

*Ingo Petzke*

Phillip Noyce is one of Australia's most prominent film makers—a successful feature film director with both iconic Australian narratives and many a Hollywood blockbuster under his belt. Still, his beginnings were quite humble and far from his role today when he grew up in the midst of the counterculture of the late sixties. Millions of young people his age joined the various 'movements' of the day after experiences that changed their lives—mostly music but also drugs or fashion. The counterculture was a turbulent time in Sydney artistic circles as elsewhere. Everything looked possible, you simply had to "Do It!"—and Noyce did. He dived head-on into these times and with a voracious appetite for its many aspects—film, theatre, rallies, music, art and politics in general. In fact he often was the driving force behind such activities. Noyce described his personal epiphany occurring in 1968:

A few months before I was due to graduate from high school, [...] I saw a poster on a telegraph pole advertising American 'underground' movies. There was a mesmerising, beautiful blue-coloured drawing on the poster that I later discovered had been designed by an Australian filmmaker called David Perry. The word 'underground' conjured up all sorts of delights to an eighteen-year-old in the late Sixties: in an era of censorship it promised erotica, perhaps; in an era of drug-taking it promised some clandestine place where marijuana, or even something stronger, might be consumed; in an era of confrontation between conservative parents and their affluent post-war baby-boomer children, it promised a place where one could get together with other like-minded youth and plan to undermine the establishment, which at that time seemed to be the aim of just about everyone aged under 30. (Petzke 8)

What the poster referred to was a new, highly different type of film. In the US these films were usually called "underground". This term originates from film critic Manny Farber who used it in his 1957 essay *Underground Films*. Farber used the label for films whose directors today would be associated with independent and art house feature films. More directly, film historian Lewis Jacobs referred to experimental films when he used the words "film which for most of its life has led an underground existence" (8).

The term is used interchangeably with *New American Cinema*. It was based on a New York group—the Film-Makers' Co-operative—that started in 1960 with mostly low-budget filmmakers under the guidance of Jonas Mekas. When in 1962 the group was formally organised as a means for new, improved ways of distributing their works, experimental filmmakers were the dominant faction.

They were filmmakers working in a more artistic vein, slightly influenced by the European Avant-garde of the 1920s and by attempts in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In film history, this era is also known as the Third Avant-garde. In their *First Statement of the New American Cinema Group*, the group drew connections to both the British Free Cinema and the French Nouvelle Vague. They also claimed that contemporary cinema was "morally corrupt, aesthetically obsolete, thematically superficial, temperamentally boring" (80).

An all-encompassing definition of Underground Film never was available. Sheldon Renan lists some of the problems:

There are underground films in which there is no movement and films in which there is nothing but movement. There are films about people and films about light. There are short, short underground films and long, long underground films. There are some that have been banned, and there is one that was nominated for an Academy Award. There are sexy films and sexless films, political films and poetical films, film epigrams and film epics ... underground film is nothing less than an explosion of cinematic styles, forms and directions. (Renan 17)

No wonder that propelled by frequent serious articles in the press—notably Jonas Mekas in the *Village Voice*—and regular screenings at other venues like the Film-makers' Cinemathèque and the Gallery of Modern Art in New York, these films proved increasingly popular in the United States and almost immediately spread like bush fires around the world.

So in early September 1968 Noyce joined a sold-out crowd at the Union Theatre in Sydney, watching 17 shorts assembled by Ubu Films, the premier experimental and underground film collective in 1960s Australia (Milesago). And on that night his whole attitude to art, his whole attitude to movies—in fact, his whole life—changed. He remembered:

I left the cinema that night thinking, "I'm gonna make movies like that. I can do it." Here was a style of cinema that seemed to speak to me. It was immediate, it was direct, it was personal, and it wasn't industrial. It was executed for personal expression, not for profit; it was individual as opposed to corporate, it was stylistically free; it seemed to require very little expenditure, innovation being the key note. It was a completely un-Hollywood-like aesthetic; it was operating on a visceral level that was often non-linear and was akin to the psychedelic images that were in vogue at the time—whether it was in music, in art or just in the patterns on your multi-coloured shirt. These movies spoke to me. (Petzke 9)

Generally speaking, therefore, these films were the equivalent of counterculture in the area of film. Theodore Roszak railed against "technocracy" and underground films were just the opposite, often almost do-it-yourself in production and distribution. They were objecting to middle-class culture and values. And like counterculture they aimed at doing away with repression and to depict a utopian lifestyle feeling at ease with each imaginable form of liberality (Doggett 469).

