film experience, a path which led her to directing. She had assumed that the vision she had was shared, and the articulation of that vision would be a careful one. However, despite the wonderful initial collaboration, this did not happen. It is an illustration of the way in which film-making is generally hierarchical and of the way in which writers are sometimes not offered full courtesy



once production starts. A process that begins with the triumvirate of the writer, director and producer sometimes moves from the time the production starts to the director, producer and editor.

### COLLABORATIONS AND FUNDING IN THE AUSTRALIAN FILM INDUSTRY

Currently in Australia the government film funding agencies have focused significantly on the idea of teams. Ros Walker wrote when manager of Film Victoria,<sup>9</sup> that the projects that get up 'tend to have a strong team attached'.<sup>10</sup> In her travel report following her attendance at the 1999 Australian Screen Directors' Association (ASDA) Conference, she stated that one of the points the conference reiterated was that 'the three positions of writer, producer and director are all pivotal to making a good film'. That 'great films require great creative teams and all three roles [should] be involved in developing projects'.<sup>11</sup> In response to this perspective on film-making, Film Victoria built into their 2000 funding arrangements for script development, that producers' and directors' fees can be included if they are working on the draft in question. Similar processes are in place in other states, such as Queensland for example, where the Pacific Film and Television Commission (PFTC) will fund teams, offering feature script development via an application from a writer, director or producer or, with emerging projects, assist to bring teams together where none are in place.

On a national level, the emphasis on teams has been more emphatic and prescriptive than it has been for the states. The Australian Film Commission's (AFC) 2002 guidelines for feature development which have categories (Strand C and D) that are 'available only to Writer/Producer or Writer/Director/Producer teams'.<sup>12</sup> Current AFC production investment does, in general, favour team approaches and the guidelines express a preference for funding writers or directors on 'projects with a producer attached'.<sup>13</sup> The support of teams might lead to the development of a more 'truly collaborative' film-making culture, a model exemplified in the rest of this chapter by the Gecko team.



CATHERINE MARTIN AND BAZ LUHRMANN WITH THEIR 1999 BYRON KENNEDY AWARDS

## THE GECKO TEAM: SUE BROOKS, SUE MASLIN & ALISON TILSON

### INTRODUCTION

Film-makers Sue Brooks, Sue Maslin and Alison Tilson<sup>14</sup> formed the production company, Gecko, in 1992.<sup>15</sup> Gecko are however much more than a production company, they are a creative team. As the following pages illustrate, their team is characterized by equality and a collective ideal. They have a determination to make ‘films that matter’<sup>16</sup> to them and which share what might be described as like-mindedness. Although they do not always work together, they have collaborated (and continue to collaborate) on several films and the formalizing of a company was the result of their desire to work together as a team. In 1987 Alison Tilson said that she had ‘discovered that it’s important to work with people I like and trust and who share some basic political and aesthetic views’.<sup>17</sup> Tilson still works this way, as do Brooks and Maslin. When they work together, they do it as a creative team. Working collaboratively can be difficult but can also offer advantages. What follows here is an exploration of collaborative, creative partnerships—the ‘team approach’ as seen through the eyes of the Gecko team.

One of the features of Gecko is that they are all female. They say that this is something they don’t really think about. Gender is only one thing among fifty things but it inevitably comes up and they concede that one of the ways they are regarded is as a female team. They acknowledge that in some circumstances being an all-female team can be a problem. For example, they believe there is a real prejudice about giving women money; Tilson says, ‘I still think that a lot of men would feel more comfortable giving the money to another man’.

Brooks, Maslin and Tilson collaborated on the award winning<sup>18</sup> film *Road to Nhill* (1997)<sup>19</sup> and they are currently developing several projects together, including several features.<sup>20</sup> Brooks and Tilson have worked collaboratively on a string of short and documentary works.<sup>21</sup> As a team of ‘true collaborators’ Gecko have developed a working method where the projects themselves are collectively developed and realised. This is not to infer that they do not have discrete roles because this is necessary to get a film made, but rather, that the process and the relationships work in a way developed over a number of projects: a non-hierarchical working method where the films themselves are collectively developed and realised.

### WORKING AS A ‘TEAM’

Tilson recalls that people say to her that ‘you are so lucky to have Gecko’ but from her perspective, ‘there is nothing “lucky” about it at all. It was a decision I made 20 years ago, that the way to make films was like this. The truth is that you’re trying to make productions together, which is harder than doing it on your own ... I quite often think there are a lot of people out in the industry who struggle to find [successful] relationships. I don’t think it’s lucky, you do actually need to make really strategic decisions, you have to know where you are going—how to get there, and make that plan’. Maslin is less offended at the suggestion

that she is lucky to have found her collaborators. She says that she has had the same comment made to her as well but she interpreted 'lucky' as being fortunate.

All agree that they chose to do it this way because of an ideological

decision to keep the balance of producer, director and writer equal. A strong reason they see for working collaboratively is that 'the basic power triangle in films is the writer, the director and the producer. You have all those people on the "same tram" from the start' (as opposed to the other model when a director for example, is brought in later in the project as more of a 'hired gun'). And then, as Tilson explains, 'each one of you have a job in getting everybody else in that film on the same tram'.

This is not unusual in terms of the film-making process. As English producer Tim Bevan has said, the 'most important thing the producer has to do is to ensure that everyone who is collaborating on the movie is making the same picture', saying that while this might sound strange, there are many films where 'everybody is working on a different movie and they have a completely different idea of what that film should be'.<sup>22</sup> In Gecko's case, the key creative people (the producer, writer and director) already have this problem solved and work together to share the vision with the other people they bring on to the project.

Gecko describe the boundaries as being less rigid than most film-making situations. Everyone on the Gecko team contributes ideas but also, everyone has their own part to play. That is, 'the buck' stops with each person in the sense that they each have a role that is ultimately the individual's responsibility. They say that this approach all started for them in the heady days of collective film-making when they were interested in what they were making, rather than because it is a good job or career path, they just did it because they wanted to and still are doing so. Maslin explains that she realised very quickly that she is not a project-driven producer, that '*people*—working as a team is the most important thing to me ... having a way of working that is about being with the people whose values you respect, whose ideas you respect, who you know you find stimulating, challenging and you're going to push each other to do the best you can do and that you are not doing it alone'.



L TO RIGHT: LYNETTE CURRAN, MONICA MAUGHAN, LOIS RAMSEY AND PATRICIA KENNEDY IN ROAD TO NHILL

Brooks, Maslin and Tilson are involved in all stages from the inception through to post-production and marketing. Tilson, whose chief role is as a writer, also has a role in post-production and is every bit as involved as Brooks, the director and Maslin, the producer. While it is unusual to have a writer present at, for example, the sound mix, Tilson explains it this way: 'I don't think I am there as a writer particularly anyway. I am there as part of Gecko [the team] and happen to have a creative role in trying to make the film good'. As a creative team, their approaches are more holistic, Tilson says, 'There is a lot a writer can do but you are also doing it as a person. Normally creative producers would do this. If you are the writer you actually understand the rhythms of the script and you therefore probably are useful in terms of working out rhythms of the film at the end if things aren't working—not so much in hanging on to what the script was'.

