

Underground film in australia

■ Danny Zuvela

Consider three films:

1. David Perry's *A Sketch on Abigail's Belly* (1968), an impressionistic glimpse of the filmmaker's wife's pregnancy, structured around a set of graphic associations including a rainbow balloon slowly filled with tapwater, an orange cut on a chopping board and imagery of a Venus-like Abigail at bathtime, massaging oil into her belly.
2. Nick Zedd and Richard Kern's *Thrust in Me* (1982), a black and white film featuring a scowling Zedd, whom, upon discovering the corpse of a young suicide in a bathtub, thrusts his erect penis in her mouth; subsequent closeups show the receiving mouth belonging to Zedd in full drag. (yeah, you can see it on Youtube, but probably not at work).
3. Ken Jacobs' *Star Spangled to Death* (2004) collages found instructional films and vintage documentaries together with semi-deranged intertitles lambasting the absurdities of capitalism and footage of legendary queer performer Jack Smith acting up in the streets of 1950s New York.

There is little to connect these three films: aesthetically, experientially, and in terms of their makers, they couldn't be more different. David Perry is a Sydney-based experimental filmmaker, photographer and artist, Nick Zedd a New York punk provocateur and Ken Jacobs the venerable granddaddy of the American avant-garde cinema. The first was shot on 16mm, the second on Super-8, and the third on a combination of film and different video formats. *Abigail* is just over a minute long, *Thrust in Me* comes in at 8 minutes, while *Star Spangled* sprawls across 3 DVDs, unravelling over nearly 7 hours. It's probably safe to say that *Abigail* is widely loved, Zedd's work widely loathed, and most people don't know what to make of the epic 'lyrical junkyard' which the *Village Voice* declared 'the ultimate underground movie'.¹ How is it, then, that all three are regarded as 'underground film'? What has this term meant historically, in Australia and the rest of the world, and what does it mean now?

The origin of a species

'The term 'underground' is very much rooted in a particular pre-Seventies concept of film as an act of sedition or revolution,' says Brisbane filmmaker and cult film impresario Andrew Leavold. 'It has connotations of being 'daring',

'provocative', 'unspeakable' or 'unseeable', set against the backdrop of a conservative, 'straight' society.'² Certainly, these are the ideas the term summons in the minds of most viewers; however, since its inception, the term, like the cinema it describes, has evolved unevenly, meaning different things at different times in history. As Duncan Reekie – author of the self-described *Definitive History of Underground Cinema* notes,

'Underground' was first deployed by beat and early counter-cultural agents to designate their subculture of resistance beneath the square world: it was a metaphoric invocation of the resistance groups of World War Two who secretly sabotaged the Fascist occupation of Europe. Crucially the Underground understood itself to be a culture; to be not only a community and a way of life but a sensibility that could realise the secret subtext of utopian liberation in popular culture.³

What began as a term originating in a famous 1957 essay on rebel Hollywood auteurs by legendary American film critic Manny Farber (1917-2008) quickly mutated into a description for filmmaking operating beneath the radar of 'official culture' and legitimate media, centred around the key nuclei of New York and San Francisco. Critical figures including Maya Deren, Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Kenneth Anger and Harry Smith emerged, making a range of poetic, diaristic and abstract experimental works.

By the early 1960s, the explosion of independent production led to the establishment of egalitarian filmmaker organisations, such as the New York Filmmakers Co-operative, whose revolutionary aims were supporting the making and screening of underground films. In Swinging London, a bootstrapping operation was devised between the notorious underground newspaper *International Times* (IT) and the London Filmmakers Cooperative, formed in October 1966, who put on multimedia countercultural events at which a band named Pink Floyd received its first public notice.⁴

Underground film in Australia

A similar freewheeling democratic spirit and groovy entrepreneurialism typified the activities of the Ubu collective, active in Sydney between 1965 and 1970, which had ties to the infamous OZ magazine, and, from March 1968, produced their own underground newspaper, *UbuNews*.⁵

