Empires of Information

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> Truth is not Holy Grail to be won: it is a shuttle which moves ceaselessly between the observer and the observed, between science and reality. (Edgar Morin: 1962, p. 5)

ABSTRACT

The international War on Terror and recent events in our immediate region, particularly Indonesia, have thrown a sudden spotlight on Australian reporting of the Asia Pacific. But Australia has a long history of journalism, travel writing and documentary filmmaking here. This paper draws on Edward Said's writings on 'orientalism' to bring an historical perspective to bear on contemporary factual genres and practices. It highlights three cases, focusing on Indonesia and Papua New Guinea: the travel writing and journalism of Frank Clune in the late thirties and early forties (To the Isles of Spice, 1944), the agit-prop filmmaking of Joris Ivens and the Waterside Workers Federation (Indonesia Calling, 1948), and the explosion of documentary work that came out of Papua New Guinea, Australia's only true colony, from the early 1970s. In conclusion, the paper offers a caveat to factual crafts and genres — in both journalism and filmmaking — that deal with these geographically close, but culturally 'other', Australian neighbours, whom we must learn to live with. Empires of information are always, simultaneously, empires of imagination.

Empires need more than armies and navies to exercise control over their conquests.
The recent Iraq war was fought on two battlefields. The first was won with tanks and cruise missiles. The second was an even more lopsided contest between a crude third world propagandist and a sophisticated information superpower. U.S. President George Bush's crusade for an abstracted "freedom" resonated widely among Arab countries, but perhaps as a result of their colonial experiences, not entirely in ways that he intended. Such rhetoric carries much historical baggage, and cannot easily cross cultural borders untouched, unexamined. And if the last century has taught humanity anything at all, it has surely warned of the dangers of thinking in absolutes — including calls for 'liberty', 'democracy', and 'justice'.

In colonial times, Westerners who chose to govern 'natives' argued moral and intellectual superiority to rationalise their governance: on one hand to underpin the recruitment of local administrators, and on the other, hopefully, to keep the conquered submissive. Such ideas of superiority — coded as 'civilisation', 'modernity', 'progress', 'development', 'liberty' — are fundamental to colonial governments, which set out early in the imperial mission to build an apparatus for transmitting them both locally and globally. Far from simple, crude methods of 'mere' government propaganda, this apparatus is sophisticated, commonly comprising 'modern' administrative, educational, medical, communication and legal institutions which replace existing traditional or 'primitive' systems of knowledge. And this cosmos of dominance is relentlessly reinforced locally through imported cultural packages, which may include literature, movies, art, music, and fashion. More importantly, narrative genres that present themselves as 'objective'

and ‘factual’ accounts — such as news and documentary — must also be seen as part of the same project.

This paper concerns itself with these latter, ‘factual’ genres, for the cultural packages of imperialism continue their work long after formal colonial government has ended, resulting in the old metropolitan centres maintaining post-colonial influence over their former subjects. And the sophisticated modern technologies and rhetorics of actuality, reality, neutrality and objectivity deployed by contemporary global news text and image empires are particularly difficult to avoid, analyse or verify at the local level — at their margins.

Introduction: Travellers’ Tales

In the Victorian era of high-imperialism, culture was understood in terms of what we might call ‘high art’ today. Writing in the Introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said begins his analysis of their intimate connection by paraphrasing Mathew Arnold’s famous 1860s definition, noting that “culture”, as each society’s reservoir of the “best that has been thought and known”, includes a refining and elevating element, but also elements of aggressive nationalism which intimately couple identity with race:

> You read Dante or Shakespeare in order to keep up with the best that was thought and known, and also to see yourself, your people, society, and tradition in their best lights. In time, culture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them’, almost always with some degree of xenophobia.

> Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that.... (1994, p. xii).

Said goes on to argue that the while clearly the first wars of imperialism were over land, the next engagement was fought on the battlefield of culture. When it came to who named the land — who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who reaped its profits, who kept it going, who won it back, who planned its future — these were issues reflected, contested, and decided in narrative

> As one critic has suggested, nations themselves were narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (1994, p. xiii).

Among the kinds of narratives that perform these naming, constructing, and blocking roles on the road to colony first, and later, post-colonial nationhood, are 'factual' categories such as administrative reports, travel writing, journalism and government documentary. At least until very recently these factual narrative genres have largely escaped scholarly attention.[1] Yet they play a central role in the continuing, contemporary nexus of culture and imperialism.