While Gecko's productions are attributed in the credits to Brooks as the director, Maslin as the producer and Tilson as the writer, Gecko regard themselves as film-makers and their work as the product of collaborations across these boundaries. Brooks says that 'we are involved in all of those stages'. Everyone is at every step of the process as the film-makers, as Gecko, and not so much as the writer, producer, and director. When they are 'in strife', they are all trying to work out strategies. Brooks says that, 'From our point of view, we just work as a team ... occasionally we scream at each other and say "get out of the room this is my bit." But by and large we are all three film-makers making the one project'. Brooks says, 'We are all Gecko ... I need to know from Sue and Alison whether it is working and I rely on that sort of involvement'.

Tilson recalls that: 'We had a lot of trouble fitting ourselves into the industry because when we first said we are a creative group they said well who does what?' For her, the decision to go with writer, producer, director 'is beginning to feel like a bad decision because of the way the industry perceives that and because it does not at all reflect how we work'. They all agree that perhaps one title 'film-makers' would be more apt because, as a team, it is clear to Gecko that it is their collective work but they also feel that realistically, credits listing them all as writer, director and producer would be a marketing problem. Brooks feels that 'one of the tensions that happens for us is that we have to constantly deal with how we actually do our work, compared to how we are seen to do our work. For example, when you have finished something, it's the director's film. I get out there as the director and own the film in a way that I know is ludicrous, and I have to. It doesn't matter how often I make references to the three of us doing it, it doesn't cut through'.

As an illustration of how she does not work just as a director, Brooks explains that every day they all get up and go to work. She estimates that she would probably actually direct actors or direct performances and cut something together only about ten per cent of the working year. 'I think my work engulfs a whole lot of producing, writing, directing or whatever it is'. Tilson adds that, 'We make up ideas; we discuss those usually, pretty much sooner or later, either in twos or in threes, or three at the start. We apply for money, and that nearly always involves the three of us. We read work and throw it past each other. It always involves something you have to do with budgets and that usually involves the three

of us. Nobody goes off and does something and doesn't pass it past the others ... We try to cram some money in for each of us and then go off ... spend time on [our] own, [then] we jointly work out the strategy for where it is going to go in the market'.

Tilson believes that 'one of the pitfalls is that it's not always easy' developing ideas and making decisions in a group. 'Sometimes when you're in a group like this, like any relationship really, you think it would be easier if you could just do it by yourself because you don't have to get the other two people's approval or understanding. You could mono focus and [then you have the] realisation that is really stupid because you know that you can't. We constantly have to learn to negotiate. We have to learn that over and over again in this group. We probably learnt some short cuts over the years, but we still have to do it'. The fundamental characteristics which they see as important in working together are a commitment to a team way of working, similar politics (which they believe is really important), and shared values. For example Maslin says 'we don't have to argue about feminism, homophobia, or sexism'.

Working collaboratively does not mean that consensus is immediate. Tilson says that creative difference is productive: 'I think we have good battles ... no one gives in without a good reason. We stand our ground on what things mean and why they're there, and we are not always there at exactly the same time'. Tilson acknowledges that the 'best times are when we all have an idea and we are all incredibly excited by it'. Maslin explains that they [the projects] just don't go away if one of us doesn't get it, they come back'. Tilson recalled that there was a project that in the beginning Sue [Maslin] said she wasn't interested in doing but that it kept 'haunting' Tilson, who says, 'I just kept fiddling away with it. I had a choice ... to take it to someone else or try and get the two Sue's in it ... and then I thought I'll do a draft and it will be better. So I show it one more time. The three of us sit down and talk about it and Sue [Maslin] says what bothers her, and what she doesn't get, and then we talk about everything—the way we work and whether or not we should take it on. Sue [Brooks] gets up in the middle of the night and writes five pages, then we have another meeting, and then I go off and do another draft'.

*Road to Nhill* is a product of Gecko's team approach. *Nhill* is about a community. It is the story of a generally uneventful small country town where chaos occurs when a car load of lady bowlers turns over on the Nhill road and thus 'ensues a rambling, constantly interrupted yarn in which everyone goes in every direction as we find out what happened'.<sup>23</sup> Gecko describe the process of developing *Road to Nhill* as beginning from pooling the ideas they had individually or collectively and picking the one that they felt 'most passionate about—all three of us'. The original idea came from Brooks who was born in the country town of Pyramid Hill (where the film is set) but all three of the Gecko team are from country towns. Tilson, who had visited Pyramid Hill with Brooks says that 'we enjoyed listening to Sue's dad's yarns. He has that particular style of storytelling that draws you in and plays with you ... that became the basis of the film—the concept of small country town and telling yarns'.<sup>24</sup>



The ultimate goal for Gecko was to protect the 'vision' of the film that they all had in their heads. The shoot of *Road to Nhill* was fraught with tensions created by circumstances that cost them time, such as terrible weather and story imperatives such as the upside down elderly women. This meant that compromises had to be made but this was always achieved by coming to a decision collectively. For example, one of the difficulties for Gecko was the problem that

arose in a key scene of the film—the upside down women (the women in the story who are involved in a car crash and become stuck in the car, upside down). They were shot with a stopwatch for every take because the maximum period the actors could be upside down was about two minutes. This meant that there was only around 45 seconds when they were in close up, upside down, and able to perform. The rest of the time was taken up getting into the harness and out again. After each take, the actors had to lie down to correct their blood pressure. The whole set then stopped and Gecko then found they were increasingly behind schedule and had to think on their feet to collectively come up with strategies. In order to get extra time they had to reduce the amount of time filming other scenes and collapsing shot lists into a fewer shots. Tilson says that it 'was an extraordinarily difficult decision to make because we decided to put more time into that at a point when we were behind schedule because we realised that was the strength of the film'. They also decided to put in \$13,000 dollars of their own money to buy that extra time.

All of the team have invested a lot of time and resources into Gecko. The dedication to achieve their own films has meant that there is perhaps more risk. Brooks is philosophical about it: 'So far, we haven't been able to be financially secure, but we still have a strong faith that it will work'. Tilson says 'I totally subsidise Gecko, we all do now'. Maslin offers this as 'definitely both a strength and a weakness, because we end up exploiting ourselves and each other' (for example, putting in money to shoot the upside down women). But Brooks says 'We do it with a trust that it will turn around. I look at a lot of organizations, such as Working Dog, and I know that they went through that for years'.

