

Time, memory and history in the labour documentary film

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ABSTRACT

What is the capacity of documentary makers to address specific moments in industrial relations and map them through filmic representations? This paper discusses in depth a labour documentary from Tom Zubrycki, an Australian filmmaker nationally awarded in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the form. *Friends and Enemies* is unique in documenting union struggle as it deals with a defeat but a defeat that is constructed by the filmmaker as a moment when the class not only suffers but also learns as a class. The film moves from the individual worker engaged in an industrial relations struggle to the collective of workers co-operating to forge a combined strength. Zubrycki demonstrates a genuine respect for the emancipatory wishes of those he films. The film remains especially relevant with the increasing ‘anti-Union astigmatism of mainstream media’ (Coyle, R., and L. Milner. 2007. “Showing Some Fight: Kemira's Challenge to Industrial Relations.” *Metro Magazine* 153, 178–183.). Zubrycki fosters a capacity to bring an audience to an encounter with the working class; an encounter that has, as a class, the potential for ongoing agency, for bearing testimony to the onward march of capital in the fast-changing landscape of industrial relations. Zubrycki leaves us with the emancipatory pulse still beating.

Introduction

This paper addresses the representation of the emotional and intellectual landscape of workers in struggle through documentary film. My particular concentration will be on an examination of Tom Zubrycki's (1987) film *Friends and Enemies*. A background assumption to all this is that unionized labour is a key into understanding of and solidarity with the workers/working class. As Michael Yates put it

A fundamental goal of a union is to change the relationship between labor and management. Again and again, when workers are asked why they support the union or what the union has meant to them, they say that their fight for a union was a fight for dignity and respect (as cited in Proyect, 2015, para.7).

In this context then the documentary is viewed as a form of social history. This has long been a rich field (Caminati et al., 2012; Geiger, 2011; Proyect, 2015; Rothman, 1997; Vaughan, 1999; Winston, 1995; Zhang, 2010). In the Americas filmmakers such as Acosta (2016); Klein and Lewis (2004); Kopple (1976, 1990) Lears and Blotnick (2014) and Moore (1989, 2009) have all produced memorable explorations of the worker-capital relationship. In the UK Gower (2014) and Loach (1975, 1985, 2016) and others have also contributed to the same tradition. As an Australian, I feel that the films of Tom Zubrycki (1984; 1987; 1990) are equally worthy of study.

Indeed, what follows is an attempt to analyse one particular Zubrycki film, *Friends and Enemies*, through a theoretical prism cobbled together from the work of Roy Bhaskar (2008) and Enzo Traverso (2017) and Walter Benjamin (1977). My particular focus will be on time, memory and history particularly as portrayed in Zubrycki's film *Friends and Enemies*.

The Film

Friends and Enemies (1985) is a provocative film. It was filmed during one of the most vicious and protracted labour disputes in Australian history — one which saw the emergence of the New Right as a powerful force on the country's political landscape.

The footage was shot in 1985 on the 'hot plate' of the dispute. This is unusual in the documentary tradition which has been dominated by the archival turn in history documentary; and it is the view of this documentary historian that Zubrycki's film is a genuine attempt by the documentary maker to tell the story with respect, of the year long strike by the Electrical Trade Union in protest at the reduction by the State Government in their wages and conditions being negotiated under the guise of 'bargaining'

The actions by the State Government and the management of SEQEB were the commencement of the outsourcing of public services and the start of increasing threats to long-term employment security. A transition was starting with a move from permanent full-time jobs to casual contracts, as part of a broader attack on working conditions. In effect the hegemony of neoliberalism was being consolidated in Australia (Quiggin, 1997).

Something of the tenor of the times can be got from the CEO of SEQEB Wayne Gilbert's 1985 address to the right wing H. R. Nicholls Society. Gilbert's (1985) address triumphantly describes the SEQEB dispute as 'one of the most important and historic activities occurring in the Australian industrial arena today'. For him what is notable was 'the deregulation of the hitherto bound up industrial society and, hopefully, the demise of rampant and militant union control of this country that we have all seen probably since the beginning of this century' (1985). Gilbert speaks of the 'duplicity of the union'. He uses phrases such as 'out of control'. He claims the 'workers sacked themselves'. Unionists are describes as 'barbarous' 'brutal' and 'vampires'.