Underground films transgressed any Hollywood rule and convention in content, form and technique. Mobile hand-held cameras, narrow-gauge or outright home movies, shaky and wobbly, rapid cutting, out of focus, non-narrative, disparate continuity—you name it. This type of experimental film was used to express the individual consciousness of the "maker"—no longer calling themselves directors—a cinematic equivalent of the first person in literature.

Just as in modern visual art, both the material and the process of making became part of these artworks. Music often was a dominant factor, particularly Eastern influences or the new Beat Music that was virtually non-existent in feature films. Drug experiences

were reflected in imagery and structure. Some of the first comings-out of gay men can be found as well as films that were shown at the appropriately named “Wet Dreams Festival” in Amsterdam. Noyce commented:

I worked out that the leading lights in this Ubu Films seemed to be three guys — Aggy Read, Albie Thoms and David Perry [...They] all had beards and [...] seemed to come from the basement of a terrace house in Redfern. Watching those movies that night, picking up all this information, I was immediately seized by three great ambitions. First of all, I wanted to grow a beard; secondly, I wanted to live in a terrace house in the inner city; and thirdly, I wanted to be a filmmaker. (Ubu Films)

Noyce soon discovered there were a lot of people like him who wanted to make short films for personal expression, but also as a form of nationalism. They wanted to make Australian movies. Noyce remembered: “Aggy, Albie and David encouraged everyone to go and make a film for themselves” (Petzke 11).

This was easy enough to do as these films—not only in Australia—were often made for next to nothing and did not require any prior education or training. And the target audience group existed in a subculture of people willing to pay money even for extreme entertainment as long as it was advertised in an appealing way—which meant: in the way of the rampaging Zeitgeist.

Noyce—smitten by the virus—would from then on regularly attend the weekly meetings organised by the young filmmakers. And in line with Jerry Rubin’s contemporary adage “Do it!” he would immediately embark on a string of films with enthusiasm and determination—qualities soon to become his trademark. All his films were experimental in nature, shot on 16mm and were so well received that Albie Thoms was convinced that Noyce had a great career ahead of him as an experimental filmmaker.

Truly alternative was Noyce’s way to finally finance *Better to Reign in Hell*, his first film, made at age 18 and with a total budget of \$600. Noyce said on reflection:

I had approached some friends and told them that if they invested in my film, they could have an acting role. Unfortunately, the guy whose dad had the most money — he was a doctor’s son — was also maybe the worst actor that was ever put in front of a camera. But he had invested four hundred dollars, so I had to give him the lead. (Petzke 13)

The title was taken from Milton’s poem *Paradise Lost* (“better to reign in hell than serve in heaven”). It was a film very much inspired by the images, montage and narrative techniques of the underground movies watched at Ubu. Essentially the film is about a young man’s obsession with a woman he sees repeatedly in advertising and the hallucinogenic dreams he has about her. Despite its later reputation, the film was relatively mundane. Being shot in black and white, it lacks the typical psychedelic ingredients of the time and is more reminiscent of the surrealistic precursors to underground film. Some contempt for the prevailing consumer society is thrown in for good measure. In the film, “A youth is persecuted by the haunting reappearance of a girl’s image in various commercial outlets. He finds escape from this commercial brainwashing only in his own confused sexual hallucinations” (Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative). But despite this advertising, so convincingly capturing the “hint! hint!” mood of the time, Noyce’s first film isn’t really outstanding even in terms of experimental film.

Noyce continued to make short experimental films. There was not even the pretence of a story in any of them. He was just experimenting with his gear and finding his own way to use the techniques of the underground cinema. *Megan* was made at Sydney University Law School to be projected as part of the law students' revue. It was a three-minute silent film that featured a woman called Megan, who he had a crush on. *Intersection* was 2 minutes 44 seconds in length and shot in the middle of a five-way or four-way intersection in North Sydney.

The camera was walked into the intersection and spun around in a continuous circle from the beginning of the roll of film to the end. It was an experiment with disorientation and possibly a comment about urban development. *Memories* was a seven-minute short in colour about childhood and the bush, accompanied by a smell-track created in the cinema by burning eucalyptus leaves. *Sun* lasted 90 seconds in colour and examined the pulsating winter sun by way of 100 single frame shots. And finally, *Home* was a one-and-a-half-minute single frame camera exploration of the filmmaker's home, inside and out, including its inhabitants and pets.