### GECKO FILMS IN THE AUSTRALIAN FILM MARKET PLACE

The exhibition market in Australia is highly competitive, despite the mechanics of multiplex exhibition encouraging a growth in both screens and box office. The American studios have moved into art-house production, a place where Australian films have traditionally done well internationally, and American production continues to dominate the market (as it does globally). The AFC and FFC reported in 1999 that Australian films make up only 4

per cent of the total box office in Australia, compared to the dominating American studios which claim 87 per cent of it.<sup>25</sup> Australia and other indigenous industries globally have to be strategic in protecting their market share and have implemented diverse strategies, for example, expanding the resource base (as has been achieved with English lotteries money being diverted to local film production), content regulation and audience development. As Mary Reid outlines in her AFC report on current market trends,<sup>26</sup> strategies might include a stronger focus on marketing and better interaction between distribution and exhibition sectors, researching audiences, finding a niche for Australian product by emphasising difference rather than similarities to Hollywood, careful timing of the release of Australian films, star development and the use of local stars in marketing, and promoting an understanding of 'success' itself in the sense that it is incongruent to compare Australian and American films given the dramatic difference in the industries.

Gecko stress the importance of being strategic. They have collectively worked out a business plan, and the marketing and exhibition of any of their projects involves developing strategies amongst the three of them in conjunction with the distributor. As three film-makers, they are constantly assessing the changes in what is happening in the marketplace and adapting their projects accordingly.

Gecko explain that they have had to respond quite pragmatically because the whole market, and the industry, has shifted considerably over the last few years. Where in the mid 1990s there might have been an assumption that budgets would increase, this has changed due to the advent of low budget/no budget feature films<sup>27</sup> which Maslin says were not really around until the 1990s. To be competitive Gecko say they have to consider the changes in technology that mean that quality productions can now be made more cheaply.

It is true that a large number of films currently made in Australia, in terms of the percentage of total production, are low budget/no budget films. For example, *La Spagnola* (*The Spanish Woman*) written and co-produced by Anna Maria Monticelli and directed by Steve Jacobs was the last of five 'Million Dollar Movies' made in the late 1990s.<sup>28</sup> The AFC and the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) have reported that 'overall, Australian feature film budgets have remained static. The average budget of features made in the 1990s was [A]\$3.5 million, much the same as the average for the 1980s'.<sup>29</sup> And they predict that these production levels will remain static, in contrast to production and marketing budgets of the American studio features which have risen significantly: 'The average budget for a studio feature was US\$52.7 million in 1998, and almost half as much again was spent on marketing'.<sup>30</sup>

Gecko say that one of the things that film-makers have to look at in Australia, in order to make films that have large budgets, is that they have to appeal to the American market. Maslin says that is a given now, 'the star cast will have to appeal to the American market, otherwise forget about doing something on a bigger budget'. Tilson says that the sort of material they are interested in 'has a good, strong audience but it is not immediately big dollar. It is not going to star Brad Pitt, so we have to look very carefully about where we fit into the market'. For example, in 1999 Tilson wrote a low budget feature and while they

feel it is a great one, it was done as a very pragmatic response to the market and the environment they are operating in.

Gecko attributes their success with *Road to Nhill* to working very hard on their strategy and thinking laterally about how they would best 'fit'. Currently exhibitors might release anything from 1–200 prints. If they don't perform, the number of screenings may be reduced.<sup>31</sup> Gecko's plan for *Nhill* was based on a view that generally the way in which Australian films work best is the old model, where word of mouth gets out after a film has played for a while. They felt this was likely to be particularly true for *Nhill*. They did something quite unusual as part of their strategy for the film's release. They began the campaign and released the film first in the country, coming later to city cinemas.<sup>32</sup> They had fewer prints and they toured them because they didn't ever believe that launching hundreds of prints was the best strategy for their film. Even if a budget for such a launch had been available, they would also have needed a commensurate advertising budget to compete with budgets of the imported films, which spend a huge amount on advertising in all media. They knew that it was not a film that was going to attract a lot of hype and that they needed 'a slow burn'. Some of the marketing was direct mail or direct action such as getting out to community groups, having special screenings, doing trivia quiz nights, and capitalising on 'photo opportunities' such as dressing up as three lady bowlers for the AFI<sup>33</sup> Awards. They spent months writing letters to bowling organisations and elderly citizens groups. They couldn't actually physically be at all of the openings given that there were ten in seven days, so they did some together, individually, and got their 'stars' involved as well.

## A SHARED VISION

It is my contention that Gecko share a 'vision' and what follows below uses the example of their feature *Road to Nhill* to offer some illustrations of this (although it is not the intention to comprehensively cover this particular film in this chapter).

A characteristic of Maslin, Brooks and Tilson's work to date in both drama and documentary is an enthusiasm for telling Australian stories. *Road to Nhill* is Australian from its language ('she'll be right') through to the sprawling vistas and characterisations. The vast landscape is hot, a place where the elements challenge people and where people become laconic because they don't want to waste energy. This is emphasised by characterisation, and also by the visual style, where the audience watch (as opposed to tracking in to characters) from above as cars travel across roads in vast expanses—inevitably in the wrong direction! In addition, the humour of the film has been described as 'quintessential Aussie humour'.<sup>34</sup>

The Gecko team share an ideological perspective and this forms part of the world-view their vision offers. Sue Maslin has said that:

*If you're black, or if you're gay, or if you're from a non-English speaking background or whatever distances you from the dominant ideology, it offers you perspective ... I feel, yes, women are interested*





L TO R: ALISON TILSON, SUE BROOKS AND SUE MASLIN

in different things, can offer different stories, and then by being feminist, that's another distance again that gives you another perspective of looking at your film ideas.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of story, *Road to Nhill* could be interpreted as the kind of 'different story' to which Maslin has referred. *Nhill* offers a focus on detail, human relationships (particularly those between women) and a story that ends without finite closure, leaving the audience with questions and a feeling that the world of Nhill goes on after the story.

*Road to Nhill* has a focus on those 'othered' by those dominant in our community and illustrates an interest in power relations. *Nhill* centres on female characters (common in their work) and the audience are privy to a female viewpoint. This is achieved especially well through the way in which some women gently step around men. For example, much of the humour is based in meaningful looks between women in the face of male ineptitude. Gecko's passion for telling stories that give an 'outsiders' view is evident in the characterisations in *Nhill*; be it non-stereotypical characters such as the townsfolk who are 'different to the caricatures of country people that often emanate from city bound scriptwriters and producers'<sup>36</sup>, the lesbian couple, Margot (Lynette Curran) and Alice (Kerry Walker), or in representing subjects who are infrequently the subject of cinematic stories (in this case older people, particularly older women).

Tilson has said that she is not interested in writing about things such as murdered women, heroic men, punch-ups, shoot-outs or men fucking and shooting each other.<sup>37</sup> What she,



and Gecko generally are interested in here is a character-driven, rather than action-driven story. From this perspective, *Nhill* offers a story (and stylistically, a film) that is different from the mainstream where largely male-dominated action films occupy a large section of the market.<sup>38</sup> Action films are frequently hero-driven but *Road to Nhill* itself could be read as

a critique of heroism. For example, the character of the policeman, Brett (Matthew Dyktinski) is 'a young man with just about everything—a gun, power, and a fast car with siren. In fact, the only thing he's lacking is a bit of common sense'.<sup>39</sup> Heroism is also critiqued when the rescue attempt by the men concludes by offering the feminist view that the women are the most competent to get themselves out and don't need to be rescued. From the perspective of discussing their 'vision', it illustrates a more pragmatic rather than romanticised view of the world.

