

PICTURING POLITICS:

Some Issues in the Documentary Representation of Australian Political and Social History

Introductory Statement to four documentary films — *Red Ted and the Great Depression* 1994, *The Legend of Fred Paterson* 1996, *The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum* 1999, and *Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers* 2005 — submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (by Publication) in the School of Arts, Media and Culture, Faculty of Arts, Griffith University

(This Statement is accompanied by four DVD discs, held by the Griffith University Library together with a printout of the Statement)

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Synopsis

This submission groups together four 'TV Hour' documentaries — *Red Ted and the Great Depression* 1994, *The Legend of Fred Paterson* 1996, *The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum* 1999, and *Stories from the Split: the Struggle for the Souls of Australian Workers* 2005 — researched, developed and produced between 1990 and 2005. Each of the submitted documentary films treats an event or individual that made a decisive and lasting contribution to Australian political and social history in the course of the 20th Century. The projects also had the good fortune to win support from institutions such as the Australian Film Commission, the Australian Research Council, the Film Finance Corporation, the Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The selected films may be viewed as representing a sustained exploration of the relations between documentary modes and production practices, the uses of oral history, the institution of television, and certain understandings of Australian Politics. Taken together, the works exemplify some significant issues in the documentary representation of Australia political and social history. All the films take their content from the field of Australian political and social history; all work within the limits of the 'Television Hour' — from 51 to 60 minutes for public broadcasters; and all employ a mix of interview and archival materials in their construction. Crucially, the films emphasise the experience, opinions and testimony of participants and witnesses rather than experts. Each film also employs elements of an approach to compilation filmmaking which can be traced to the montage strategy pioneered by the Soviet filmmaker Esther Shub; and celebrated by Jay Leyda in his groundbreaking study *Films Beget Films* (1964)

As part of their submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Publication at Griffith University, an introductory statement that critically reflects on their production context accompanies the films. This statement indicates the institutional position of the works with regard to the provenance of the archival sources for the productions; the industrial and policy framework of their production; and some theoretical debates relevant to that production. In keeping with the requirements of the degree the statement indicates the way in which the work has developed; demonstrates the contemporary relevance of each publication; clarifies how the publications make an original scholarly contribution to knowledge; provides a thematic overview which converts the individual

publications into an integrated work; and makes clear my contribution to all jointly authored publications.

In the period of the production of the submitted documentaries, the Australian documentary filmmaking community was negotiating new arrangements for the funding, development and circulation of its films. In broad terms, this might be understood as the 'independent' documentary sector acknowledging and engaging with the determinant role of the Television broadcasters. At the same time, each project was also influenced by ongoing concerns around the legitimacy of audiovisual treatments of history and the role of oral history in such audiovisual productions. One productive way, therefore, to understand the development of the selected works is to consider, against the backdrop of the conventions of broadcast television, the various strategies employed to engage the audience and contextualise the oral history interviews in each of the selected texts. These strategies include narration, archival compilation, montage of image and interviews; and, in the case of *The Legend of Fred Paterson*, reconstruction. Arguably, the body of work is informed by major research and benefits from a sound knowledge of film, history and politics. The works have also made a considerable research impact through multiple forms of distribution including the internet, broadcast, non-theatrical sale and inclusion in educational curricula. Taken together, these factors suggest that the oeuvre constitutes an original scholarly contribution to knowledge and understanding in these fields.

Statement of Authorship

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself. Similarly, to the best of my knowledge and belief, my role in collaborative or jointly authored publications submitted here has been fully and accurately described.

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Abbreviations

ABA	Australian Broadcasting Authority
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABT	Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (forerunner of ABA)
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACS	Australian Content Standard
ACTF	Australian Children's Television Foundation
AFC	Australian Film Commission
AFCH	Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities
AFI	Australian Film Institute
AFTRS	Australian Film, Television & Radio School
AIATSIS	Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANFB	Australian National Film Board
ARC	Australian Research Council
ASDA	Australian Screen Director's Association
AWG	Australian Writer's Guild
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BTCE	Bureau of Transport & Communications Economics
CFU	Commonwealth Film Unit
CTVPPF	Commercial Television Production Fund
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DETYA	Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
Dir.	Director
DOI	Department of Information
DVD	Digital Video Disc
DOCA	Department of Communications & the Arts (Federal Government)
EBU	European Broadcasting Union
Ed.	Editor
E.P.	Executive Producer
FACTS	Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations
Film Australia	Federal Government's film production unit
FFC	Film Finance Corporation
FLICS	Film Licensing Investment Company Scheme
FQ	Film Queensland
GU	Griffith University
NFB	National Film Board of Canada

