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Waterloo - a film by Tom Zubrycki

Waterloo, the suburb, has a remarkable history.

One of Sydney's oldest residential areas, home of the Eveleigh rail workshops which, for a long time, housed a huge workforce' under one roof, Waterloo was a significant area in the development of the labour movement and the Labor party in N.S.W. More recently it has been the scene of a bitter and drawn out struggle by the residents to save their suburb from slum clearance and redevelopment by the Housing Commission

The value of "Waterloo", the film, is that it manages to represent the current struggle within this broader historical context. By avoiding the neat historical narrative Zubrycki has constructed a film that acknowledges the complexity and contradictions of history, that nearly always avoids crude 'them and us' or 'people versus the State' evaluations and that, like the struggle, has no tidy resolution..

This is achieved via the assemblage of an incredible variety of material; archival footage, stills, newsreels, re-enactments, T.V. news and video footage, contemporary images of the struggle and even home movies. All this is linked with a narration by Marg. Barry, a key figure in the resident action group, and also with the use of some great music that not only provides pace but also pinpoints different periods in the film.

Without this form it would have been impossible to illuminate the basic contradiction of the whole battle over Waterloo: how did the Housing Commission, a public housing authority set up by the State Labor Government in the forties, get to the stage of evicting workers to build more public housing?

The struggle to maintain the inner suburbs of Sydney as an area of low cost housing has been long and continuous. Threats have come not only from increasing gentrification but also from developers, the Department of Main Roads and the Housing Commission. In the film we see how the post war Labor government was conned by the smart talk of the planners and experts whose grand ideas of slum clearance, efficient planning and the inevitable march of progress were interpreted as somehow being the answer to the depressed housing conditions of the working class.

"Waterloo" exposes how the motives behind slum clearance depended on fairly deterministic notions about nice homes equalling nice people. There is a brilliant newsreel about post World War II reconstruction that blames the slums for health hazards, traffic chaos and delinquency and poses the answers to all these problems in neat cottages on quarter acre blocks in Blacktown all with easy access to the centrally located community centre which, needless to say, was never built.

The Housing Commission's vision for Waterloo was to bring 'vigorous new life to this decaying old suburb<sup>1</sup> in the form of highrise towers of concrete and steel. The shock the

residents experienced when they received a letter telling them that their homes had been gazetted for redevelopment reveals the fragility of that great Australian dream of owning your own home.

Many of the residents in Waterloo are owners who bought before the property boom in the early seventies at a time when South Sydney and Waterloo were still within the reach of low income earners. The images of the depression expose the desire for home ownership as a real response to the appalling hardships the working class experienced during this time. The re-enactment of an eviction is a powerful sequence in the film. Using a voice over of a personal account of an eviction with long shots of an empty house, the brutality of the police as they heaved people out of their homes is revealed.

The contemporary footage in the film is largely about the residents' struggle against the Housing Commission. Their struggle is not romanticized, internal debates, compromises and disagreements over strategies are all recorded. Should they have taken a firmer line over squatting?, does the demand for consultation automatically lead to co-option?, what is responsible planning? — all these questions are raised.

While there is a general avoidance of talking heads in the film there are points where no other technique could have got the message across as directly. This is particularly so in the footage of Bourke (head of the Housing Commission) and McKell (born in Waterloo, Labor Premier, Governor General and key figure in the establishment of the Housing Commission). Both talk to the camera as if it were sympathetic, revealing their unshakable conviction in their own benevolence. They are both foolishly optimistic about the good they *are* doing. These segments in the film set them up as buffoons, it's very easy to be partisan when you hear platitudes about "progress"<sup>11</sup> and "the good of the people" coming straight from the horse's mouth. Equally bizarre is the scene where the Queen comes to open one of the towers. She gets a warm welcome from the residents while the narration points out that the cost of the rock to commemorate this event could have repaired one house. The irony of this scene provides some welcome light relief.

The only problem with the structure of the film is that at times issues are located as significant but are never really explored in enough detail to explain why. The role of South Sydney Council remains unclear at the end of the film as does the connection between the Waterloo struggle and

those in the Rocks, Ultimo and Woolloomooloo. At one point Marg Barry declares that the relationship was largely based on providing numbers at each others demonstrations. Obviously there is a lot more to it than that, but more fundamental links are never effectively detailed.

I saw the film with some students from Waterloo High School. Apart from the immediate thrill of seeing their friends and streets on the big screen the kids also responded to the positive images of struggle and solidarity throughout the film. Local identity and networks are a powerful force in working class suburbs as the Housing Commission came to realise. For these kids the imminent amalgamation of their school with Cleveland St. Boys High, as part of the Education Department's inner city school rationalization programme, is yet another issue in the struggle for Waterloo's identity. Gay Hawkins