A point made by Gecko is that shared political values are important. In addition to the numerous women in leading roles, and a story told from a female perspective, *Road to Nhill* is a film where almost all the key creative production positions are held by women; a circumstance that is unusual on a feature film in Australia. The exceptions are generally films produced and directed by women, Shirley Barrett's films for example. In addition to the Gecko team holding the positions of writer, director and producer, they also hired numerous other women: the director of photography (Nicolette Freeman), the composer (Elizabeth Drake) and the production designer (Georgina Campbell); the only key creative role not filled by a woman was the editor (Tony Stevens). While Gecko obviously felt these women to be the best people for the jobs, it illustrates a world view that women are equal and gender does not exclude women from being the 'best'.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it has not been the intention of this chapter to juxtapose team and non-team (or hierarchical models) or to argue for one against the other. There is no magic answer or indisputable best practice in terms of whether to work in a team or not. It is just one of many possible ways of working, provided you can find the right collaborators.

The Gecko model illustrates the importance of shared values and trust, something that takes time to develop over a number of collaborations. Working as a team can be difficult, given that the other members of any group have to be won over, and sometimes this might delay a given project (or perhaps stop it). In Gecko's case, they all subsidise their team with

other work, at times pouring this money into Gecko projects, and while this is a financial drain, it is one which they see as worth it given their faith in the collaboration. Working as a team offers advantages such as a supportive environment, where each member has a commitment to supporting each other. In addition the projects benefit from a range of views from the inception.

Gecko expressed a sense of reward derived from the actual collaborative process (which includes a balance of power that is shared, and working towards a shared vision). The Gecko situation is one where the members of the team have the collaboration in place; they are regarded as 'lucky' because they don't have to constantly set up working relationships. The greatest advantage of the team approach is that it can potentially develop a body of work that has a distinctive voice through the shared values, intellectual and aesthetic commonalities in approach—a shared vision!



PATRICIA KENNEDY IN ROAD TO NHILL

## Endnotes

- 1 Anad Tucker quoted in Mel Charrington, Jane Linfoot & Pieree Ziade, *British Cinema Today*, Tours droits reserves Karpai Productions, La Set-Arte, 1998. Broadcast on SBS, 18/11/99.
- 2 Working Dog Inc. are a team of cross media producers (Jane Kennedy, Tom Gleisner, Santo Cilauro and Rob Sitch). They began with a top-rating radio program (*D-Generation*) and have had a prolific output in television (for example, *Frontline* 1994, 1995 & 1997; *Funky Squad* 1995, *A River Somewhere* 1996; and *The Panel* 1998). They have made two features and also have some publishing activities.
- 3 By 'true collaboration' I mean that members of a team construct projects together, individuals work in a non-hierarchical way across a range of roles and decisions are made by consensus rather than being set by any individual.
- 4 Gerard Whateley, Jane Kennedy quoted in 'Working Wonders', *The Sunday Magazine, Sunday Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 21/6/98, p.p.14.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 The session was 'Director, Producer, Writer Relationships' and the conference was 'Our Brilliant Careers', St Kilda Town Hall, October 23, 1999.
- 8 Jackie McKimmie quoted in Julie James Bailey, *Reel Women: Working In Film And Television*, AFTRS, Nth Ryde, NSW, Australia, 1999, pp. 220-221.
- 9 Film Victoria is a state government funded organisation in Victoria that encourages and assists the development, production, exhibition and knowledge of film, television and new media.
- 10 WIFT Conference: 'Our Brilliant Careers', *op. cit.*
- 11 Ros Walker, Film Victoria, *Travel Report on the ASDA Conference, 1999*, p. 1.
- 12 Australian Film Commission, Film Development and Marketing Branch, *Funding Program Guidelines*, July 2000, p.7.
- 13 *ibid.* p.5.
- 14 Alison Tilson graduated from the AFTRS screenwriting strand in 1983. She has written both documentary and drama scripts. Sue Brooks trained in camera and directing at the AFTRS, graduating in 1984 and has directed shorts, television and a feature. Sue Maslin has produced numerous documentary films and

- her first feature as sole producer was *Road to Nhill* (1997), a collaboration with Sue Brooks and Alison Tilson.
- 15 Maslin ceased to be a director of Gecko (the company) in 2001 but still works with Brooks and Tilson in largely the same collaborative way as had occurred when she was a director.
  - 16 All of the material which follow is, unless otherwise indicated, from an interview with Sue Brooks, Sue Maslin and Alison Tilson conducted with Lisa French in December 1999. Quotations have not been indented as they are numerous.
  - 17 Alison Tilson's personal statement in Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed & Freda Freiberg, *Don't Shoot Darling! Women's Independent Filmmaking in Australia*, Greenhouse, Richmond, Australia, 1987, p. 225.
  - 18 *Road to Nhill* won 'The Golden Alexander Award for Best Feature Film' at the 1997 Thessaloniki International Film Festival and the 'Best Feature Film Script' at 1997 Turin International Film Festival. It was also nominated for three other awards: 'Best Original Screenplay' and 'Best Music Score' at 1997 Australian Film Institute Awards and was nominated for Best Original Feature Film Script at 1997 AWGIE Awards (Australian Writers Guild).
  - 19 For further detail on *Road To Nhill*, see: French, L. & Tudball, L., 'Road to Nhill', *Metro Education*, No. 15, 1998, pp.30-42.
  - 20 Their second feature together is *Japanese Story* (2002) starring Toni Collette.
  - 21 *High Heels* (1985), *An Ordinary Woman* (1988), *Land of the Long Weekend* (1994).
  - 22 Tim Bevan quoted in *British Cinema Today*, op. cit.
  - 23 Deb Verhoeven (ed.) *Twin Peeks: Australian and New Zealand Feature Films*, Damned Publishing, Melbourne, 1999, p. 449.
  - 24 Ronin Films, *Road to Nhill Press Kit*, 1996, p.2.
  - 25 AFC & FFC, *Report on the Film and Television Production Industry*, Prepared for the Hon. Peter McGauran, MP, November 5, 1999, p.31.
  - 26 Mary Anne Reid, with Diana Berman & Rosemary Curtis, *Distributing Australian Films - A survey of current market conditions and distributors' perceptions*, AFC, Sydney, 1999.
  - 27 For example: *Love and Other Catastrophes* (Emma-Kate Croghan, 1996) or *Redball* (Jon Hewitt, 1998).
  - 28 The 'Million Dollar Movies' accord was developed in 1995/96 as a joint initiative of the AFC and SBS Independent, with Beyond Films as sales agent. Other partners were brought in later with the Premium Movie Partnership in Australia and Channel Four in the UK. Five films with budgets of A\$1 million each were funded over a three-year period. The funding for *La Spagnola* (*The Spanish Woman*) was the last to be announced (November 1999). The others were *Fresh Air* (Neil Mansfield, 1998), *Mallboy* (Vincent Giarrusso, 1999), *A Wreck, A Tangle* (Scott Patterson, 1999) and *City Loop* (Belinda Chayko, 1999).
  - 29 AFC & FFC, *Report on the Film and Television Production Industry*, op.cit. p. 7.
  - 30 *ibid.* p. 8.
  - 31 There is now so much product, that is, so many films waiting to be next into the cinemas, that there is a lot of pressure to get non-performing films off and the next one on. It is simplistic to say that they will be off if they don't perform in the first week as it is more of a complex equation than this. However, some of the films screening at any multiplex will have to move over to make room for new product and it makes sense that those which are not performing are those which have to move over. Exhibitors will however have a strategy for each film and know that some films need time to find an audience.
  - 32 The strategy to launch the film in the country was because they felt that it was a film that would benefit from word of mouth and also, it is a film about community and the country.
  - 33 AFI is Australian Film Institute
  - 34 David Stratton, 'Road to Nhill', *Variety*, August 18-24, 1997, p.35.
  - 35 Sue Maslin quoted in Lisa French, *Do Contemporary Australian Women Filmmakers Share a Feminist Perspective in their Work?*, MA Thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1995, p.66.
  - 36 Ronin Films, *Road to Nhill Press Kit*, 1996, p.2.
  - 37 See Blonski et. al., op. cit. p. 224.
  - 38 I am not arguing that all action films are directed by or star men, as obviously women action directors exist and increasingly, warrior women have appeared in films—although it could be argued that these characters, while women, act in the same way as male action stars.
  - 39 Matthew Dyktinski describing his character in: Ronin Films, *Road to Nhill Press Kit*, 1996, p.21.