In *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient,* Rana Kabbani analysed 19th Century travel writing: what she found in terms of ideas and negative stereotypes about the 'Orient' that infuse

that genre are strikingly familiar, even today. She shows that descriptions abounded of distant lands peopled by fantastic beings, as the dominant, ‘writing’ culture forged images of the 'alien' in opposition to its own self-perpetuating categories: if oneself was the norm, then the other must be different — in negative ways:

> If it could be suggested that Eastern people were slothful, preoccupied with sex, violent and incapable of self government, then the imperialist would be justified in stepping in and ruling. Political domination and economic exploitation needed the cosmetic cant of *mission civilisatrice* to seem fully commendatory. For the ideology of empire was hardly ever brute jingoism; rather it made subtle use of reason, and recruited science and history to serve its ends. The image of the European coloniser had to remain an honourable one; he did not come as an exploiter but as an enlightened person. He was not seeking mere profit, but was fulfilling his duty to his Maker and his sovereign, whilst aiding those less fortunate to rise toward his lofty level. This was the white man's burden, that reputable colonial *malaise*, that sanctioned the subjugating of entire continents. (1994, pp. 5-6).

Kabanni wrote that the idea of travel as a means of gathering and recording information was commonly found in societies that exercise a high level of political power. Travellers wrote from a national perspective for consumers in their home country — and note she assigns them male gender:

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[1] Notable exceptions are Mary-Louise Pratt, Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation (London: Routledge, 1992), and David Spurr, The rhetoric of empire: colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

> He feels compelled to note down his observations in the awareness of a particular audience: his fellow countrymen in general, his professional colleagues, his patron or his monarch. Awareness of this audience affects his perception, and influences him to select certain kinds of information, or to stress aspects of a country that find resonances in the culture of his own nation. His social position also colours his vision, and (since he often belongs to a leisured class, which are both expensive and prestigious) he usually represents the interests and systems of thought in which he was schooled. (1994, p. 1).

In this respect, travel writers may be said to share the same schooling, constraints and incentives as foreign correspondents: in fact their roles seem to match precisely. And there is another communication apparatus that reaches and overarches all European travellers who sojourn and work in a strange, colonised land: structures of colonial censorship and press control, government information officers, documentary filmmaking and photography units, and official propaganda departments, an apparatus which also extends into the informal expatriate social networks — the foreign correspondent clubs, the press clubs, the 'old hands'.

The danger is that in time, official propaganda seamlessly transforms itself into accounts of history which in reality are little more than mythology. And the longevity and reach of of this orientalist, so-called 'factual' reporting are remarkable for their endurance.

Foreign Correspondents

Journalists specialising in foreign affairs are by definition concerned with reporting on social and value systems to which they do not belong. Western news organisations place journalists in Asia precisely to seek non-Asian perspectives on Asian affairs, prioritising and interpreting foreign

events in ways most Westerners can understand. Further, they seek to report the specific activities of their nationals abroad. Otherwise, sub-editors assembling newspapers and bulletins would merely rely on international news agency copy, technically excellent but generic news produced from within the Western intellectual framework. ABC foreign correspondent Peter George in his memoir, *Behind the Lines*, put it this way:

> I try not to philosophise about the job too much because it gets in the way of the practice. But if I do have a philosophy, it is a simple one: the foreign correspondent has to bear witness. The job requires you to see as much as possible, try to understand what is happening (difficult) and why (almost impossible), and then tell that story in a way that someone living halfway around the world can comprehend and care about. (1996, p.132).

National values and interests are therefore explicitly embedded in foreign correspondents' news gathering practices. As Rodney Tiffin observed in his 1978 study which examined the sociology of Western reporting of Asia:

> The processes of news making are not politically neutral or ideologically inert. News values, assumptions and audience interests and attitudes, the production and format demands of news organisations, the differing priority and authority accorded to different news sources, all constitute a very considerable and limiting prism through which Southeast Asian news is filtered... (1978, p. 5).

Tiffin's prism may be a hall of mirrors where journalists' prior expectations, prejudices and corporate news priorities combine not only to affect how news is filtered but also how it is

created and later understood. ‘News’ is refracted as it moves through the information distribution systems, in turn creating new illusions upon which new stories are based. This process is evident in the production of newsagency copy where disparate sub-editors have no opportunity to examine a reporter's veracity, other than checking spelling and basic grammar. Once filed, an inaccurate or false story can emerge through a multiplicity of outlets, often without attribution, thereby appearing to provide confirmation, even among competing journalists, that the original story was considered true after all. Meanwhile, stories which challenge or which fall outside the reporters' and editors' belief systems are often downgraded or simply discarded.

