Underground film in Australia

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).


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’. 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.’ 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 metaphor for 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.

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.

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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*. ©
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). 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.

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 Film 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’ of some Structural Film artists resulted in heavily subsidised promotion of their work, and in the US, the purified, minimalist 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 voluntarism of the 1960s underground mutated into a distinctly different aesthetic programme shaped by its belief in radical political agendas. 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’ 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.’

In Australia, young filmmakers, experimenting with the possibilities of cheaper Super-8 film, distanced themselves from both commercial cinema and the ‘absolutely antinarrative’ 16mm ‘avant-garde orthodoxy’ 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’. 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 resurrected 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, transquillise and obfuscate’, promising instead a ‘direct attack on every value system known to man’. Repudiating ‘the entrenched academic snobbery which erected a monument to laziness known as structuralism’, which, Zedd argued, ‘ruined the underground of the sixties’, the DOT 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.’

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 Droppest as the Gentle Rain, made in 1963 by a pre-Ubu Albie Thoms in collaboration with another young ‘filmer’ named Bruce Beresford. Based on a Jacques Prévert short story, the film in which ‘the bourgeoisie ignores the perils of fallout’ 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 Droppest as the Gentle Rain (that) led to underground activity and illegal screenings.’

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.

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. 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...
Sleazy punkster Lydia Lunch stars as an abrasive phone-sex prostitute who's swept along by her passions and those of her greaseball ballboyfriend, played by Marty Nation. After intense and prolonged hard-core copulation, the two embark on a spree of senseless, Charlie Starkeather style murder, with knife-wielding Nation driving from atrocy 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 Lunch 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 trampling 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..."
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 Whannel.24

Of course, from its humble first showing at the inaugural MUFF, the Saw franchise25 has come to epitomise 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.

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2. Statements by Andrew Leavold quoted throughout this essay are sourced from a series of Facebook chat conversations with the author, February-March, 2010.
4. ‘In the next month LFMC Field their first major film series, the ‘Spontaneous Festival Underground film’ (which received a pages of coverage in IT, which of course LFMC 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 p662.
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).
9. Thomas, pp461-467
10. Hodsdon, p96
11. Hodsdon, p119
12. Reekie, p188
13. Hodsdon, p288
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
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). 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.’

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

www.andrewleavold.blogspot.com and www.bamboogodandahsionickys.blogspot.com

Andrew’s ‘other’ writings www.mondostumpo.blogspot.com