# POSTMODERN FEMINISM in *The Piano*

MARY ALEMANY-GALWAY

This paper will offer an analysis of Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) as a postmodern feminist film. It evinces many of the same concerns as postmodern feminism and adopts many of the same ways of thinking, as well as using a postmodern cinematic style. The relation of *The Piano* to postmodern feminism is not necessarily obvious to Campion herself. But, as a woman living at the end of the twentieth century, she is involved in the same dilemmas and perplexities about the human condition as the rest of us and influenced by the prevalent climate of thought.

Many feminists, as Linda Nicholson has discovered, object strongly to postmodernism since they feel it undermines political certainties. However, Nicholson (and other feminists) feel that postmodernism is important in that it helps one to



HOLLY HUNTER AND ANNA PAQUIN IN *THE PIANO* (JANE CAMPION, 1993)

see what is theoretically problematic in much modern political and social theory and within feminism itself. Postmodern thinkers, such as Lyotard and Foucault, show us how claims to objective knowledge tend to hide power games that are often detrimental to women and minorities. Postmodernism is also useful in helping feminists eradicate those elements within itself that prevent an adequate theorization of differences among women. Like postmodern thinkers, Nicholson believes that truth is plural and contingent.<sup>1</sup> Mostly Nicholson is referring to a type of postmodern thought associated with the French poststructuralists. Poststructuralism operates as a critique of structuralism from within and also includes such thinkers as Derrida and the later Barthes.<sup>2</sup>

What I will call a postmodern feminist cinema thus forwards a multiplicity of truths and leaves the contradictions between them open. In essence, this is the type of feminist cinema that Kuhn sees as offering the possibility of a 'feminine language'. She posits that it is somewhat different from the deconstructive 'Brechtian' feminist cinema, which tends to follow an argument and expects the viewer to come to certain conclusions. 'Feminine writing' in the cinema still offers a challenge to Hollywood cinema but in a more oblique way. It privileges feminine subjectivity, heterogeneity and multiplicity of meanings in its mode of address and thus has a tendency towards openness. Kuhn cites Potter's *Thriller* (1979), Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972) and Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1978) as examples of this type of cinema.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, I am not referring here to the type of postmodern film, like *Star Wars* or *Body Heat*, which duplicates past styles and narrative forms in a type of nostalgia that supports conventional ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I am referring to the type of critical postmodern work that Craig Owens discusses in his article on feminist artists and postmodernism. For instance, he discusses Martha Rosler's photographic work and how her juxtaposition of two representational systems (verbal and visual) undermines the truth-value of each.<sup>5</sup>

Originally from New Zealand but now living and working in Australia, Campion's film career is international in reputation and scope. Her work has been seen and supported as that of an auteur who imbues each film with her own vision and style.<sup>6</sup> In this film, Campion is pointing to the multiple and contradictory forces that make up any identity. Caught between nature and society, our need for freedom and human limitations, we are, as Lacan says, posited on desire. Many narratives point to these conflicts but most of them resolve the nature/culture opposition by the end. What is different about *The Piano* is that it forwards the contradictions and leaves them unresolved in the same way as they are left unresolved in postmodern feminism.

The film can be seen primarily as a feminist exploration of the construction of gender and sexuality. However, in feminist terms these are not unproblematic concepts. Of course, gender is usually associated with social norms and sexuality with natural instincts but the valuation of each of these in feminism has changed over time, as I shall explain later. It seems to me that the film deconstructs the nature/culture opposition and that the depiction of the Maoris (which has been seen by some as racist<sup>7</sup>) is meant to fit into this opposition. It is an opposition that is also central to the gothic novel, which the film both mimics

and comments upon. The central image of the piano on the beach implies the conflicting pulls of nature and culture that are embedded in any music or art associated with the romantic movement in the nineteenth century.

The question is—why have some seen the film as exemplary in its depiction of feminist and postcolonial concerns<sup>8</sup> and some seen it as racist and sexist (particularly in its depiction of the seduction scenes which some see as rape?<sup>9</sup>) I will argue that this has to do with the nature of postmodern works which are built on contradictions that are never resolved. Many writers have seen the contradictions in the film<sup>10</sup> but none have directly related this feature of the work to the nature of postmodern thought.

Bennett and Royle see undecidability of meaning as one of the key components of postmodern works. They point out that classical logic is based on the law of non-contradiction: something cannot be both A and not A at the same time. A good example of a paradoxical statement is the sentence, 'I am a liar'. In classical logic this is an isolated case but for the postmodern, the suspension of the law of non-contradiction is endemic. This has radical implications since it calls into question traditional values such as God, Truth, Reason and Law. For the postmodern critic, undecidability radically undermines the principle of unity in a work and dislodges the principle of a final meaning.<sup>11</sup> Thus it becomes difficult for traditional critics who do look for unity and a final meaning to understand what message a postmodern work is trying to convey.

The film is an account of the colonial experience in nineteenth century New Zealand and as such raises the problematics of the relationship between coloniser and colonised. The centre of the story is Ada (Holly Hunter), a self-willed mute, who has come to New Zealand with her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin) and her beloved piano, to marry Stewart (Sam Neill). This is a marriage arranged by her father. Her subsequent love affair with Baines (Harvey Keitel), a white man who has befriended the Maoris, leads to the end of the marriage. Dyson argues that a fantasy of colonial reconciliation is played out through the developing sexual relationship of Ada and Baines. According to her, Ada dumps her piano into the ocean as a symbol of her rejection of European bourgeois culture and her decision to begin her life anew with Baines who has already 'gone native'.<sup>12</sup> This indeed is one



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possible explanation of the plot but it doesn't take into account the fact that the piano itself has multiple contradictory meanings.