In the case of foreign correspondents, Edward Said's argument in the earlier work, *Orientalism*, already suggested that Western journalists' ‘truth’ about Asia might merely be representations founded in someone else's ‘fact’, fiction and ultimately fantasy:

> Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. (1978, p. 20)

Said examines the work of those who wrote, taught or researched the Orient, “whether the person was an anthropologist, historian or philologist" (1978, p. 2).[2] The ‘Orient’, according to Said, is both a geographical and cultural entity. It is a European invention, and has since antiquity been a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. The ‘Orient’ derives from a confrontation of politics, economics, cultures and ultimately ideas which date back beyond the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire and the sack of Constantinople in 1452. It has its genesis in the struggle between Eastern and Western powers and helped define notions of the ‘West’.

As European peoples embarked on empire building, the ‘West’ transcended mere geographic locations, transforming into an intellectual tradition as well as an expression of power. Orientalism, in Said's definition, is founded on and synonymous with notions of Western superiority which were used to justify colonial regimes in the ‘Middle East’, Africa and Asia. Crucially, it may still survive in contemporary writing and filming about Asia and our region, as Said argues, "In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices." (1994 , p. 8).

Frank Clune — Foreign Correspondent, Travel Writer, Orientalist

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[2] And Said specifically addressed orientalism in terms of journalism and the media in a more recent work: Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world, (London:

Historically in Australian travel writing and reporting, orientalist ideas were too easily embedded in what purported to be documentary or non fiction accounts of Asia. A former Gallipoli digger, chartered accountant and later war correspondent, Frank Clune was during the forties and fifties one of Australia's best selling 'non fiction' authors. By 1945, he claimed to have published a dozen books and sold 100,000 copies[3]. He had gone to Asia in 1938 to produce a series of 15 minute radio reports, which he negotiated over a round of golf with the then General Manager of the ABC, Charles Moses. His trip to Shanghai on the eve of World War Two provided the impetus for a trilogy of books, *Sky High to Shanghai* (1939), *All Aboard for Singapore* (1941), and *To the Isles of Spice* (1944).

Clune consciously cast himself as an Australian adventurer abroad. In a period when by-lines were uncommon and journalists attempted to isolate themselves from the action by employing third person narrative, Clune placed himself at the centre of the story. Indeed his practice of relying on a largely unacknowledged researcher and writer to conduct the journalistic spade work would be familiar to some contemporary television presenters. Structured around journeys by steamers, air clippers and flying boats, his travelogues relied primarily on Western sources, including research drawn from libraries, information from academics, and briefings by trade advisors. However these reported views were supplemented by frequently ironic conversations

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Vintage, 1997).

[3]Frank Clune as cited by Craig Munro, Wild man of letters: The story of P.R.Stephenson (Carlton,Vic:Melbourne University Press,1984).

with English-speaking “Asiatics”, and personal observations from a self-consciously Australian perspective.

To the Isles of Spice presents as its central narrative the ‘development’ by European colonial administrators of an exotic, unexplored, tropical wilderness, in this case the Dutch East Indies. Although the book was written about a trip made by the author in 1939, it was published late in the war in 1944, when Clune was working as a war correspondent for the *Daily Mirror*. It featured postcard style photographs which repeated stereotypes of the ‘Oriental’ other: Balinese cock fighters, Dyak head hunters in loin cloths and, inevitably, images of sexual allure — such as a young, bare breasted girl selling drinks and fruits in exotic street scenes.

Indonesia was described as "a giant umbrella, between Australia and the rising sun", while the Dutch colonialists were depicted as determined defenders against the “Asiatic” threat from the north. Clune strongly approved of the Netherlands colonial administration and what he saw as its educated and committed officers, calling the Dutch government "the light bringer into dark places" :

> Let us sing a little paean of praise of Imperialism. Many are the agitators who denounce the white man for gathering taxes from the toil of the teeming multitudes of the Orient. When I saw the heaps of guilders collected from the Toradjas by military methods, I thought the Dutch were pretty crude in their guilder wringing. But what of the other side of Imperialism? (Munro, 1984, p. 254)

Clune wrote that Hollanders were martyred as they enriched themselves in the Indies and "its fetid climes". For their taxes, the "natives" received free hospitals, veterinary service, irrigation, agricultural advice, police supervision, freedom from slavery, schools for the ambitious, and "impartial" law courts. The land was being drained by engineers and plague spots eliminated:

> These things the natives could never have done for themselves. They needed a guiding hand to redeem them from the filth and germs in which they wallowed. . .The White Man's burden is a burden indeed. If they are well paid for carrying it, it is only fair recompense for the worries and hardships they endure, and the responsibilities they bear — exiled for the best years of their life from their cool native land to swelter and sweat in these humid tropics among dark skinned heathens and pagans. . .(Munro: 1984, 254-255)

To the Isles of Spice was published near the end of World War Two, at a time when the Dutch were hoping to resume the "burden" of colonial administration in the Indies. Clune should have been aware that the Dutch colonial regime had been established in exile at Wacol on the outskirts of Brisbane in 1942. In the same year, Indonesian independence movement members were transferred from a Dutch concentration camp in what is now East Irian to an Australian POW camp at Cowra.[4] They were freed the following year after a campaign by "agitators" belonging to Australian trade unions (Lockwood: 1982, pp. 15, 26).