As a true experimental filmmaker, Noyce had a deep interest in technical aspects. It was recommended that *Sun* "be projected through a special five image lens", *Memories* and *Intersection* with "an anamorphic lens" (Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative). The double projection for *Better to Reign in Hell* and the two screens required for *Good Afternoon*, as well as the addition of the smell of burning leaves in *Memories*, were inroads into the subgenre of so-called *Expanded Cinema*.

As filmmaking in those days was not an isolated enterprise but an integral part of the all-encompassing Counterculture, Noyce followed suit and became more and more involved and politicized. He started becoming a driving force of the movement. Besides selling *Ubu News*, he organised film screenings. He also wrote film articles for both *Honi Soit* and *National U*, the Sydney University and Canberra University newspapers—articles more opinionated than sophisticated. He was also involved in Ubu's Underground Festival held in August and in other activities of the time, particularly anti-war protests.

When *Ubu Films* went out of business after the lack of audience interest in Thoms's long *Marinetti* film in 1969, Aggy Read suggested that *Ubu* be reinvented as a co-operative for tax reasons and because they might benefit from their stock of 250 Australian and foreign films. On 28 May 1970 the reinvention began at the first general meeting of the Sydney Filmmakers Cooperative where Noyce volunteered and was elected their part-time manager. He transferred the 250 prints to his parents' home in Wahroonga where he was still living he said he "used to sit there day after day just screening those movies for myself" (Petzke 18).

The Sydney University Film Society screened feature films to students at lunchtime. Noyce soon discovered they had money nobody was spending and equipment no one was using, which seemed to be made especially for him. In the university cinema he would often screen his own and other shorts from the Co-op's library. The entry fee was 50 cents. He remembered: "If I handed out the leaflets in the morning, particularly concentrating on the fact that these films were uncensored and a little risqué, then usually there would be 600 people in the cinema [...] One or two screenings per semester would usually give me all the pocket money I needed to live" (Petzke 19).

Libertine and risqué films were obviously popular as they were hard to come by. Noyce said:

We suffered the worst censorship of almost any Western country in the world, even worse than South Africa. Books would be seized by customs officers at the airports and when ships docked. Customs

would be looking for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. We were very censored in literature and films and plays, and my film [Better to Reign in Hell] was banned from export. I tried to send it to a film festival in Holland and it was denied an export permit, but because it had been shot in Australia, until someone in the audience complained it could still be screened locally. (Castaway's Choice)

No wonder clashes with the law happened frequently and were worn like medals of honour in those days of fighting the system, proving that one was fighting in the front line against the conservative values of law and order. Noyce encountered three brushes with the law.

The first occurred when selling Ubu Films' alternative culture newspaper *Ubu News*, Australia's first underground newspaper (Milesago). One of the issues contained an advertisement—a small drawing—for Levi's jeans, showing a guy trying to put his Levis on his head, so that his penis was showing. That was judged by the police to be obscene. Noyce was found guilty and given a suspended sentence for publishing an indecent publication.

There had been another incident including *Phil's Pill*, his own publication of six or eight issues. After one day reprinting some erotic poems from *The Penguin Collection of Erotic Poetry* he was found guilty and released on a good behaviour bond without a conviction being recorded. For the sake of historical truth it should be remembered, though, that provocation was a genuine part of the game. How else could one seriously advertise *Better to Reign in Hell* as "a sex-fantasy film which includes a daring rape scene"—and be surprised when the police came in after screening this "pornographic film" (Stratton 202) at the Newcastle Law Students Ball?

The Newcastle incident also throws light on the fact that Noyce organised screenings wherever possible, constantly driving prints and projectors around in his Mini Minor. Likewise, he is remembered as having been extremely helpful in trying to encourage other people with their own ideas—anyone could make films and could make them about anything they liked. He helped Jan Chapman, a fellow student who became his (first) wife in December 1971, to shoot and edit *Just a Little Note*, a documentary about a moratorium march and a guerrilla theatre group run by their friend George Shevtsov. Noyce also helped on *I Happened to Be a Girl*, a documentary about four women, friends of Chapman.

There is no denying that being a filmmaker was a hobby, a full-time job and an obsessive religion for Noyce. He was on the organising committee of the First Australian Filmmakers' Festival in August 1971. He performed in the agit-prop acting troupe run by George Shevtsov (later depicted in *Renegades*) that featured prominently at one of Sydney's rock festival that year. In the latter part of 1971 and early 1972 he worked on *Good Afternoon*, a documentary about the Combined Universities' Aquarius Arts Festival in Canberra, which arguably was the first major manifestation of counterculture in Australia. For this the Aquarius Foundation—the cultural arm of the Australian Union of Students—had contracted him. This became a two-screen movie à la *Woodstock*. Together with Thoms, Read and Ian Stocks, in 1972 he participated in cataloguing the complete set of films in distribution by the Co-op (see Sydney Filmmakers Cooperative). As can be seen, Noyce was at home in many manifestations of the Sydney counterculture.