The proceeds from Ubu's popular lightshows were used to fund more production, and the distribution of other filmmakers' work. It was with Ubu – the rabble-rousing libertarian film posse spearheaded by the dynamic Albie Thoms and including Aggy Read and John Clark – that David Perry produced the controversial *A Sketch on Abigail's Belly*. The film encountered censorship difficulties, notably 'when Aggy Read tried to take the film to the US (and) it was refused permission for export'⁶. Operating before the 1970s 'revival' of Australian filmmaking, and light years before the takeover by Australian moving images of the gallery space, Ubu waged censorship battles and developed a unique independent system of production, distribution and exhibition at a time when no such official structure existed. After successfully arguing their case for co-operative registration with the Australian Government by using the only model available (that of a farmer's co-operative!), Thoms and Read took advantage of Ubu Films' distribution base and in May 1970, the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op was formed.⁷

By the mid-1970s, however, the vital beat and bohemian energies that had birthed the underground cinema were dissipating and a division began to show between formally-inclined 'artists' cinema' filmmakers, and the more counter-cultural inclinations of 'the underground'. Structural Film⁸ gathered up artistically-inclined filmmakers who distrusted the romantic symbolism, libidinous excesses, ostentatious amateurism and eye-gouging psychedelia of the 1960s, and sought to distance themselves from their predecessors, using minimalist strategies which interrogated the material, mechanical, optical, chemical and perceptual processes of filmmaking itself.

In the UK, the 'cultural consecration'⁹ of some Structural Film artists resulted in heavily subsidised promotion of their work, and in the US, the purified, minimalistic experiments of Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow and others became a kind of institutionalised avant-garde. In Australia, Ubu disbanded, and although the Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative continued, the omnivorous volunteerism of the 1960s underground mutated into a distinctly different aesthetic program 'shaped by its belief in radical political agendas'.¹⁰ While some films by Dirk de Bruyn, John Dunkley-Smith, Paul Winkler and the Cantrills do confirm structural tendencies, on the whole the urge to make the sort of films Reekie at one point describes as 'radically tedious'¹¹ was not as widely evidenced by Australian experimental filmmakers in the 1970s as it was elsewhere.

The backlash against Structural Film began in the early 1980s, as the film-pendulum began to swing back towards narrative, drama, actors and characters. In the US, the No Wave movement developed among filmmakers antagonised by 'the sedate minimalism and modernism of the avant-garde', who began producing 'no-budget Super-8 documentaries and ironic spectacles which parodied and celebrated 1960s Underground cinema, film noir, European art cinema and trash exploitation movies'.¹²

In Australia, young filmmakers, experimenting with the possibilities of cheaper Super-8 film, distanced themselves from both commercial cinema and the 'absolutely anti-narrative' 16mm 'avant-garde orthodoxy'¹³ alike. Key

filmmakers in the Australian post-punk underground include Brisbane filmmaker Gary Warner, whose rapid, single-frame clusters and nervous lens movements embodied the in-the-wild interdisciplinary energy of what has been described as 'Brisbane dada'.¹⁴ Warner's films were an intrinsic part of performances by the band known as Zero, later (Xero), projected as the band played in an expansion of the cinema beyond the quietist dynamics of 'serious' film screenings (art, arthouse or otherwise).