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4 Ironically, Clune's researcher and ghost writer was also being held by the Australian authorities. Since 1936, Clune had collaborated in the production of his books with P.R. Stephenson whom he retained on a salary to transform his travel diaries and historical material into professional narratives. Stephenson,

Joris Ivens — 'Agitator'

One of the more remarkable outcomes and catalysts in this trade union campaign was a documentary film made by peripatetic Dutch Marxist filmmaker Joris Ivens, *Indonesia Calling* (1948). Ivens had been politicised and energised by the experimental Russian film movement of the late 1920s, particularly the work of Dziga Vertov and the *Kino Pravda* (literally, 'film truth') group, and worked for a time in Russia making 'heroic worker' and 'industrial symphony' propaganda.[5] He was involved in the Spanish Civil War (Ernest Hemingway narrated one of his films there), and later spent a short spell working with Frank Capra in the United States on the war propaganda *Why We Fight* (1942-44) series.[6] Finally, in 1945, Joris Ivens was appointed by the Netherlands government, Film Commissioner for the Dutch East Indies (then still under Japanese occupation)(Barnouw, 1993, pp. 131-139).

President of the pro-fascist Australia First Movement, was interned by the Australian government from 1942 to 1945 (Munro, 1984, p. 23)

[5] Although he began his career in Holland as an experimental, 'art' cineaste, Joris Ivens from the early 1930s devoted his life to what we would today call political or agit-prop documentary film, working in all the world's trouble spots. In his later years he visited Cuba, Central and South America, and into his eighties was working in China under Mao to develop a propaganda documentary film industry there.

[6] The *Why We Fight* series comprises seven films made between 1942-1944. Frank Capra asserted overall control, but many Hollywood luminaries worked on the films; there are no credits on them. See Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, first published 1974) pp. 155-162.

Ivens immediately set off for Australia, where by 1945 an armada of British and Dutch ships had been assembled awaiting official word to set sail and 'liberate' the old colony from the Japanese. The political context now becomes complex: during this waiting period in Sydney, Ivens naturally moved within Australian left wing and both expatriate and 'native' émigré cultural and political circles. When, in August 1945, word came that Sukarno had declared independence from within Indonesia itself, Ivens realised that what had masqueraded as a liberation fleet now in fact stood ready to blockade the islands, 'restore order', and nip independence in the bud. His project — both political and filmic— changed overnight: the task now became to stop the armada from sailing (Barnouw, 1993, 169-172).

Ivens mobilised contacts in the Australian Communist Party controlled Waterside Workers Union for an agit-prop cinema project, a call to all Australians to support Sukarno and the cause of freedom from Dutch colonial rule for Indonesia. As Javanese crews deserted the fleet, one ship crewed largely by Indians set sail. In a dramatic chase on Sydney Harbour, members of the Waterside Workers union hailed the crew from a small clinker boat, and appealed for them to return to port. The ship turned back, and the rest is history.

Indonesia Calling, narrated by young Australian rising star Peter Finch, remains to this day an extraordinary piece of filmmaking. Taking his cue from one of the lines of narration, Erik Barnouw has suggested that the theme of the film might be summarised as "the ship that didn't sail", but that formulation overvalues a simple narrative device and undervalues the film's overall rhetorical sophistication and power (1993, p. 171). Shot with unblimped, borrowed 35mm

Arriflex cameras and his own old 1928 Kinemo, on black and white 'short end' film stock donated by local Cinesound news cameramen, and processed at night by sympathisers within the Sydney laboratories, the film combines actuality and staged scenes in what had become by now a well-crafted Ivens style.[7] The dramatic harbour chase sequence which forms the film's climax is one of the many unacknowledged re-enactments within the 'documentary' framework.