His own films had slowly become more politicised and bent towards documentary. He even started a newsreel that he used to screen at the Filmmakers' Cooperative Cinema with a live commentary. One in 1971, *Springboks Protest*, was about the demonstrations at the Sydney Cricket Ground against the South African rugby tour. There were more but Noyce doesn't remember them and no prints seem to have survived. *Renegades*

was a diary film; a combination of poetic images and reportage on the street demonstrations.

Noyce's experimental films had been met with interest in the—limited—audience and among publications. His more political films and particularly *Good Afternoon*, however, reached out to a much wider audience, now including even the undogmatic left and hard-core documentarists of the times. In exchange, and for the first time, there were opposing reactions—but as always a great discussion at the Filmmakers' Cinema, the main venue for independent productions.

This cinema began with those initial screenings at Sydney University in the union room next to the Union Theatre. But once the *Experimental Film Fund* started operating in 1970, more and more films were submitted for the screenings and consequently a new venue was needed. Albie Thoms started a forum in the Yellow House in Kings Cross in May 1970. Next came—at least briefly—a restaurant in Glebe before the Co-op took over a space on the top floor of the socialist Third World Bookshop in Goulburn Street that was a firetrap. Bob Gould, the owner, was convinced that by first passing through his bookshop the audience would buy his books on the way upstairs. Sundays for him were otherwise dead from a commercial point of view. Noyce recollected that:

The audience at this Filmmakers' Cinema were mightily enthusiastic about seeing themselves up on the screen. And there was always a great discussion. So, generally the screenings were a huge success, with many full houses. The screenings grew from once a week, to three times on Sunday, to all weekend, and then seven days a week at several locations. One program could play in three different illegal cinemas around the city. (Petzke 26)

A filmmakers' cinema also started in Melbourne and the groups of filmmakers would visit each other and screen their respective films. But especially after the election of the Whitlam Labor government in December 1972 there was a shift in interest from risqué underground films to the concept of Australian Cinema. The audience started coming now for a dose of Australian culture. Funding of all kind was soon freely available and with such a fund the film co-op was able to set up a really good licensed cinema in St. Peters Lane in Darlinghurst, running seven days a week. But, Noyce said, "the move to St. Peters Lane was sort of the end of an era, because initially the cinema was self-funded, but once it became government sponsored everything changed" (Petzke 29). With money now readily available, egotism set in and the prevailing "we"-feeling rather quickly dissipated.

But by the time of this move and the resulting developments, everything for Noyce had already changed again. He had been accepted into the first intake of the Interim Australian Film & TV School, another one of the nation-awareness-building projects of the Whitlam government. He was on his "long march through the institutions"—as this was frequently called throughout Europe—that would bring him to documentaries, TV and eventually even Hollywood (and return). Noyce didn't linger once the alternative scene started fading away. Everything those few, wild years in the counterculture had taught him also put him right on track to become one of the major players in Hollywood. He never looked back—but he remembers fondly...

## References

*Castaway's Choice*. Radio broadcast by KCRW. 1990.

Doggett, Peter. *There's a Riot Going On: Revolutionaries, Rock Stars and the Rise and Fall of '60s Counter-Culture*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007.

Farber, Manny. "Underground Films." *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*. Ed. Manny Farber. New York: Da Capo, 1998. 12–24.

Jacobs, Lewis. "Morning for the Experimental Film". *Film Culture* 19 (1959): 6–9.

Milesago. "Ubu Films". n.d. 26 Nov. 2014 <<http://www.milesago.com/visual/ubu.htm>>.

New American Cinema Group. "First Statement of the New American Cinema Group." *Film Culture Reader*. Ed. P. Adams Sitney. New York: Praeger, 1970. 73–75.

Petzke, Ingo. *Phillip Noyce: Backroads to Hollywood*. Sydney: Pan McMillan, 2004.

Renan, Sheldon. *The Underground Film: An Introduction to Its Development in America*. London: Studio Vista, 1968.

Roszak, Theodore. *The Making of Counter Culture*. New York: Anchor, 1969.

Stratton, David. *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980.

Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative. *Film Catalogue*. Sydney: Sydney Filmmakers Co-operative, 1972.

Ubu Films. Unreleased five-minute video for the promotion of Mudie, Peter. *Ubu Films: Sydney Underground Movies 1965-1970*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 1997.