Queensland's Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen, reacted to the union's opposition by calling a State of Emergency and sacking all of the 1,002 workers. Soon after, he rushed through Parliament some of the harshest anti-union legislation ever seen in Australia. The film's director, Tom Zubrycki, spent many months following the major protagonists in these events. The resulting film is a chilling portrait of political intrigue with strong, colourful characters locked in a struggle where the stakes are the future of unionism itself.

The film is about strategy, tactics and backroom deals. Vince Lester, the National Party minister in charge of the dispute, takes us on a crusade of country fairs, schools, and debutante balls as he spreads the gospel of anti-unionism and free enterprise.

Meanwhile, the union office is a radically different world. There, Bernie Neville, a determined rank and filer, fearlessly confronts his own union officials and the local decision makers – the Queensland Trades and Labour Council. Nothing stands in his way, especially where he fears a sell-out round the corner.

The film is history as it happened. Its remarkable portrait of a watershed episode in Australian labour relations is seen from the perspective of ordinary workers and their families, especially their wives, whose story might otherwise have been unrecorded.

Scene 1 - with Anne Warner.

Through their struggle against betrayals and oppression, the film achieves an importance that extends far beyond the details of the moment. Reverberations from

the conflict continue to be felt in national politics, and the recent attack on penalty rates is another turn of the same screw.

In the films' final sequence, a group of women are shown waiting in the Trades and Labour Council headquarters to speak to someone about what is happening with the strike. The filmmaker stays with them but the wait is hopeless. The doors of power are locked and the women are excluded. The final comment from Joyce Nugent sums up the experience and gives the film its title. She says "When you look at it, this has done wonders ...Fair enough, you're a lot poorer, but ... hasn't it sorted your political views: your friends from your enemies?" (Nugent as cited in T. Zubrycki, 1987)

The film clearly sympathises with the rank and file and provides enough material for the viewer to understand their point of view. I agree with the verdict that "The film's strengths are those that spring from Zubrycki's gentle humanism, his undoubtedly sincere interest in people" (MacLennan, 2000).

Time

To understand the relationship of the film to time, let us begin with Roy Bhaskar's examination of time. This is especially important because as Bhaskar puts it 'No one should underestimate the causal grip that the past exercises on any present, however inert it may appear to be' (Bhaskar, 2008, p.141).

Here Bhaskar is taking a different approach to time than that which is offered in analytical philosophy. There the standard position owes much to the Cambridge philosopher J.M.E. McTaggart's who held that 'Nothing really changes. And nothing is really in time' (McTaggart, 1993, p.34). McTaggart divided time into three series, two of which Bhaskar deals with in DPF. The first of these is the A series (past, present, future). By contrast in the B series events are simply earlier than, simultaneous with, later than). For McTaggart neither series was real, that is time and tense are not real (McTaggart, 1993). Bhaskar's response was 'to argue... for the reality of both time and tensing, the irreducibility of tense and the reality of the future' (Bhaskar, 2008, p.142). Interestingly, the third of McTaggart's series, the C Series, was for him the ultimate reality of 'a timeless and endless state of love- love so direct, so intimate and powerful that even the deepest mystic rapture gives us but the slightest foretaste of its perfection' (McTaggart as cited in Laird, 1945, p.58).

One does not generally expect a documentary film maker to be particularly interested in the future. That is generally thought of as more of the domain of the science fiction film maker. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the future is real and at any one's present it can be exercising an impact. Here, Bhaskar emphasizes that the future is always mediated by the presence of the past (up to the limit of the indefinite present). Thus we have to think the concept of the presence of the future as the presence-of-the-future-in-the-past-in-the-present (Bhaskar, 2008, p.142).

If we return to the Zubrycki's film we can see it is the bleakness of vision of the future in their present that drives the sacked workers and their families to such depths of struggle and despair. But the film is also concerned with the past in the present. In the opening sequence a worker attempts to return his medals



Slide One

He is arrested and led away. His medals represent for the worker the congealed past. He was given to them for his service to his country. They contained acknowledgment and a promise that his sacrifice would be respected in the future. When he moves to return the medals, he is rejecting that past in the present that the medals represent. He is in effect saying that the promise of the past was being betrayed by Premier Petersen and his medals no longer have worth.