Indonesia Calling was collaged together some years after the events it narrates took place. In effect, only the film's opening graphic sequence takes place in the present (of 1948), the rest of the film is all flashback, or rather two sets of flashbacks. The tenses here get complicated: from the 'present tense' of a map of Indonesia and Australia, the film next jumps to the *finale* of the story it will relate — a Cinesound newsreel about the departure of the Esperance Bay ship carrying Indonesian exiles of the war years back home, which took place in October, 1945. With a neat rhetorical manoeuvre in the narration — "On that October day the Esperance Bay sailed from Australia to Indonesia. But the *real* story behind this journey is the story of ships that didn't sail. Let's start at the beginning…" — the film launches into a sustained flash-further-back narrative about the long, combined union "direct action" which stranded the Dutch fleet in ports around Australia for two months.

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[7] Because the cameras are unblimped they are too noisy to record synchronised sound; 'short ends' are remains of the normal Arri 200 foot loads (2 minutes of film) which are not considered worth saving (usually

There is some actuality footage of key meetings and marches from this 'Black Ban' period — particularly sync sound speeches from union leaders and other politicians, probably smuggled to Ivens by Cinesound cameramen — but the vast majority of the material is shot on unblimped cameras, and re-staged with what is clearly a constructed, effects sound track. That is not to say it is unsophisticated, unpersuasive, or inauthentic: narration and image fit together into a strong political rhetoric. Visually, the film draws on the vernacular of heroic worker imagery familiar from both Russian and British documentary traditions, including wide shots of massed or marching workers, low-angle two-shots and singles, mid shots of raised fists, and close shots of rugged, attentive, determined faces. In the narration, repetition, verbal colour, colloquial language, and the rhythmic listing of supporting unions, ships, ports, countries becomes hypnotic, begins to take on the cadences of the Bible, and suggests the poetry of W.H.Auden laid over *Night Mail* (1936), one of the masterpieces of the British Documentary movement. The central theme of this narrative is standard Wobbly propaganda, summed up in commentary over the climactic harbour chase in a tiny boat:

> Our boys didn't have much of a cruiser to go out to battle, they didn't have any guns or ammunition, but they had words… and they were talking to Indian seamen, Indian brothers. Brother! Turn the ship back! (...) Outside the Sydney Heads… Stop engines. Stop engines! They've come back, the Indians have stopped the ship!

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up to about 50 feet or 30 seconds of film), because the run in and run out of the camera roll carries too much

And there is a characteristic Ivens final touch: over actuality footage of a march by returned servicemen in both civilian clothes and uniform over Sydney Harbour Bridge — borrowed by Ivens from who knows where — the narration makes connection to the dock workers and ships under the bridge ("ships that didn't sail so that a young republic might live"), to be replaced by a chorus of male voices rising into the Internationale, sung in Bahasa Indonesia, which continues on as the marching workers and the film itself fade to black.

Propaganda — From War to Nationalism

Along with the returning soldiers, foreign correspondents, and documentary war photographers and filmmakers, returned trailing glory from the Second World War. Many went on to found distinguished careers in the post-war years — in print, writers such as Alan Moorehead, Wilfred Burchett, Richard Hughes became household names. In documentary film, Damien Parer's newsreel about war on the Kokoda Trail garnished Australia's first (and last) Academy Award for documentary film.[8] But documentary film and photography also faced crisis: as the Joris Ivens case so dramatically demonstrated, having been diverted from 1930s socialist agendas for reform of domestic inequality and injustice into nationalist demands for war propaganda, the post-war role of non-fiction genres — documentary in radio, film and photography, and indeed, any reportage from 'foreign correspondents' — seemed desperately unclear, uncertain and indeed unnecessary as nations began successfully rebuilding, and people turned gratefully to entertainment genres and consumerism.

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risk of fogging and scratching to make it worthwhile.

[8] *Kokoda Frontline*, 1942 (Damien Parer, Australia, Cinesound)

Enter John Grierson, Charles Moses, 'Nugget' Coombs, and the ghost of John Reith.

John Grierson, the 'father of British documentary', had never let go throughout the war years of his dream for an independent cinema that could both counter Hollywood and 'Americanisation', and build links within empire, a responsible citizenship, and national pride among the middle and working classes. As war broke out in 1939-40 he visited in rapid succession Canada, New Zealand and Australia to present his argument before government forums (Moran, 1991, pp. 2-3). As Albert Moran puts it:

> He was to advise on the role of film in national life and in strengthening empire ties. In all three countries his reports followed much the same lines: there was little point in government support for feature films because theatrical distribution was dominated by America; there was more chance of national purposes being fulfilled by educational and documentary films which might find a place in theatres; these short films could also be released on non-theatrical circuits; such films could strengthen the war effort, highlight the general work of government, and project a national image to people inside and outside the country. (p. 3).