NFSA	National Film & Sound Archive
NIP	National Interest Program
OLA	Open Learning Australia
PFTC	Pacific Film and Television Commission
PTT	Popular Theatre Troupe
Prod.	Producer
QCA	Queensland College of Art (Griffith University)
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
SBSI	SBS Independent
SPAA	Screen Producer's Association of Australia
TPS	Television Program Standards
The Act	Broadcasting Services Act 1992
The Accord	FFC documentary investment agreement with TV networks

Preamble

This submission groups together four 'TV Hour' documentaries developed and produced between 1990 and 2005. Each of the submitted documentary films treats an event or individual that made a decisive and lasting contribution to Australian political and social history in the course of the 20th Century. The projects also had the good fortune to win support from institutions such as the Australian Film Commission, the Australian Research Council, the Film Finance Corporation, the Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

My engagement with the creative representation of Australian social and political history started in rather different circumstances in the late 1970s when I was privileged to collaborate as a researcher with the playwright Errol O'Neill and the members of the Popular Theatre Troupe on a series of satirical 'agitprop' productions whose themes find echoes in the submitted documentaries. Those four shows — the *Popular Theatre Troupe's Australia*; *Says Who: a New Release on the Media*; *Out of Work, Out of Mind*; and *Hands Across the Pacific* — were supported by the Australia Council and performed Australia wide in prisons, factories, schools, community halls and theatres.

[In 1986 this collaboration took another form when I wrote a timeline of the historical background to Errol O'Neill's play *Popular Front*. A decade later that chronology offered a starting point for one of the submitted documentary productions, *The Legend of Fred Paterson*.]

The work of companies such as the Popular Theatre Troupe can be seen as one contribution to a continuum of cultural initiatives in Australia in the 1970s. Related developments included the rise of community broadcasters such as 4ZZZFM; the work of the filmmaking organisations such as the Filmmakers' Co-ops and the Video Access Centres; and the establishment of Community Arts and Cultural Development organisations. At that time the focus for many cultural workers was not so much the medium as the message: Film, Theatre and Radio were each considered effective means of communication and many artists worked across all. Most such practitioners assumed (or indeed embraced the fact) that their work would be excluded from any mainstream conduit to a mass audience such as broadcast television.

Thus, from the late 1970s I worked on film projects that, while often supported by the

Creative Development Branch of the Australian Film Commission, had little prospect or expectation of any conventional theatrical or broadcast exhibition. Despite films such as *Exits*, *Munda Nyringu*, *Bootleg* and *The Road: Voices from Prison* each winning some recognition in terms of awards and festival selection there appeared scant chance of any being part of a broadcast TV schedule. The first sign that things might be changing was the inclusion of *Munda Nyringu* — a film which I had edited in 1983 for the Fringe Dwellers of the Western Australian Goldfields — in the 1987 ABC TV series, *The First Australians*.

At that point I had just commenced as facilitator on what would prove to be a three year collaboration with the Ngukurr community at Roper River to make *Ngukurr Weya Wi Na*, a history of their settlement from mission times until the period of community control. Ironically, this was the first production to which I contributed which from the outset was aimed at Television broadcast, albeit on the then recently established indigenous broadcaster Imparja TV. [Meaghan Morris offers a generous commentary on *Ngukurr Weya Wi Na* in her 1998 volume *Too Soon, Too Late: history in popular culture* (pp26-28).]

Heartened by the success of that process and by the signs of a developing relationship between the independent film community and the public broadcasters, I and Brian Burkett, the co-producer of *Ngukurr Weya Wi Na*, then pitched to the ABC the project which would eventually come to fruition as *Red Ted and the Great Depression*. With that film, as with the others submitted for this degree, the aim has been to win prime time broadcast for a subject grounded in Australian political and social history and to generate a resource which might make a lasting contribution to the curriculum in the library and the class room.

To date, the first three of the submitted productions — *Red Ted and the Great Depression*, *The Legend of Fred Paterson* and *The Fair Go: Winning the 1967 Referendum* have achieved that goal. At the time of writing, negotiations to realise a broadcast 'cut' of *Stories from the Split* are ongoing.

Along the way, in part through the need to identify archival sources for the submitted projects, I have become increasingly interested in the history of earlier Australian documentary production and, with support from the ARC, the PFTC and the National Film and Sound Archive have, with the assistance of Chris Long, researched and

produced two narrated compilations which showcase Queensland's documentary film pioneers. The two outcomes from that fascination achieved thus far — *Queenslands First Films 1895 —1910: Surprising Survivals from Colonial Queensland* and *Queenslands Silent Films 1910 —1930: The Newsreel Years* — have been released by the NFSA.