Although Ada chose to stop speaking at the age of six, she does have a voice of sorts and this is her piano playing. Campion has deliberately chosen a form of communication that is outside language and the rational and therefore, in some ways, outside society's structures. Music communicates on a purely emotional (natural) level and the romantic emotionality of her playing is emphasised in the film. Visually, the piano is associated with nature as it is left on the beach when Ada arrives in New Zealand and ends up at the bottom of the ocean by the end of the film. Yet, it is also a cultural instrument and as such is part of society. Here we find one of the central contradictions of the film, that some things (the piano, Maoris, women) can belong to both sides of the nature/culture opposition, that is, that some things can be A and not A.

In an interview, Jane Campion states that she studied structural anthropology and linguistics with a disciple of Claude Lévi-Strauss. What interested her particularly was the nature of thought and its mythical content 'which has nothing to do with logic'.<sup>13</sup> Lévi-Strauss believed that we all think in terms of binary oppositions, nature and culture being the primary one. So did most structuralists but, even in Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, there was



a term that did not fit this neat schema and this was the incest taboo which could be seen as both natural and cultural. In one of the seminal texts of the poststructuralist critique of structuralism, Derrida points this out and calls for an abandonment of the idealization of structure. Instead, Derrida proposes a free play of meaning without the security of a stable structure and the 'affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin, which is offered to active interpretation'.<sup>14</sup> This is an excellent description of a poststructuralist/postmodern work where paradoxical meanings are left open for the audience's active interpretation.

*The Piano* points to the contradictory positions that both women and indigenous people are placed in because of the way they are positioned in traditional accounts of the nature/culture opposition. That is, both women and the native Other are seen as belonging to nature and thus 'naturally' occupying a subordinate position. If they reject this position then, in a structure of binary oppositions, they would immediately belong to the realm of culture. But it is this very culture which has repressed them in the first place.

The Maoris in the film are caught in this contradiction since it is their closeness to nature, sexuality and the land which enables them to see the rigidity and sterility of the white colonialists' society. However, to survive they too must adapt to that society's ways, at least to some extent. Thus, in the script, when Baines is leaving, Hira, an older Maori woman, says this to him:

*I worry for us Peini Pakeha cunning like wind, KNOCK you over, yet you cannot see it. Some they say, 'How can pakeha get our land if we won't sell it?' They wrong Peini. Today our enamee he sell some land for heapah guns.*

*Now, we too buy guns. We must sell our land to fight for our land.*<sup>15</sup>

This speech has been left out of the film but the semi-adaptation of the Maoris to white mores is implicit in the hybridity of their costumes, speech patterns and customs.

Bhabha, in an essay on postcolonial identity, cites Fanon, the seminal writer of colonial liberation, who warns against the romanticising of a people's past since simplified national narratives can miss the fluctuating movement that people are just giving shape to. Bhabha argues that:

*It is from this instability of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities—modern, colonial, postcolonial, 'native'—that cannot be a knowledge that is stabilised in its enunciation.*<sup>16</sup>

This unstable, hybrid position should also be taken as the norm in the nature/culture divide, for none of us are either one or the other, rather we belong to both categories.

Campion has stated that she wanted to deal with 'the relationships between primitivism and civilisation, a whole construction based on opposites'.<sup>17</sup> The problematic of the relationship between women's position and that of the racial Other was already a part of the gothic genre in the nineteenth century—a genre which the film mimics and comments upon. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) has long been recognised as an exploration and critique of the position of women in nineteenth century society but it is only recently that critics have begun to see questions of racial and ethnic difference as central to the novel.<sup>18</sup> In *Jane Eyre*, the mad Creole woman from the West Indies is depicted as a sort of wild animal whose very presence impedes the marriage between the governess, Jane, and her master, Rochester. In plot terms, this is because he is married to her. But, she also represents a wild, promiscuous (natural?) sexuality that must be contained for marriage, that is, reinstated into the social order, to succeed.

Thus, the racial Other, in many Imperial texts, symbolises nature in its wild, chaotic and disordered form—a dangerous kind of freedom which is associated with sexuality.<sup>19</sup> In *Jane Eyre*, the mad-woman in the attic must die (in a fire that she herself ignites) so that the proper marriage can take place. Campion turns this around in *The Piano* since it is the more relaxed sexual mores of the Maoris that are validated rather than the repressive ones of the Anglo-Saxon culture represented by 'old dryballs'—Ada's husband. It is his patriarchal/colonialist position which must be rejected for the 'true union' of the lovers to take place.

Campion tells us that she is attracted to romantic literature and wanted to contribute to the genre but from the standpoint of the colonial culture that she belongs to. She particularly likes Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847).<sup>20</sup> In this novel, the nature/culture opposition is played out in the character structure of the two men that the heroine, Catherine, is involved with. Heathcliff, the man she is in love with, is associated with nature and sexuality while her husband is associated with social order and appears to be somewhat asexual. This, of course, parallels the character structures of Baines and Stewart. As well, Heathcliff is lower class and uneducated and there is a hint of his darkness being caused by a racial mixture just as Baines is lower class and uneducated and is associated with the Maoris.

However, there are also interesting differences between the two works. Heathcliff and Catherine can only be united in death but Baines' love is not depicted as ultimately destructive and, even though he is associated with nature, he brings Ada to live in and accept society. If love and the romantic impulse can lead not only to transcendence but also to death and dissolution,



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they can also lead us back into society and culture. This is a central contradiction in the film and its centrality is signaled by the image of the piano on the beach which implies the contradictory pulls of nature and culture which are embedded in any music or art associated with the romantic movement in the nineteenth century. Campion, in her introduction to the film script, warns of the dangers of untrammelled passion, for the romantic impulse can be courageous but, paradoxically, can also be foolhardy.

*I think that the romantic impulse is in all of us and that sometimes we live it for a short time, but it's not part of a sensible way of living. It's a heroic path and it generally ends dangerously. I treasure it in the sense that I believe it's a path of great courage. It can also be the path of the foolhardy and the compulsive.<sup>21</sup>*

In the film, that danger becomes obvious when the piano nearly pulls Ada down to her watery death. However, her romantic courage has also enabled her to fight against the repressive patriarchal system, which imprisoned her in a loveless marriage.

The gothic genre is directed at women and therefore mirrors their concerns. The basic premise is that a good man is hard to detect and he that seems above suspicion is often the villain and might even be a murderer. One aspect of the genre is that marriage is often seen as a form of mutilation or imprisonment. Women in gothics are persecuted and therefore, since the eighteenth century, this genre has proved attractive to many women writers, including feminists. The difference between popular gothics and a militantly gothic novel, like *Maria* (1768) by Mary Wollstonecraft, is that the latter explores women's conflicts on a conscious level and these conflicts are not resolved in a fantasy ending.<sup>22</sup> Campion certainly makes the conflicts of the genre obvious in *The Piano*, particularly between marriage and freedom, but its 'happy ever after' ending could be seen as a problem in feminist terms.