Canada in 1939 (appointing Grierson himself as first Government Film Commissioner), and New Zealand in 1941, acted immediately on the report. In Australia as the war drew to a close, H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs (now Head of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction), Charles Moses (founder in 1926 and still Director of the Australian Broadcasting Commission), and other bureaucrats were gearing up for a new vision of post-war Australia; they convened a Commonwealth Film Conference in September 1944, and dusted off Grierson's report. An ideology of nation-building through modern communication technologies, enunciated two

decades earlier by John Reith, founder of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), was shared by all three powerful bureaucrats, indeed in the cases of Grierson and Moses, had intimately shaped their own careers.

And thus was born both the modern ABC and the Commonwealth Film Unit (now Film Australia).[9] Englishman Stanley Hawes, disciple of Grierson, was recruited to lead the Unit, and he set about gathering filmmaking talent from among the ranks of journalists, writers, photographers and cameramen who had previously been employed primarily in the production of war propaganda and newsreels.[10] Over the early years others came in from the cold of Australia's small intellectual, artistic, and left-wing political circles, including notably Keith Gow from the Waterside Workers Film Unit, the same group that had produced *Indonesia Calling*.[11] Over the next twenty five years, the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU) became a crucible of filmmaking talent that nurtured the seeds of an Australian film industry. When Hawes retired in 1969 (having been at the helm since 1946), the CFU employed Peter Weir, Phil Noyce, Chris Noonan, Dean Semmler, Don McAlpine, Richard (Dick) Mason, John Morris,

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[9] Naturally, the story of the bureaucratic in-fighting that went on is a little more complex than this short summary, see Albert Moran, Projecting Australia: Government film since 1945 (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991) for the most authoritative account of CFU history, and on the ABC see Ken Inglis, This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1932-1983 (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 1983).

[10] These included writer Maslyn Williams, war cameraman Frank Bagnall, war correspondent Lee Robinson, John Heyer (for others, see Moran, 1991).

Gil Brealey, Donald Crombie, Damien Parer, (son of the maker of *Kokoda Trail*), to name only a few of the more well-known of those who would shortly revive an Australian feature film industry.

Crucially, (and unlike some of the other Government filmmaking Units seeded by Grierson around the colonies)[12], built into the Unit's charter from the beginning was a two-fold structure: a Departmental Programme which made films on commission, directly sponsored by Government; and what became known as the National Programme, a lump sum of money with which the Unit itself could initiate film projects, under general guidelines set by a National Board. In other words, the Film Unit had the good fortune to be grounded in a similar philosophy of the public good that underpinned the whole concept of public broadcasting, and the ABC. As Moran notes: "The national programme was and is an ideological tool for supporting and propagating the idea of the nation and the national entity" (1991, 8).

Moran specifically links the idea of the national programme to a struggle and shift in power relations between the state and federal governments. But in the immediate post-war years the issue of nation was not so narrow; Australia sought to construct a new, more complex, more

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[11] Keith Gow (1927-1987) joined the CFU in 1959, and stayed with the Unit until his death, becoming a master filmmaker and mentor to new generations of filmmakers.

[12] Grierson's ideology of government filmmaking in the service of empire and nation was immensely influential: 'Units' were established not only in Canada, New Zealand and Australia, but also in colonies as diverse as Singapore, the former Malaya, Hong Kong, the former Rhodesia, Fiji, and so on.

distinct identity in the face of strong geopolitical forces and a changing world: national security focus shifted from Britain to the U.S., an influx of refugees from Europe was coupled with an aggressive immigration programme, and in our own region the era of post-colonialism had begun, with revolution on our doorstep in Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, the French colonies of L'Indochine, and so on.

Much as America had been forced to construct a nationalist 'melting pot' mythology around the turn of the previous century under the pressure of immigrant 'others', Australia a half century later also needed to define elements of an 'Australianness' that would hold the whole complex mix together. This drive for a new, national identity took the form of an aggressive re-imagining and celebration of the past as anti-colonial resistance, and the assertion of a largely Anglosaxon mythology of what made us 'Aussies'. This early, nationalist phase lasted into the early seventies, and is directly reflected in the first tentative steps of the Australian feature film industry.[13] Only around the mid-seventies, following the Labor Party inter-regnum, was it possible to become more relaxed about assimilation, and a more complex idea of a 'multicultural' Australia to take hold. In 1975 the mission statement for Film Australia, the recently renamed CFU, was re-defined as "dealing with matters of national interest to Australia

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[13] Consider, for example, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981), *Newsfront* (Phil Noyce, 1978), *The Adventures of Barry Mackenzie* (Bruce Beresford, 1972) *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam, 1975), *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Fred Schepsi, 1978), *Between Wars* (Michael Thorhill, 1974), *Ned Kelly* (Tony Richardson, 1970).

and illustrating and interpreting aspects of Australia or of the life and activities of the Australian people" (Moran, 1991, p. 9).

