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'We film the facts': the Waterside Workers' Federation film unit, 1953 - 1958

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'We Film the Facts':
The Waterside Workers' Federation Film
Unit,
1953 - 1958

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

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by

Lisa Milner
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DEDICATION

To the memory of Keith Gow (1921-1987)

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Abstract

'We Film the Facts': The Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit, 1953-1958

This thesis explores the history of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit. Comprising three filmmakers, Norma Disher, Keith Gow and Jock Levy, this union production group operated in Sydney from 1953 to 1958. Within an environment which was generally hostile towards militant labour, it produced seventeen short films on a range of topics for the Waterside Workers' Federation and other labour and left-wing organisations. To date, no comprehensive history of the work of the Unit exists.

The work begins by giving a history of the Unit's operation. The second chapter explores the theoretical approaches to the topic. The Unit operated at a point of intersection of film, industry and culture, and the disciplinary areas of cinema studies, labour history and cultural studies are interrogated as to their utility in presenting a critical history of this group. The following chapter provides the context for the WWFFU, and examines the industrial, cultural and cinematic spheres of activity which existed as a background for the WWFFU's existence in Sydney from 1953 to 1958. Chapter Four undertakes a close analysis of three key films, examining how these filmmakers responded to industrial and political campaigns, and how the Unit's output related to its context. The final chapter reflects upon the provision of this history and the issues raised, including the changing nature of class in Australia, and representation within the documentary.

This thesis contributes to a succession of Australian cultural histories. The localised milieux in which the Film Unit operated, its economic, political and social structures, were historically specific formations. Popular culture of the 1950s has often been positioned as predictable, but this is because a specific activist working-class culture has seldom been examined. Bringing a localised working-class cultural formation, such as the WWFFU, to a critical analysis is a valuable way to see beyond such positionings.

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For the directions they gave along the way in studying Australian film history, I would like to thank my colleagues at the Sydney Film Oral History Group, especially Martha Ansara, Judy Adamson and Graham Shirley. Many activists and filmmakers have assisted my research with interviews, advice and information, and they have brought the topic of this project alive for me in many ways. A special thanks to John Hughes for his work with, and for, the WWFFU members, helping them to take their place in history. Lastly, I remain grateful for the generous personal support of John Roberts and, during the last stages, Pete Randles, Colleen McGloin and Rebecca Albury.

The author acknowledges permissions from the Australian Film Institute, John Hughes, Norma Hawkins and the Maritime Union of Australia for the use of the illustrations in this work. Copies of the three films detailed in Chapter Four are available for viewing at Screen Sound Australia, McCoy Circuit, Acton, ACT.

List of Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission/ Corporation
ABS	Australasian Book Society
ACSEF	Australasian Coal and Shale Employees' Federation
ACTU	Australian Council of Trade Unions
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AMWU	Amalgamated Metal Workers' Union
APC	Australian Peace Council
ARU	Australian Railways Union
ASIO	Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
BHP	Broken Hill Proprietary Company
BL	Builders' Labourers Federation
BWIU	Building Workers' Industrial Union of Australia
CFMEU	Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
DOI	Department of Information ⁱ
MIT	Maritime Industries Theatre
MUA	Maritime Union of Australia
NBAC/ANU	Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University
NFSA	National Film and Sound Archives
RFA	Realist Film Association
SFF	Sydney Film Festival
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
SORA	School of Realist Art
TLC	Trades and Labour Council
WEA	Workers Educational Association
WWF	Waterside Workers' Federation
WWFFU	Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit

Note to the Reader

The MLA documentation system of parenthetical referencing has been used throughout this text, and endnotes have been used for discursive comments on the text, also according to the MLA system. I am aware that this may be an unfamiliar referencing system for many historians.

ⁱ Throughout its history, the government film production unit (as distinct from the controlling body) credited as the Film Division of the Department of Information, the Film Division of the Department of the Interior, the Film Division of the News and Information Bureau of the Department of the Interior, the Commonwealth Film Unit and Film Australia; for the purposes of this work I shall refer to it as the DOI.

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Prologue

Scepticism and the Film Historian

This thesis explores the history of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit (WWFFU), a trade union production group that operated in Sydney from 1953 to 1958. It begins, however, with an encounter with a television mini-series made many years later. From the late 1970s there has been a prolific growth in the number of film and television programs celebrating Australian history. The 1950s have been a particularly fruitful decade for these works, with Australian audiences watching productions like *Newsfront*, *Silver City* or *Celia*.¹ Particularly for viewers who have not lived through the period, like myself, the 1950s becomes known initially through the perceptions promoted in these works.