That the film deals with feminist issues is made clear from the beginning by the fact that Ada refuses to speak yet we hear her voice authoring the fiction. The problematic of 'the woman's voice' is important in feminist film theory.<sup>23</sup> In a patriarchal society where women have little power in the public sphere and are not encouraged to speak as subjects, or authors of their own discourse, the theme of the woman's voice is an important one. But Ada has chosen NOT to speak from the age of six. Perhaps this has happened because, in some way, she has recognised that to use language is to enter the Symbolic and to become subject to the Law of the Father, that is, to enter the patriarchal order.

Here is another of the central contradictions of the film and it has been one of the central contradictions of feminism as well. Liberal feminists seek gender equality and access to the public sphere, that is, they want to acquire a voice. The danger of gender equality is that one risks becoming man-like and adopting patriarchal values, as some feminists have pointed out.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, to refuse to speak leaves one vulnerable and in the power of others and, of course, Ada is sent by her father to New Zealand to marry a man whom she has never met.



Ada seems to be able to communicate, in a full sense, only with her daughter, Flora. Again, this is significant in feminist terms because the closeness of the mother/daughter bond is often seen as the basis for the identification of women with women. I think Campion has chosen to name the daughter Flora as an allusion to Botticelli's painting, *Primavera*. In this painting there is a figure of a young woman carrying flowers who is usually called Flora and who is seen as 'mistress of flowers and a goddess of spring'.<sup>25</sup> It seems to me that this figure alludes to the myth of Demeter and Persephone and this is why Campion has chosen the name. Demeter is an earth goddess who goes into mourning when Hades abducts her daughter and this brings about winter and the death of vegetation. It is only when Persephone is allowed to come back for six months of the year that spring returns to the land. This ancient myth has been seen by some feminists as emblematic of the bond between mother and daughter, as well as between women and nature.<sup>26</sup> This is the realm of essentialist feminism, that is, of a feminism which advocates the rejection of all masculine values and the adoption of a value system that is specifically that of women and is based on caring, continuity and the experience of mothering.

Thus, through the construction of the character of Ada as an artist (who finds a voice in her music), a wilful mute and a mother, the film juxtaposes the opposing discourses within feminism itself. According to Barrett and Phillips, in the 1970s, liberal feminists claimed that the differences between men and women were based on social constructions of gender and thus oppression was seen to occur at the level of the social structure. Patriarchy used arguments from nature and biology and defined women through their sex as 'naturally weak' and inferior and therefore the idea of women being 'naturally' different was rejected. How-

ever, later feminist theorists saw sexual difference as more positive since they esteemed specifically feminine values and pointed out the theoretical problems in distinguishing between biology and social construction. The impulse towards denying sexual difference came to be viewed as capitulation to a masculine mould. Barrett and Phillips point out that a third element in this debate has been the appropriation and development of poststructuralist and postmodernist ideas by some feminists. 'Much of this work is "deconstructive" in character, seeking to destabilise—challenge, subvert, reverse, overturn—some of the hierarchical binary oppositions (including those implicating sex and gender) of western culture'.<sup>27</sup> In a similar fashion, *Campion* is deconstructing the binary opposition of sex and gender that is central to feminism and, of course, this follows on her concern with the nature/culture opposition.

Thus, even though the film seems to have a happy ending it certainly can be classified as having feminist concerns. However, we are not faced with a straightforward indictment of patriarchal society. In a postmodern fashion, the film forwards the contradictions of feminism and leaves them open rather than trying to resolve them. It is true that Ada does give up her piano and her silence at the end of the film and chooses a relationship with a man and an accommodation with society, but this traditional happy ending is problematised in a number of ways. The image that we see of Ada with her metal finger clicking on the piano keys is certainly counter to the passionate piano playing that she indulged in before. And the black veil, which covers her face as she walks up and down, is disturbing. Both of these symbols imply the mutilation and imprisonment, which is often the fate of gothic heroines. The visual insert, at the end of the film, of the image of the piano at the bottom of the sea with her body floating above it, is also strange and threatening. This happy ending in some ways seems like an unhappy one. *Campion* does not resolve the conflict between individualism/romanticism and social values/marriage the way a 'normal' narrative would do. Like other postmodern artists, she leaves the options open for active interpretation. The question remains—can women preserve their voice and spirituality when they get married and join a patriarchal society?

Perhaps the answer is that there is no ONE answer. Judith Butler has explored the political implications of the deconstruction of the subject of feminism. She proposes that it would be better to safeguard the rift among women over the content of the term so as to assure a future of multiple significations.<sup>28</sup> In a similar manner, Donna Haraway's postmodern approach is appealing in that it does not pretend to mirror women's experience or to define women's reality at all. Rather than beginning with a definition of oppression or woman, Haraway begins from the assumption of women's oppression and seeks a new description of women which might move humans away from the oppressive and static gender codes and towards an alternative understanding of humans as perpetually unfixed and contingent.<sup>29</sup>

*Campion* seems to have similar ideas in that she not only problematizes the idea of what a woman is but also our usual assumptions about men. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff, the male figure associated with nature and sexuality as is Baines, is a violent man. In *The Piano*,

this violence characterises the man who stands for the patriarchal order; that is, the husband. In *Wuthering Heights*, the implication is that sexuality is a violent and destructive force, while the husband is gentle but a boring conformist. As Robin Wood has pointed out, this is a common assumption in popular culture.<sup>30</sup> Baines is somewhat outside society, somewhat of a rebel, but he is also the 'new age sensitive man'. He starts by bargaining with Ada for sexual favours but, as Sue Gillett notes, his desire becomes a passive desire for her desire and turns away from the appropriative aims of a phallically defined masculinity.<sup>31</sup>

The film is also unusual in ascribing an active sexual desire to Ada. Her child does not seem to have been the result of a rape but a love affair where she communicated with her lover's mind telepathically. The scene where she caresses her husband is particularly interesting since here she takes a physically active role while he lies there completely passive. Campion explains the scene in this way:

*When Ada caresses Stewart, she is looking for herself. Usually, it is the reverse: women often feel men are treating them as objects. Maybe it's a cliché, but often men want a sexual experience without being emotionally involved. The film wants to show that men too are vulnerable, sexually vulnerable as well. They need to be loved and to feel protected.*<sup>32</sup>

In other words, the sexual contradictions of love and lust exist for both men and women.

