

Australian Documentary: Notes on the State of the Art of the Art of the State in the 1960s

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INTRODUCTION

This paper surveys and contextualises some of the state supported work produced by filmmakers at the Commonwealth Film Unit and ABC Television in the 1960s. Since that decade, broadcast television has increasingly become both the key commissioner and provider of an audience for documentary and, as many writers have observed, this means that television is now a decisive 'formative influence' on documentary production (Kilborn and Izod 1997, p. 7). In the period under examination, the negotiation of the relationship between these two state agencies was in its formative phase. While there were interchanges of personnel and formats, the two institutions initially adopted quite distinct approaches towards bringing their work to an audience.

Australian governments had been quick to adopt motion pictures as a medium to market their resources and promote migration (Laughren 1995). This soon enabled some filmmakers — often cinematographer-directors — to 'make a go of it' working for, or under contract to, government departments and newsreel companies. (Shirley and Adams 1983, pp. 3-19; Long in Mayer et al 1999, pp. 109-115). The Commonwealth became directly involved in film production in 1911 when the Department of External Affairs appointed James Campbell as its inaugural Cinematographer. After just eighteen months in his post, conflicts arising from his 'tendency to strive after "artistic" effects' led to Campbell's dismissal but a report on his sacking suggests the policy for much subsequent government sponsored production by the Commonwealth's Cinema Branch:

The Department simply requires prints of useful advertising value of good technical quality, sharp and clear. To meet the demand of the High Commissioner's Office, for the present at any rate, 'artistic' quality must, to a large extent be sacrificed to quantity. (Cooper 1965, p. 44)

The Second World War, however, brought significant changes to the nature and organisation of Commonwealth Government documentary production. Increasingly, documentary was recognised as a medium to break down sectionalism, promote national viewpoints and, in John Grierson's words, 'bring into the public imagination the problems, responsibilities and achievements of Government' (in Moran and O'Regan 1985:72). When the Australian National Film Board was established in 1945, one of its members, Professor Alan Stout emphasised that the Film Division

is not just a Government propaganda machine, In their own productions, they seek to give a true and objective picture of Australian problems, to encourage self criticism rather than complacency, to inform rather than to sell a policy. (Shirley & Adams 1983 p.177)

In the workplace, such views were not always welcomed. For years afterwards, amongst the older school of Australian cameramen, the term 'documentary would signal a middle-class concern with aesthetics and social concerns which had never been in the brief of the cameramen-directors of Frank Hurley's generation who regarded their productions as, essentially, adjuncts to marketing primary products (Ansara 1998, p. 41).

Most of the 'nation building' films produced in this period employed the classic documentary style: off-screen voiceover exposition of a problem or issue accompanied by images acting as both particular illustrations and as anchorage for the commentary. From the early 1950s the majority of these films was intended to circulate in the commercial cinemas and, since the cinema managers of the time were unwilling to accept any film over 10 minutes in length, the required brevity discouraged any untoward lyricism, poetic sequences or sustained exposition and analysis. (Moran 1991)

THE COMMONWEALTH FILM UNIT

In 1956, the year television was introduced to Australia, the Film Division became the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU). Organisationally, a more strictly demarcated hierarchy replaced the concept of the 'generalist' filmmaker and increasingly staff members were restricted to more specialist technical roles. This organisational rigidity was echoed by a disabling aesthetic conservatism. The classical 'Voice of

God' style hardened into an unimaginative orthodoxy that became the 'house style'. In the typical government film of this period the expository 'voice' of the documentary was always professional, confident, authoritative, male, and neither particularly young nor old; a voice striving to transcend class and sectarianism by its very lack of colour. (Moran 1991) The tone is well caught by a perceptive critic, Neil Beggs, who in 1960 wrote his assessment, 'The Heart Seems to Have Gone', for the *Film Journal*:

The faults of Australian documentary are legion. After seeing a few dozen, one begins to suspect that all the scriptwriters were trained in radio, that the cameramen have not grasped the idea of movement and excitement in their subject, and that the editors have had no say in the photography and shooting-script of the films (if there has been a shooting script ... The root of the trouble, the cause of the decline in the artistic standards of the unit — not the technical standards — is the overload which has been put on the unit in recent years. Not only are the half dozen directors required to make films to a tight schedule, they are also detailed to work in fields of study in which they have no interest and no past knowledge. The burden has been added, it seems, as production techniques have been progressively routinised. The cost accountant took over with his own criteria of efficiency; now the completed products roll out with that spray painted look of the assembly line. The smug polish of the after dinner speech replaces the careful compilation of the significant details of some well-known field, which alone gives poetic revelation to documentary ... The artists and craftsmen are hardly to be blamed for the limits set by the low goals of the bureaucrats in the front office. If the overwhelming bulk of production must meet a demand for glossy creature, made hurriedly with cheap canned music, any artistic touches will be lost or seem affected. (in Moran & O'Regan 1985, pp. 100-103)

After moving to a position at the recently established ABC TV service, Colin Dean, a long time CFU documentary maker, would observe

The Commonwealth Film Unit was in general disarray in the 1950s. There was a lack of funds, a lack of policy, a lack of interest, a lack of co-ordination, lack of anything. Except every now and then an

individual would succeed after a fashion in turning out something. But the general climate was antipathetic to government filmmaking, probably of any kind. (in op cit 1991, p. 79)

NEW IMPULSES

But things were changing. As Peter Wintonick's (1999) documentary *Cinema Verite: defining the moment* shows, around the world an emerging generation of documentary filmmakers was beginning to react against its perception of the restrictive orthodoxy of the classic Griersonian style by developing new techniques and technologies which would allow new forms of documentary production. Soon lightweight 16mm film cameras with a capacity for sync sound recording would augur in a new wave of filmmaking and a new 'Golden Age' for documentary. (op cit 1991, p.82) At the same time, Documentary Film, which had hitherto been distributed and exhibited in the cinema either as part of shared bill in the commercial theatres or on specialist non-theatrical circuits, began to negotiate its relationship with a new medium, Television. (O'Regan 1993, p. 71) From the coming of television in the mid 1950s until the 1980s, in-house factual production by television broadcasters would parallel the CFU's important contribution to documenting Australian life.

Broadcast television started in Australia in 1956 with the beginnings of what would become the national network of the government-funded Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and the Seven and Nine commercial networks. Ten, a third commercial network began in 1964-65. (O'Regan 1993; ABT 1988, pp. 207-223; Brown 1987). During these years the national broadcaster, the ABC, concentrated on non-fictional programming ('features') marked by series formats, journalistic modes of production and scant traces of individual authorship. (Raymond 1999; Beilby & Lansell 1982, pp. 70-79, 146-154)

In October 1963 the Vincent Report — the Report from the Senate Select Committee on the Encouragement of Australian Productions for Television commented:

Perhaps the greatest danger lies in its effect upon the rising generation ... who, day by day, are not only receiving anything but the

most inadequate picture of Australia, her national traditions, culture and way of life, but in its place are recipients of a highly coloured and exaggerated picture of the way of life and morals of other countries; mainly the United States of America. (in Shirley & Adams 1983, pp. 209-210)

While the Vincent Report was primarily concerned with promoting Australian drama production in the film and television industries, the 1960s would nonetheless witness a remarkable expansion of quality Australian documentary programming on public and commercial television and a reinvigoration of Commonwealth documentary production. (Moran 1991) Graham Shirley (1983) has suggested that, in part, this was an effect of generational change as largely self-taught cine-literate filmmakers began to access 'non-professional' 16mm formats and make films for festival circulation or for new audiences outside the mainstream circuits. To an extent, this revival of the documentary form also mirrored developments in the UK and US, where in the early 1960 each had experienced critiques of their broadcasting cultures by Pilkington and Minnow respectively. (Briggs 1995)