Memory

Here I would like to explore the question of how the strike and the film should be remembered. At the end of the film *Friends and Enemies*, the workers are left with the general loss of a belief in a better future and the growth of a horizon which is marked by the absence of utopian dreams.

It is in the address of these earlier moments of struggle and defeat that Enzo Traverso argues we may experience the onset of a melancholic remembrance.

This melancholic view approaches the past not as the site where militants struggled for a better world, but as a space of ruins inhabited by the ghosts of victims. As a result, expectations vanish and we get the feeling of a perpetual present in which the 'status quo' cannot be changed. As things are they will always be. Traverso summarises this by saying that there are two paradigms – the victim paradigm and the militant paradigm. Events can be interpreted quite differently depending on which paradigm one chooses.

Adhering to the militant paradigm means keeping alive the memory of struggle, with the lessons of that particular struggle a lesson repeated – 'you know now just who are your friends and who are your bloody enemies'. (Zubrycki, 1985)

There was no blood spilt, but marriages were broken and men committed suicide in the face of financial ruin.

The film itself fosters the realization that the union delegates were driven by the strong belief in the possibility of improving the lives of their members.

We can see this process of memory in action in this flyer included in Garry MaLennan article on history of teaching union.

See attached Fig 1.

Fig 1.

April 28 is set aside to remember those killed in industrial accidents. But the memory is meant to stir us into a determination to fight militantly to create a better future. There is no passive acceptance here of the way things are. Once more, *historia magistra vitae est*.



Fig 1.1

Historians who advance the victim paradigm, by contrast, encourages the growth of what the Marxist philosopher Daniel Bensaïd, called the 'piety of memory'. Bensaïd was also born in 1946, and died in 2010 at 63 years. In the summer of 1980, he had written 'In Memory of A Rebel' for Telso (44).

In this paradigm that echoes 'a piety of memory',¹ the past is no longer approached in the belief that we can learn from the struggles to build a better world.

We seem condemned by this paradigm, according to Bensaïd, to go round in circles. We find history boring and we withdraw from it because we feel that it has nothing to teach us. We would much rather use our imaginations not to create a blueprint for a better world but to escape to a 'long time ago and a galaxy far, far away'.