Making a spectacle of themselves: the transgressive underground

The most spectacular of the resurfaced 1980s underground was the Cinema of Transgression spearheaded by Nick Zedd in New York, who, in his manifesto (written under the pseudonym Orion Jeriko), promised to 'violate' 'the laws, commands and duties of the avant-garde; i.e. to bore, tranquilise and obfuscate', promising instead a 'direct attack on every value system known to man'.¹⁵ Repudiating 'the entrenched academic snobbery which erected a monument to laziness known as structuralism', which, Zedd argued, 'ruined the underground of the sixties', the COT vowed to 'violate the command and law that we bore audiences to death' and 'to break all the taboos of our age by sinning as much as possible', promising 'blood, shame, pain and ecstasy, the likes of which no one has yet imagined'.¹⁶

This distinctive thread of the underground, concerned with liberation through degradation, draws energy from a long tradition of transgressive literature in art that includes de Sade, the Surrealists, Artaud, Bataille, Pauline Réage and the Viennese Aktionists. In Australian film history, it finds echoes in 'underground burlesque' films such as Colin Munro and Barry Humphries' *Le Bain Vorace (Dial P for Plughole)*, 1954, and the film *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain*, made in 1963 by a pre-Ubu Albie Thoms in collaboration with another young 'filmer'¹⁷ named Bruce Beresford. Based on a Jacques Prévert short story, the film in which 'the bourgeoisie ignores the perils of fallout'¹⁸ features a vision of society showered in great clods of excrement, and was promptly banned on its release. In 1970, Thoms showed the 'shit film' at the International Underground Film Festival in London, with the program note that it was 'the banning of *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* (that) led to underground activity and illegal screenings'.¹⁹ Underground cinema's nasty, scatological drives continue to generate controversy – most recently, with Nick Zedd being ejected from Canada for 'borderline criminal material' after police examined films he was carrying for presentation at a festival – *War is Menstrual Envy, Whoregasm and Smiling Faces Tell Lies*.²⁰

This extreme legacy continued into the 1990s for another generation of filmmakers for whom 'underground cinema' also meant low-budget, often gratuitously offensive and monstrously popular film produced independently of the film industry, such as in London's still-active open-access Exploding Cinema collective.²¹ Alternative distribution channels emerged in film festivals such as the New York and Chicago Underground Film Festival, followed by the Melbourne Underground Film Festival (2000-) and Sydney Underground Film Festival (2007-). While these events have manifestly supported underground film in all its forms, they

FINGERED

1986

super 8mm

black and white

28 min

soundtrack: Clint Ruin (Foetus), Lydia Lunch
and Norman Westburg

"...the most offensive, sleaziest, ugliest,
sickeningly violent and goddamned funniest
film I've ever seen!"

SCOTT MORROW

LA WEEKLY

August 1986

Sleazy punkster Lydia Lunch stars as an
abrasive phone-sex prostitute who's swept
along by her passions and those of her
greaseball ballfriend, played by Marty Nation.
After intense and prolonged hard-core
copulation, the two embark on a spree of
senseless, Charlie Starkweather style murder,
with knife-wielding Nation driving from
atrocious to atrocity while Lunch stridently
assails his manhood and demands to be let out
of the car. Despite Nation's assurances that
everything is under control, it's obvious that
events have slid into the realm of disaster.
The Lunch and Nation characters are exemplary
role models for any youths who want to grow up
to become institutionalised. Also excellent is
Lung Leg's portrayal of a teenage girl in
distress who the kill-crazy couple attempt to
defile in a climax of unsimulated barbarity.
Kern then has the good sense to end the movie
before it bogs down in self-analysis.

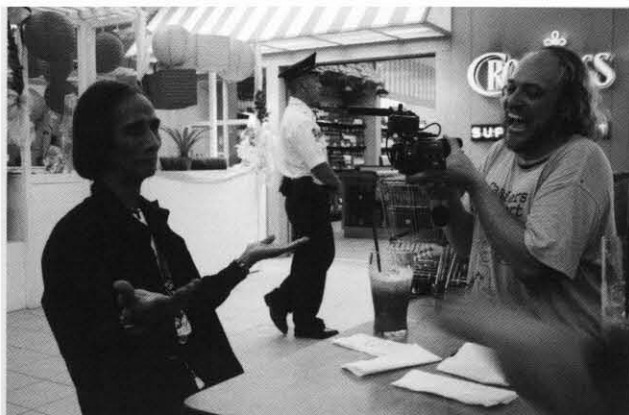
Kern wants to show us human behaviour at its
most repulsive without having to take a moral
stance. The strength of this film is that he
knows the extent to which our desires overrule
our reason. **FINGERED** is pure entertainment.
Without regard for conventional school-taught
thought patterns this intense barrage of
images speeds by without a single dead spot,
visuals tramping over conventional narrative.
Kern says: "The preview of a film is usually
the best part. It doesn't matter any more to
have a narrative sequence; there are lots of
movies that don't make sense and are so much
better for it."