THE COMMONWEALTH FILM UNIT IN THE SIXTIES

By 1964 the Commonwealth Film Unit was emerging from the 'long fifties' and drawing its second breath. In 1962 the CFU had moved to new premises at Lindfield and, with a significantly improved budget, advertised nationally for 22 production assistant positions and begin a slate of new productions which made visible many of the groups marginalised in earlier years. By the end of the decade some of those production assistants — among them Donald Crombie, Arch Nicholson and Peter Weir — would become directors. (Moran 1987)

The CFU also diversified its aesthetic approach to the documentary. Thus, after making *The Aborigines of Australia* in 1964, Ian Dunlop was allowed to specialise in ethnographic film and, using cameramen like Dean Semler, produced two series, the five hour *People of the Australian Western Desert* and the eight hour *Towards Baruya Manhood*. At the same time, beginning with Bob Kingsbury's *One Man's Road* (1967) and Stefan Sargent's *The Change at Groote* (1968), CFU filmmakers began to make works that drew attention to relations between blacks and whites in the city and the country. Commenting on the lack of narration in his

film, Bob Kingsbury observed that

if you don't have commentary, if you don't sit down and write it and get it approved, if somebody is giving their opinion, is speaking for themselves, then its no longer a policy thing. (in Moran 1991, p. 102)

John Morris, spoke similarly of *Sailor*, a portrait of life in the Australian Navy, which he directed in 1968:

We didn't want to do a propaganda film. We wanted to get below deck and show what it was really like. We wanted it to be real. Our using the *cinema verite* approach was a means out of the Department having the editorial control. We used only synch sound and no commentary. (in Moran 1991, p. 102)

From the Tropics to the Snow (1964), a parody of the process of bureaucratic filmmaking by committee, is generally regarded as the key film demonstrating the CFU's new freedom from official constraints. (Moran 1991, pp. 88-93) Producing two films-within-a-film — one a parody of the CFU's 'house style' film 'full of bland cliché, the other suggesting a new style based on 'poetic integrity' — the co-directors, Richard Mason and Jack Lee, skewered the pressures to conform with which they were all too familiar. McMurchy (in Murray 1994, pp. 180-181) comments that, viewed in retrospect, this groundbreaking film fails to escape entirely its institutional mission of presenting one more 'round-up of Australian tourist icons'. Nor, she suggests, does *From the Tropics to the Snow* give any hint of the changes going on in the wider society: 'the birth of "mod" youth culture, Aboriginal "freedom rides" into racist outback towns, lock-outs of miners in Mt Isa' or the growing dissent over Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war. These would be the subjects for a new type of documentary production by the television broadcasters.

DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION BY TV IN THE 1960S

As McMurchy observes,

'it was left to the other main arm of government documentary making, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, to begin tackling difficult contemporary subjects and the possibilities of a more spontaneous and candid style of filmmaking. By the mid 1960s, the ABC had begun to

develop a counterpart to the exciting television documentaries which had been produced at the BBC by film-makers such as Ken Loach, Peter Watkins and Ken Russell. This new era at the ABC was heralded by Cecil Holmes' *I, the Aboriginal* (1964), which won the Australian film institute's Gold Award'. (in Murray 1994, p. 181)

That same year the Aboriginal pop star, Jimmy Little, hosted Therese Denny's *A Changing Race*, an excellent interview and observation based exploration of shifting indigenous/white relations in Australia. (MacDonald 2001) A year later Gian Carlo Manara's *Living on the Fringe* would capture the dilemma of Aborigines coming to the city to look for work only to find unemployment and poverty.

McMurchy notes the influence of international developments in public broadcasting and documentary forms:

Working on the BBC model for the weekly *Impact* time slot, ABC staff documentary makers such as Tom Haydon, John Power, Michel Pearce and Ken Hannam were able to choose their own subjects and work with an unusual degree of freedom to make documentaries examining controversial issues. (in Murray 1994, p. 181)

The newly emerging current affairs programs also regularly contained strong documentary elements. Under Bob Raymond, Michael Charlton and John Penlington, *Four Corners* regularly put to air challenging quasi-verite treatments of subjects such as the 1966 Federal Election and its attendant anti-conscription protests. (Raymond 1999; Belby & Lansell 1982, p. 70)