But while Australia may have been growing up, loosening the ties of Empire, and entering the post-colonial era, the nation also occupied a kind of schizophrenic, imperial role in relation to both its indigenous people and its own colonies. Australian writers, journalists and filmmakers of the period face a double bind: they are familiar with and actively engaged in defining a new, liberational, post-colonial condition for themselves, yet at the same time, as an English-speaking, European settler society, they historically imagine, narrate and desire their colonial 'others' through the tropes and myths of an earlier, guilt-ridden imperial mission. Nowhere was this drama played out more clearly than in Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea — Australian Colony

In the Australian press some of the old orientalist thinking and reporting did not die gracefully. Peter Hastings, long-term Pacific desk reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald, remained one of the 'old hands' who had trouble coming to grips with the post-colonial realities of emerging independent Pacific nations. At the 1972 Sydney Film Festival launch of his nine-hour series filmed in the Papua New Guinea Highlands, *Towards Baruya Manhood*, director Ian Dunlop brandished from the stage one of Hastings's articles from that very week, which described the Baruya as an inferior, "stunted" race. Dunlop's film series, documenting the extraordinarily

demanding initiation ordeals and rituals which admit adolescents into full adult status, demonstrates convincingly their strength, courage, and intelligence.[14]

From today's perspective, however, and to its credit, the record over the last few decades of Australian reporting from the Asia Pacific region, particularly in the public broadcasting sector and quality broadsheets, is on the whole, responsible and thoughtful. Long-term resident foreign correspondents such as the Sean Dorney (based in Port Moresby) and Mary-Louise O'Callaghan (based in Vila, capital of the Vanuatu), and committed journalists of the calibre of Tim Bowden and Paul Kelly, have established and maintain a tradition of accurate, informed commentary from the region which not only helps educate their general Australian audiences but also influences public policy. In documentary film, the story is much the same, with a generally positive record in "the processes of beginning to see and think about Asia", as David Hanan remarks (Hanan, 1993, p. 39).

The full history remains to be written, but Australia's only true colony, Papua New Guinea (PNG), stands out as a kind of critical site for Australian journalists, writers and documentary filmmakers, the place where they confronted their craft and its implicit ideologies of 'writing' or 'observing' the 'other' — the problematics of representation and orientalism discussed earlier in this paper. It has been argued that documentary film and photography led the way:

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[14] Co-author Philip Robertson was sound editor on the *Baruya* series, and present at the launch.

> Well in advance of representation in writing, documentary and ethnographic film have been aware of the difficulties involved in representing other peoples' worlds through the medium of images and story forms particular to Euro-American culture. (Leslie Devereaux: 1995, p. 331)

For documentary film, the best account to date is not text-based scholarship, but a compilation film, *Taking Pictures*, made bv Les McLaren and Annie Stiven in 1996.[15] The film is a meditation on Australian filmmaking's encounter with its colonial other, combining interviews with filmmakers and clips from their respective films. As coherent narrative or argument *Taking Pictures* faces an uphill battle: it is not easy to describe the PNG expatriate documentary filmmaking milieu of the early seventies. Moreover, academic scholarship, preferring print texts, is not good at the fine tracings of informal contacts and social networks.

Before looking in more detail at the themes raised in *Taking Pictures*, here is a catalogue of facts about this milieu: Ian Dunlop had been recruited in 1969 by French anthropologist Maurice Godelier to film the rare and recently revived Baruya initiation ceremonies; Chris Owen, permanent resident and mentor to many filmmakers, was quietly turning out films about social change and cultural survival in long-term collaboration with village communities; Dennis O'Rourke was employed by the PNG Government Film Unit (Grierson's ghost never dies) as cameraman/director to make educational and health films; Gary Kildea, who preceded O'Rourke at the Film Unit and continued to work there from time to time, teamed up with

anthropologist Jerry Leach to scrape together money for a film about cricket in the Trobriand Islands; and Les McLaren was drifting around as freelance sound recordist on any project going. Out of this period come the ethnographic classics, *Towards Baruya Manhood* (1972) at the more traditional pole of ethnographic film, and at the more self-reflective, post-colonial end of the spectrum, *Trobriand Cricket*(1978). And Denis O'Rourke launches his international career with the official government record of the movement for independence in the period between the granting of self-government (1973), official independence (1975), and the first general elections(1977), *Yumi Yet*(1977) — the film (the *pigin* title translates as 'now together') is a powerful call for national unity and purpose to its home audience of some 600 different groups and languages. It was immediately followed by a stirring film about these first democratic elections, *Ileksen*(1978), and later a raft of important Pacific region works, including *Shark Callers of Kontu*, *Cannibal Tours*, *Half-Life*, and so on.