The 1987 mini-series *The True Believers* focuses on political events in Australia in the years from 1945 to 1955, notably the split in the Australian Labor Party.² With its narrative weaving around the central characters of Robert Menzies, Bert Evatt and Ben Chifley, the eight-hour program builds up a general impression of Australian life during that decade. Ian McGarrity, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) Acting Director of Television, commented that 'what the drama hopes to achieve is a portrayal of historical events and personalities which, while perhaps not factual in every detail, will nevertheless convey the atmosphere and overall sense of events and personalities of the time' (8). Through histories such as *The True Believers* Australians are invited to recall the 1950s as a progressive time, with an overall sense of stability and security, overlaid with a general feeling of polarised opinion, in which conservatism was the standard, Communists were denigrated, and militant unionists were depicted as 'hard-faced fanatics'. I became interested in the archival footage interwoven with the more prevalent dramatic sequences of this program. The inclusion of archival film in such productions is a common device, but what does it do to the presentation and interpretation of history? It raises a number of issues about the construction and reconstruction of the past on celluloid and an assessment of the relationships between drama and documentary, fact and fiction.

If I had applied a straightforward textual analysis to this mini-series, I would include an assessment of the use of archival footage in a historical production. But I wanted to interrogate this archival footage more closely, so as not to make any presumptions about it. I decided to concentrate on one sequence that depicted a group of miners during the 1949 coal strike, brandishing 'Nationalise the Mines' banners at a protest march. Was it, in fact, archival newsreel footage, as it had been implied in the mini-series? From what newsreel company had it come? Where had it been shot? What were the details of its production? This led me to the vaults of the National Film and Sound Archives (NFSA), and their collections of Cinesound and Movietone newsreel footage. There, I found that this sequence did not originate from a commercial newsreel production as I first thought, and as I suspect other viewers may have been led to believe. It was, in fact, an excerpt from a film that had been made by a trade union film unit. Here was a clip which was presented as newsreel footage in a historical recreation. It made the use of archival footage in the mini-series even more complex; what was presented as documentary evidence was itself recast.

The striking miners were originally recorded by the WWFFU, and the sequence which masqueraded as newsreel footage in *The True Believers* was an excerpt from *Hewers of Coal*, made in 1957 for the Miners' Federation. Militant organisations commissioned the Unit to make works that perceived the value of film as a political and educational tool. Their productions were often documentary in nature, and supported improvements to working and living conditions. My discovery of this masquerading newsreel footage raises many issues. Some are about the work of the WWFFU; others interrogate the re-use of its footage, and the representation of wharfies, and other blue-collar workers such as miners in visual media.³

Noel Sanders writes of the popularity of works such as *The True Believers*: 'processes of reading and viewing history are now increasingly mass media-oriented; and increasingly what we "know" of the past is reduced to what gets cycled and recycled in the media ... what is now "remembered" is what media words or images "remember" for us selectively' (116). Finding the

source of the protest footage changed my interpretation of this sequence as newsreel. The two guises of the film sequence raise questions about the selective nature of history, and how we construct our past through cinema. If the mini-series itself was recasting footage, then perhaps McGarrity's opinion on the representative nature of *The True Believers*, which he hopes 'convey[s] the atmosphere ... of the time', should be questioned as well – were the 1950s just as this work, and other histories, had depicted? What does the de-historicisation of the footage signify for history, and for film?

Being sceptical about the original sources of footage in this mini-series had brought me to the topic of this thesis. My research on the appropriated footage was guided by my interests in Australian film and politics, and this thesis reflects my political background, alongside the desire to make a contribution to Australian cultural history. My identities as an Australian film student and a historian led me to investigate the representation of the WWFFU in our cinema history. A healthy scepticism is required in any historical project. The word 'scepticism' derives from the Greek *skepsis* meaning inquiry or doubt (Sykes 1012), and inquiry into the textual characteristics of *The True Believers* led to the project of a history of the WWFFU itself. Similar sceptical reflection is necessary on commonplace inferences of life in Sydney in the 1950s, film in Sydney in the 1950s, and the very nature of the WWFFU and its film-work. A banner displayed on the Unit's production van boasted that 'We Film the Facts' (Fig. 1). Is this what occurred? Perhaps the Unit's representations were no more factual than those in the *True Believers*.

After seeing the miners' footage in *The True Believers*, and not being able to find a great deal of comment on the work of the WWFFU, I embarked on research for the compilation of a history of the Unit. This entailed more research at the National Film and Sound Archive, as well as unions and other organisations, the uncovering of films and documents, and the undertaking of a number of interviews with filmmakers, as well as past and present members of Sydney's political, labour and artistic spheres. There are four questions which this thesis will address. Why did the Waterside Workers' Federation (WWF) establish a film unit? Why was it in 1953? What did the Unit achieve? And lastly, why did its work end in 1958?