McMurchy recounts how 'in 1967, ABC producer, Tom Manefield, returned from the BBC and persuaded the ABC to undertake a documentary series similar to the BBC's *Man Alive*'. The result was the *Chequer-board* series which commenced broadcast in 1969 and broke new ground for Australian documentary and Australian television audiences both in terms of its 'living camera' style, its probing, intrusive close-ups and its broaching of issues such as homosexuality, divorce, poverty, and personal relationships. (in Murray 1994, p. 181)

At the CFU, productions such as Bob Kingsbury's *One Man's Road* (1967) and

Stefan Sargent's *The Change at Groote* (1968) were not only exploring the realities of indigenous experience but also increasingly employing formal innovations in their filmmaking practices. Unusually for the CFU, both these films had premier screenings on the ABC rather than through festival or non-theatrical release. (Raymond 1999, Hughes 2008)

In *One Man's Road* an Aboriginal man, Clive Williams, recalls his personal journey from the country towns and reserves of rural New South Wales, where he grew up, to life with his family in Sydney. *One Man's Road* demonstrated a radical break with both an orthodox voice-of-God narration, and a non-Aboriginal ethnographic perspective. With music by Don Burrows' jazz quartet, *One Man's Road* screened on television stations throughout Australia on Aborigines' Day, July 16th 1967 and at the prestigious Festival dei Popoli, Florence in 1968.

The Change at Groote which screened on Aborigines' Day a year later, provided an impressionistic look at how the Aboriginal people of Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria adjusted to the new life brought about by the discovery of manganese on their land. Its director, Stefan Sargent, described the film as a fragmented collage of images and sounds, intended to produce a direct emotional response. The result is a flood of images, some of them flicking past almost too quickly to be grasped, others repeated over and over again to induce special effects.

As John Hughes notes

The Change at Groote is 'experimental' in its editing techniques and its 'very 60s' camera operation, montage and sound design. It delivers a critical argument about development, questioning the real value for Aboriginal people affected by mining for manganese at Groote Eylandt. It does this by the juxtaposition of startling, metaphorical images, fragments of interviews, and savage sound cuts, without an explicit narration advocating an argument. (Hughes 2008)

Writing in *Nation* at the time of its release, Sylvia Lawson criticised the film's formal strategy of demanding audiences find their own conclusions by actively reading the film's images, as 'an easy way out'. Lawson argued that this technique allowed the filmmakers to avoid taking a position themselves. Despite

Lawson's reservations, the film was awarded the 1968 Australian Film Institute Gold Award for non-fiction for both the adventurous filmmaking strategies and for the sentiments it evoked.

CONCLUSION

The end of the Sixties saw 'in house' production at the ABC and the Commonwealth Film Unit embrace wider stylistic and thematic options; strongly influenced by a growing awareness of contemporary developments amongst both their international broadcasting peers and innovations in documentary film.

This rich documentary tradition was underwritten by the preparedness of government to underwrite production which promoted a national and international appreciation of the variety of our landscape, culture and people and challenged crude stereotypes and clichés of what it might mean to be Australian. Such production won support not through a calculation of an individual program's market profitability but from a wider recognition of the documentary form's capacity to communicate important information in an engaging way to targeted communities.

Throughout this period, documentary production — by dint of its comparative economy, opportunity for creativity, and capacity for witness — was viewed as being uniquely placed to provide both immediate and long-term economic, social and cultural benefits. That is, as Franco Papandrea has demonstrated, for 'benefits, such as the enhancement of a national culture, that may be generated as a market externality'. (BTCE 1997, p. 66) In the years under survey Australians were not willing to allow such crucial activities as national image making to be placed solely in private hands or to be the purview of a narrow band of broadcasting gatekeepers. As Tom Haydon put it in 1984,

In the long run the only reason for the Australian public either through tax concessions or a Film Commission, to back film as against, say, dry cleaning or hairdressing, is that it's going to have some perceived cultural value for the country. (Filmnews 1984)

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