Running only 23 minutes and paced like a car
chase, **FINGERED** is Kern's idea of what an
action movie should be. "I wanted it to be
like a drive-in trailer, where all you see are
the best parts. I wanted to capture all the
action within a compressed period of time, to
keep pushing things over the edge so that it
has more energy, more violence, more
excitement. More, more, more..."



Fingered, by Cinema of
Transgression filmmaker
Richard Kern, starring
Lydia Lunch as a phone sex
operator who teams up with
a psychotic rapist for a reign
of no-wave terror.

Lydia Lunch and Marty Nation in *Fingered*. PHOTO BY R. KERN



Brisbane underground filmmaker **Andrew Leavold** on location in Manila interviewing exploitation director 'Palito' for *The Search for Weng Weng*, a film about the one and only 'Filipino midget James Bond'. Photo: Khavn de la Cruz.



Nick Zedd, Director, still from *Whoregasm*, New York 1984.

have also contributed to a certain conceptual blurring around the meaning of 'underground cinema'. Recent programming has intermixed underground films with those labelled 'avant-garde', effectively foreclosing the argument between 'underground cinema' aligned with popular, transgressive spectacles, and its former foe, formalist 'fine-art film'.²² However, with this once-intractable opposition overcome, a new division has emerged for films and filmmakers operating in the usual stock-in-trade of underground cinema - self-produced, ultra-low-budget carnivals of exploitation, gore and violence - between those who actively aspire to commercial success, and those who don't.

Aspiration and the 'bona-fide' underground

As Leavold points out, 'in these days of shot-on-digital, hyper-violent commercial cinema' it can be hard to distinguish between bona fide 'underground' films and some of Hollywood's output.²³ As a look at the message boards of the Digital Retribution website (dedicated to 'Horror, Cult, Cheese and Sleaze from Down Under') shows, naked commercial ambition often goes hand-in-hand with self-production and the vast distribution possibilities of the internet. Underground film festivals have had more than a small role to play in the rise and rise of commercially aspirational low-budget shockers. As Adrian Martin has argued, the Melbourne Underground Film Festival (MUFF) is the example *par excellence*; founded in 2000 as a grassroots *salon des refusés* for filmmakers rejected by the overground Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF), MUFF didn't celebrate countercultural, oddball or personal visions by recognised underground filmmakers. Instead,

MUFF lionised two young, unknown Melbourne filmmakers who, in 2004, sold their low-budget idea for a gruesome, violent horror film to Hollywood, and then made a huge box-office success from it: *Saw*, written and directed (and even partly acted) by the team of James Wan and Leigh Whannell.²⁴

Of course, from its humble first showing at the inaugural MUFF, the *Saw* franchise²⁵ has come to emblemise the absorption of the formerly underground genre of splattercore by the mainstream film industry, becoming 'one of the most successful horror franchises of all-time'.²⁶ Similarly, the whips, chains and leather many associate with 'underground cinema' have gone noticeably overground; in the decade of MUFF's existence, for instance, fetish has gone from the province of secret VHS tapes in plain packaging to being an unremarkable aspect of contemporary sexual practice. As the commercial cinema licks its lips in anticipation of the next low-budget profit vehicle, the pressure is on film festivals to balance the need to demonstrate their engagement with screen culture, evaluate the degree to which they should act as a laboratory for the industry, and to decide between films that want to make a buck, and films that want to make a statement.