Taking Pictures is both an historical compilation film and a personal narrative; Les McLaren's voice threads its way through the film as he links each filmmaker's interview, and each excerpt of their films, with his own personal filmmaking journey from innocence to self-consciousness, to borrow the title of Loizos's more general history of ethnographic film (Loizos: 1993). The film sets up its theme in the pre-title sequence: black and white archival footage from the 1930s which records the first contact between remote Highland peoples and the outside world — shot by the Leahy brothers, Australian gold prospectors and explorers — then cuts abruptly to

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[15] *Taking Pictures*, 1996, (Les McLaren and Annie Stiven, Australia, Australian Film Commission (AFC),

scenes in a contemporary (mid 1990s) Highlands marketplace. McLaren's voice-over links the two filmmaking moments, and comments: "More than 60 years later, I'm another Australian behind a camera, continuing a Western tradition of enquiry and recording other people's lives." Suddenly, his filming of the markets is interrupted by an angry local; the confrontation that follows is conducted in *pigin*, and subtitled as follows:

> "Show me your permit before you go". (Angry local, the image jerky and disrupted as the camera is jostled).
> "It's not here, but I do have Government permission to film." (McLaren's voice from behind the camera.)
> "Where is it?"
> "Back at the office."
> "No, that's no good! We're just ordinary people, and you take pictures and go back to your place and portray us very badly. No, you go back to your place and portray us as ignorant, as if we were worthless. Turn the camera off or I'll smash it!"

Taking Pictures goes on to trace from the 1970s to the present the history in film of the "Western tradition of enquiry and recording" in the post-colonial relationship between Australia and PNG, and the complexities of the encounter between cultures — between observer and observed. As McLaren's voice over sums up after the market scene and the main title, "When I first went to PNG in 1970, questions of representation and the idea of filming another culture weren't contentious. And I was idealistic about what filmmaking could achieve." Gary Kildea adds:

Australian Film Finance Corporation (AFFC), Special Broadcasting Service (SBS Independent)).

> We were of a 60s liberal ideology where the idea of the equivalence of all cultures had kind of arrived… learning to make documentary films differently was all tied up with learning to respect other people, the people you're filming, more.

Ian Dunlop concurs: "They open up their culture to us, and it's a huge responsibility to treat that material with respect." And O'Rourke remarks: "It was only with our early work that their language, and the complexity of their thought, their poetry, was revealed to be exactly the same as ours."

In the 1980s, Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson would continue this pilgrimage to Australian documentary's Mecca, producing the extraordinary Highlands trilogy (*First Contact, Joe Leahy's Neighbours, Black Harvest*), two of which were nominated for Academy Awards. *Taking Pictures* ends on an optimistic note about the potential for thoughtful and responsible cultural outcomes in the relationship between Australian documentarians and their subjects:

> It's important to be reflective, and to question the way in which we represent the lives of others. The cameras have been mostly in our hands, and I can sympathise with the man in the market. Who knows what he's seen on television? There are problems and dilemmas, but there's still reason to be optimistic about the power of film to capture moments and stories in the complex encounter between cultures.

And this self-reflective, sensitive observation, writing and filmmaking about our region continues today in the work of Curtis Levy, Tom Zybrycki, David Bradbury, Denis O'Rourke, and others.

Conclusion

> Back then we thought things were knowable… No matter how well-intentioned, can we ever see another society except through our own cultural lens?
> (Les McLaren voice-over in *Taking Pictures*)

The ethical and epistemological dilemmas posed by documentary filmmaking apply equally to Australian journalism, and all other genres of 'fact' and 'reporting'. Moreover, neither culture nor imperialism are fixed constellations of products and practices, but rather processes in constant negotiation with each other. And these negotiations take place neither in distant places nor far away in time: Australian culture itself, today as always, faces challenges from new imperialisms.

As Australia engages the United States in a tighter political embrace, Australian journalists and documentary makers may be asked to play their part in a familiar apparatus of imperial cultural packaging. Already global television bulletins are laced with reports implying U.S. intellectual and moral ascendancy over a post-Saddam rabble which loots and burns its libraries, universities and schools. Whether Australian media practitioners accept and reproduce propaganda-inspired caricatures may indicate whether we have learned from what may be, for us, merely a post-colonial interlude — and illusion. The challenge of 'seeing' our region through clear eyes and a sensitive, responsible, self-reflective lens has never been more urgent: empires of information are also, always, simultaneously, empires of imagination.

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