When I initially encountered the body of work that the WWFFU had produced, my political sympathies led me to view their films as exemplary: it seemed that, against commonly held ideas about wharfies in the 1950s—as I had read from mainstream newspaper reports of the day and had seen in commercial newsreels—these films did, indeed, seem to be telling another side of the story. But was it the facts? As this thesis will demonstrate, the WWFFU filmmakers, along with their union, placed a great emphasis on the authenticity of their work compared to these other media of their time. But after embarking on a series of oral history interviews with the two surviving Unit members, I found that there were a number of scenes in their films that they had recreated. For example, in their second film, *The Hungry Miles*, there is a sequence that depicts the life of the wealthy ruling class during the Depression: they feasted at grand banquets, the filmmakers argued, while many other Australians suffered enormous privations. One of the producers proudly related the preparation for this scene when the wharfie producers went to Sydney's State Theatre and shot footage of its magnificent chandelier. They borrowed actors, costumes and props from the New Theatre, and one of the filmmakers borrowed his aunt's candelabra for the banquet table, to recreate what they believed was a scene from the ruling-class environment.⁴

The filmmaker I interviewed was quite insulted when the ABC, in requesting information on that scene, referred to it as archival footage. She exclaimed, 'all the trouble we went to for that scene, and he thinks it's archival footage!' Just as *The True Believers* recreated the miners' history 'wrongly', the WWFFU had, 35 years earlier, similarly recreated this scene of the ruling class. In both instances it was a case of recreating 'the other'. Was this recasting 'wrong' as well? What does it mean for me, as a sympathiser of the work of the WWFFU, to find out that they recreated scenes themselves? It points to the fact that, as with all other perceptions, political sympathies are discursively constructed formations. I had an interest in the political and cultural realms of the 1950s, and these films seemed to be showing me a side of that period I had rarely seen before. What was I to make of the evidence that these documentaries from that period were not all completely authentic? Through the course of my research, I discovered that the WWFFU

films had not only recreated scenes of the ruling class, but many scenes from the waterfront workers' history. Paula Rabinowitz reminds us that 'documentaries have and present values; they are persuasive, not simply artifactual', and they are viewed by 'a spectator whose position is located within history, essentially remaking the relationship of truth to ideology by insisting on advocacy rather than objectivity' (7). Although I previously thought I generally understood how all texts are mediated, had I not gone on to further research on the Unit, I may have held a less critical view of their work.

It is relevant today to investigate the WWFFU in considering not only their own production and recasting, but also the more recent re-uses of their footage. *The True Believers* has many resonances from its production, and its screening as part of Australia's bicentenary celebrations of white invasion. An interrogative history of the WWFFU is doubly relevant at the end of the twentieth century, as the union of waterside workers continues to call on their tradition of militancy and solidarity to overcome perceived attacks from government and big business. And, as was particularly demonstrated in 1998, sections of the Australian mainstream media are still representing wharfies in such ways, with comments that 'the rows of idle forklifts sitting at Webb Dock in Melbourne are a reminder that this new battle is merely the latest in an unending class war waged for most of this century' (Sheehan). Australia has enjoyed a long history of union activism, and the WWFFU's representation of strikes and other industrial issues will have resonances when placed beside more well-known representations of these issues, or more recent ones – including the front page newspaper photographs of striking Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members protecting their children from fights with police (Russell and Kennedy).

¹ *Newsfront* is in itself a film worthy of close study, being one of the first Australian feature films to combine dramatic scenes and archival footage, and one that takes as its subject the work of cinematographers of the 1950s. Scott Murray describes *Newsfront* as 'Noyce's *only marginal* examination of how Len and his newsreel mates were responsible for almost the only cinematic images Australians had of their country' ('The 1970s and 1980s' 89) [my emphasis].

² *The True Believers* was an ABC/Roadshow Coote and Carroll co-production. The series won an AFI/Logie award for best mini-series of 1988. One review states that 'the effect of a series like *The True Believers*, partisan as it is, is unwittingly a profoundly conservative one' (Walter 40).

³ At the same time that I was researching *The True Believers*, reports of the 1998 docks dispute led me to consider contemporary media coverage of wharfies and other workers in Australia.

⁴ The New Theatre is an independent Sydney organisation; for details see Chapter Three.

Fig 1. The WWFFU Kombi van in the 1956 Sydney May Day March (Norma Hawkins)