For Leavold, 'it's unfortunate that the 'underground film' rhetoric concentrates as heavily as it does on the genres which in recent years have become mainstays of commercial cinema – as festivals like MUFF give really crucial access to outsider cinema' – including work by filmmakers with little desire (and, it must be said, hope) of breakthrough commercial success.

1 Hoberman, J. 2003, 'Star Spangled to Death 1957-2004' *Village Voice* 15 October 2003, reprinted in Lim, Dennis (ed) *The Village Voice Film Guide: 50 Years of Movies From Classics to Cult Hits*.

2 Statements by Andrew Leavold quoted throughout this essay are sourced from a series of Facebook chat conversations with the author, February-March, 2010.

3 Reekie, Duncan 2007 *Subversive: A Definitive History of Underground Film*, Wallflower Press, London, p139.

4 'In the next month LFCM field their first major film series, the 'Spontaneous Festival Underground

Film' (which received 4 pages of coverage in IT, which of course LFCM also wrote), and then filled the rest of the year with a series of open screenings – screenings where anything that turns up on the night is projected' Thomas, Peter, 2006, 'The Struggle for Funding: Sponsorship, Competition and Pacification', *Screen* 47 p462.

5 See Mudie, Peter 1995 Sydney Underground Movies: Ubu Films 1965-1970, Bernt Porridge, UNSW Press, Sydney.

6 *UbuNews* No. 11, January 1969 p1.

7 The Melbourne Filmmakers Co-op (1971-76) involved a number of

notable Melbourne underground and experimental filmmakers including Arthur and Corinne Cantrill, Nigel Buesst, Peter Tammer (see Hodsdon, Barrett 2001 *Straight Roads and Crossed Lines: The Quest for Film Culture in Australia*, Bernt Porridge Group, Shenton Park p91).

8 Sitney 1979 (1969), Oxford University Press, p367.

9 Thomas, pp461-467

10 Hodsdon, p96

11 Reekie, p179

12 Reekie, p188

13 Hodsdon, p288

14 Szulakowska, Ursula 1987, 'Brisbane Dada: Collaborative Art in a Stagnant Culture', *eyeline* no. 1, May, p14, pp5-6.

15 Zedd, Nick 1984 'Cinema of Transgression manifesto' *Underground Film Bulletin*, New York.

16 Ibid.

17 In a 2003 interview, Albie told me that the term 'filmer' was preferred by 60s filmmakers who saw it as more closely aligning their work with other arts; e.g. writers and painters. See: http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/27/albie_thoms.html

18 See Thoms, Albie 1979, *Polemics for a New Cinema: Writings to Stimulate New*

Leavold argues that with the mainstreaming of such fare today 'underground film is more of a revolutionary act in the way films get made and distributed, than the content itself'. He should know: for over fifteen years, his name has been synonymous with the culture of underground film, making low-budget features, and helming much-loved Brisbane 'cult film emporium' Trash Video and its influential, decadent Film Club (2000-2006).²⁷ For Leavold, today's accelerated access to the means of production may mean some 'traditionally' underground territory is now the commercial mainstream's golden goose, but this merely heightens the need for opportunities to see 'difficult' and 'unseeable' films. According to Leavold, 'we need the dyed-in-the-wool troublemakers, the born shitstirrers - the provocateurs for whom Good Taste is a prison with words and ideas for bars', and, more than ever, 'we need to actively seek out alternatives.' Amidst the glare of multi-million-dollar 'high concept' film spectacles, people like Andrew Leavold, Jaimie and Aspa Leonarder (Mu-Mesons), and Jack Sargeant are crucial to maintaining the ongoing spirit - profane, collective, improvised, transgressive, convivial, illegitimate - of underground film. According to Leavold, 'obviously, to do this, there has to be passion, you have to really believe in the films. And be a certifiable junk-fried crazy'. ■