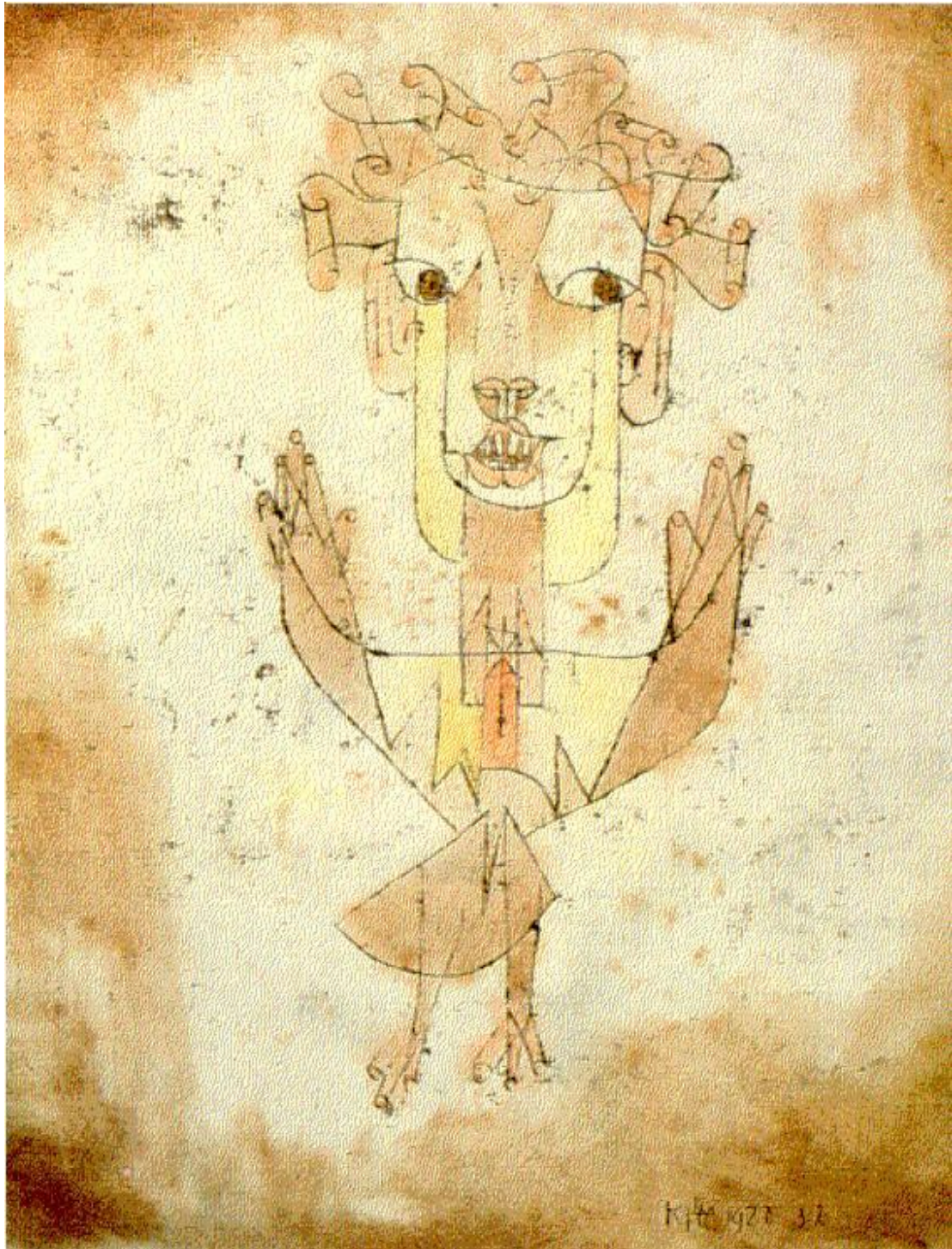
History

Zubrycki's film is now a historical document. But I would argue that it has much to teach us in our present. The film's shows events of the time of the consolidation of the Neoliberal paradigm (D. Harvey, 2007; David Harvey, 2007). Arguably, since the Financial Crash of 2007-8 we are going through what Koselleck(2002) termed a 'saddle time', that is a time where there is a paradigm shift. We may be about to move from neoliberalism to a post-capitalist paradigm. Certainly, commentators such as Paul Mason (2015) argue this. Others, such as Nancy MacLean (2017), argue that we face a future with an even more vicious model of neoliberalism to be put in

¹ Daniel Bensaïd (2001) *The Mole and the Locomotive*

place. Whatever the case, I would argue strongly that Zubrycki's film in its portrayal of struggle against a crucial neoliberal offensive is a useful reminder of how workers and their unions should respond to the challenge facing us.

The film should also enable us to reject forcibly notions such as the Thatcherite slogan 'There is no alternative' and the even more insidious version of history which would depict what happened to the SEQEB workers as a moment on the road to historical progress. In showing the suffering and despair of the workers and their families, Zubrycki is like the Angel of History in Benjamin's great meditation on the Paul Klee painting.



Slide 2

Benjamin wrote

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel

can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 1977, p.259).

Conclusion

Being a trained sociologist and social critic, Tom Zubrickyi headed to Queensland on the announcement of the strike in 1985 having learnt a great deal on Kemira: Diary of A Strike he was keen to refine and retune his filmmaking skills with respect to producing an industrial relations documentary. *Friends and Enemies* was filmed during the hundreds of days of the struggle by the workers and their supporters in 1985 between emerging neoliberal forces determined to achieve the privatization of government services against a loyal unionized workforce whose plight was taken up by the community in a powerful and protracted struggle.

I have chosen to approach the film from a theoretical position which considers the film in relation to time, memory and history. I have chosen to do so in the hope that this will show the continued relevance of a fine documentary to the troubled world we inhabit today.

Thank you

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