It might seem like a small thing to claim for women an active sexual desire but the implications are wide-ranging. Hélène Cixous, the postmodern French feminist, claims that in philosophy woman is always on the side of passivity. As soon as there is a will (desire, authority) one is led right back to the father.<sup>33</sup> The opening of Pandora's box has from Greek times been seen as a threat to the established male order. Campion uses an old fairytale, Perrault's *Bluebeard*, to call attention to the dangers of female curiosity, sexual or otherwise. (This is the story enacted in the play put on at the church, which parallels the scene of Ada's finger being cut off by her husband with an axe.) The patriarchal order does not accept women's agency, their curiosity or desires. Perrault's tale of a young wife who is given a bunch of keys to the house upon her husband's departure and told she can use any one of them except the smallest, on pain of death, seems to have sexual implications, that is, the smallest key refers to a woman's clitoris. As we know, many women all over the world are forbidden to use that key to their sexual pleasure.

Like Cixous, Campion, in this film, is against binary schemes of thought which would place women on either side of the passive/active divide. Against any binary scheme they set heterogeneous difference as an ideal. *The Piano* fits in well with Cixous' notion of *écriture féminine* which designates the kind of writing said to be done by women where the text 'works on difference'.<sup>34</sup> Some French theory is very explicit about linking the female body to postmodern forms of thought. Like Cixous, Irigaray has talked about the feminine as linked to multiplicity and difference. For her, that link is reflected in the female body itself with its multiple zones of eroticism symbolised most fully in the two lips of the vagina. Irigaray's emphasis on the two lips that are always touching constructs the sense of touch as

the female sexual equivalent of the male's voyeurism.<sup>36</sup> Campion's reliance on this schema has already been pointed out by Stella Bruzzi who states that 'in Ada's piano-playing scenes with Baines the emphasis is on proximity, as the (touching of) clothes and body are part of the same ritualistic process, leading not to distancing but sex'.<sup>37</sup> Further it is Stewart's adherence to the male dependency on the look that renders him paradoxically passive. *The Piano* thus creates 'an interrelationship between an active female subject and the feminine sense of touch'.<sup>38</sup>

In the film, the emphasis on the sense of touch is made evident by the focus on Ada's fingers from the first shot, which is a reddish close-up of her fingers. She communicates through sign language, and her fingers, of course, play the piano and explore Stewart's body. So it is not surprising that, as a punishment for owning her desire, Stewart cuts off one of her fingers and threatens to cut the rest off if she returns to Baines. This is no doubt a form of castration. Yet female sexuality has not had an unproblematic history within feminism itself. The attitudes of feminists toward women's sexuality have been contradictory, probably because one both wants sexual pleasure and yet must protect oneself from becoming a sexual object and victim. Campion points to this paradox by having Stewart try to rape Ada just after he has cut off her finger. Naomi Wolf in *Promiscuities* discusses the divergent attitudes that feminists have taken towards female sexuality and argues for a reclaiming of female desire and a re-valuing of the female body as sacred because of its eroticism and generative capacity.<sup>39</sup>



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The linking of the body and sexuality with the spiritual also occurs in *The Piano*. Female sexuality is associated with nature and the romantic music played by Ada. The climactic sexual scene between Ada and Baines takes place in his house situated in the undisturbed 'native bush' and the release of sexual passion is accompanied by extra-diegetic piano music similar to that usually played by Ada. Campion has spoken of her love of romantic literature.<sup>40</sup>

In the romantic movement the links between spirituality and nature were very prevalent. The strange thing is that this link is also evident in postmodern feminism, particularly if one substitutes the body for nature. Stockton calls poststructuralist/postmodern feminists, 'the new Victorians'. According to her, what God was to Victorian thinkers, the body is to postmodern feminists. To compensate for deconstructive excesses and extreme forms of social constructionism, they have adopted a spiritual materialism, which eludes definitions and endows bodies with sacred enigmas and mystical escapes. Her three exemplars, Gallup, Haraway and Irigaray, cover the fields of literary criticism, biology and philosophy respectively. 'When they bend back to bodies, poststructuralists almost inevitably repeat a Judeo-Christian problematic, since they must invest in beliefs in something that escapes and exceeds human sign systems'.<sup>41</sup>

In an interview, Campion talks of her feelings for the New Zealand landscape. She explains that she thought the wild landscape suited the story because romanticism is harsh and dark. She wanted the audience to feel afraid of the power of the natural elements. 'That is, I believe in the essence of romanticism: that respect for nature seen as greater than you, your spirit or humanity even'.<sup>42</sup> The discourse of spiritualism is just such a discourse—one where human meanings fail. 'Spiritual can illumine both Victorians' and poststructuralists' reliance on general categories of inscrutabilities'.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, as I pointed out earlier, Campion's attitude to romanticism is not simplistic. She sees the romantic impulse as both courageous and foolhardy. In the end, Ada insists on throwing her piano, that symbol of her romantic spirituality, overboard and, for a moment, almost joins it in its grave in the ocean depths but chooses life instead. Campion tells us that Ada becomes able to separate art from life: 'Up until then she had a poetic idea of herself—she was in love with her romantic ideals, which in the end dominated her so much so she couldn't live'.<sup>44</sup>

There is no absolute final truth in this story just as there is no absolute truth in postmodern knowledge, as Lyotard has noted.<sup>45</sup> In cultural terms, this has meant a questioning of narrative structures and their propensity to provide the reader with a 'truth' or vision of the world, which is unified and coherent and can be attributed to the genius of the author.<sup>46</sup> In a critical postmodern work, the 'truth' presented by a discourse is problematised and the idea that there can be a universal, coherent account of the world is put into question. If more conventional postmodern works duplicate past narrative forms because they are nostalgic about that past, and would like to see conventional values reinstated, critical postmodern works either duplicate past narrative forms to question their inherent value systems and/or juxtapose contradictory truths so as to make us aware of the complexity of the 'truth'. In *The Piano*, Campion uses both of these postmodern strategies, that is,



she problematizes the gothic genre and its associated romanticism and she juxtaposes the divergent truths that are present in the discourses of feminism.

The juxtaposition of opposing accounts of reality is most clearly seen in the ending. As I have stated, the happy ending of the woman's melodrama is subverted through the use of disturbing elements in the *mise-en-scène* such as the metal finger and the black veil. But, it is the insertion of the final shot of the piano at the bottom of the sea, with Ada's body floating above it, which is most disturbing. Apparently Campion was not sure which ending to use and has given us both.<sup>47</sup> Even though the mutually exclusive versions are accounted for by Ada's voice-over, the strength of a visual corroboration and the fact that this is the last image of the film leaves the ending open to audience interpretation.

Postmodern narratives often use the device of multiple endings. They present contradictory and mutually exclusive versions of events that do not allow the reader/viewer to infer a coherent story and reality.<sup>48</sup> Thus, we are not sure if *The Piano* has a happy ending or not, or even if Ada has really given up her romantic aspirations. As women, it is difficult to even decide which is the best ending—marriage or a transcendent release into nature and art. As Campion says:

*Personally, I feel within me, among other things, two main forces guiding me: the excitement of discovering the truth about things and people, whatever that might be, and the desire to be loved. Two such companions are difficult to accommodate.*<sup>49</sup>

For women generally, as for feminism, it is difficult to decide between the conflicting pulls of individualism and human connection, the spiritual and the material world, love and lust, culture and nature.<sup>50</sup>

## Endnotes

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