Danni Zuleva is based in Brisbane and is a writer and curator of all kinds of moving image. danni@otherfilm.org

Thanks to Andrew Leavold, my friend and colleague, for our discussions held over February 2010 (and also for many years of amazing and excruciating film). Check out: trashvideo.com.au and Stumpy's other blogs: *The Search For Weng Weng*.

www.andrewleavold.blogspot.com and www.bamboogodsandbionicboys.blogspot.com

Andrew's 'other' writings www.mondostumpo.blogspot.com

<http://www.revelationfilmfest.org/>; <http://www.sydneynundergroundfilmfestival.com/about.html>; <http://www.muff.com.au/>; <http://www.trasharama.com.au/>; <http://www.mumeson.org/>

Soft Skull Press has recently re-issued Jack Sargeant's *Deathtripping: An Illustrated History of Transgression*: <http://www.softskull.com/>

seed bomb

■ Kirsten Bradley

The poetry of the seed ball concept is simple, yet immense. Encase a seed in a protective jacket of clay, creating a seed ball. Distribute seed balls across the ground, not worrying if this day, or this month even, is the best time to 'sow'. Protected from insects, birds, heat and sunlight until the time is right, the seed ball activates with a rain event. But only a rain event that is sufficient to soak through the clay coating to germinate the seed. And that's it. But that's not all.

Let's talk ferment. Add compost to the clay. Now you have something to kick-start those seeds after germination. Add more growing medium to the seed ball. Add more than one seed. Different seeds. Compatible seeds. Now you're companion planting in the palm of your hand. Seed bombs the size of mandarins, which contain the beginnings of a field of wildflowers, or a hardy herb patch, or a potager garden. Now you're talking revolution.

There is a saying in permaculture design theory that advocates 'top-down thinking and bottom-up action'. Designing from



Seedballs and helpful notes for a herb garden.

Approaches to Film, Wild & Woolley Press, Sydney, p32; 79; 348-349; Mudie p274.

19 As Read wrote in a 1968 letter to the editor over the banning of another underground film on the basis of obscenity, 'a similar ban on the film *It Droppeth as the Gentle Rain* has been defied countless times without prosecution' and 'the film has been publicly screening in all States in Australia without any complaints from audiences' (reproduced in Mudie, 1995 p126)

20 'Who knows if they watched *Police State*?' he asks on his Myspace blog

account of the incident. Zedd, Nick 2008 Canada Sucks March 13, 2008, Myspace Page, blogs.myspace.com/nick_zedd.

21 See Reekie, Ch. 13 'The Underground Cinema Resurgence: From the New York Cinema of Transgression to the New London Underground 1991-2006', in *Subversion* pp187-199.

22 SUFF had Ubu in their inaugural year and Cantrills in 2008

23 As Leavold puts it, 'it can be hard to find differences at the level of content between, say, the recent *Hills Have Eyes* remake and its contemporaries within

the art and underground circuits - *Martyrs* (Pascal Laugier 2009), for example.'

24 Martin, Adrian 2007/9 'Grandrieux en el underground' *Archivos de la Cinemateca* no. 55 (Febrero 2007). pp. 158-175. [Spain] [trans. Antonio Francisco Rodriguez Esteban].

25 Saw I 2004 - Saw V 2008.

26 Ryan, Mark 2009, 'At Breaking Point? Challenges for Australian Film Policy through the Lens of Genre (horror) Film', ANZCAog Communication, Creativity and Global Citizenship conference, Brisbane, July 2009.

27 In 2010 he is to release two more shot on video, edited-on-home-computer feature films; as writer-director of *The Search for Weng Weng* (a video diary of his obsessive quest to find the truth behind the midgen James Bond of the Philippines) and, as Associate Producer and Researcher, *Machete Maidens Unleashed* (an upcoming Filipino exploitation film).