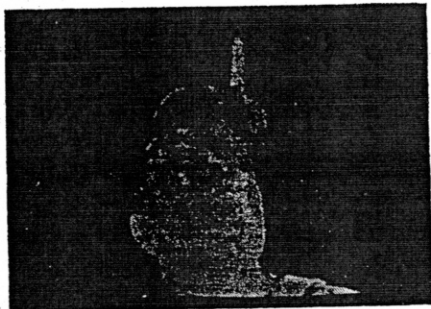


KEMIRA

Diary of a strike

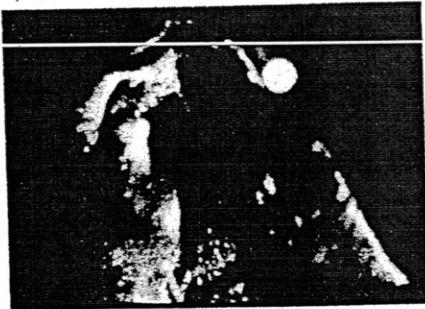
Kemira — Diary Of A Strike was completed in June this year in time for a successful screening and discussion session at the Sydney Film Festival. It had its official premiere at the Trade Union Centre in Wollongong in July, launched by the Women's Auxilliary and the Rank and File of the Southern District Branch of the Miners Federation, who were the major protagonists in the sixteen day underground stay-in strike which the film so vividly portrays. Kemira was voted Best Documentary at this year's AFI Awards, and will open for a two week season at the Sydney Opera House in mid November, six days in Melbourne at the Glasshouse Cinema, an open ended season at the Classic Cinema in Adelaide, and a six day season followed by weekend screenings at FTI in Perth at various dates in November (see below for details).

Last month John Hughes (Menace, Filmwork), who has been active in organising a closer working relationship between filmmakers and trade unions in Melbourne, sat down with Kemira's maker Tom Zubrycki and watched a cassette of the film. They discussed the structure of the film, the development of certain sequences in the editing process, and the creative and political decisions that went into that construction.



Opening montage

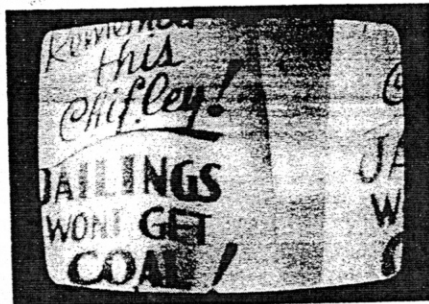
Would you agree that one of the reasons that the opening montage sequence works so nicely as a series of statements about the past and the present is that what one seeks out is the similarities, not the differences. What does this mean about the image of the miner which is so consistent in all those pictures? The images are of closeups of work. They evoke the back breaking nature of the job, and also the skills involved — they suggest that the dangers are still very real underground, even though the working conditions have greatly improved — and that these improvements have only been achieved through struggle — the dust demonstrations of the '40s, the '49 strike and the demands for shorter working hours in the '50s and '60s. I suppose, also, my intention was to pay homage to earlier representations of miners' struggles.



Opening montage

Do you think there is a problem in the way we depict the present in work related to the labour movement, particularly to labour history? We always evoke the classic images, the classic representations, without drawing attention to the mythical qualities of these constructions. In that sense the work is open to the criticism that the social realist project is open to. Do you think Kemira is a social realist film? It is, but I think it does throw open to question some of those mythic qualities, such as the uncritical acceptance of worker as hero. In the film I try to depict honestly the various contradictions within the miners' struggle to regain their jobs — that concessions cannot usually be won without considerable cost, that "unity" in fact

covers up some basic mistakes in organisation plus lack of communication. The social realism of the '50s and '60s as typified by Joris Ivens or the WWFU films is not the same as the realism of the '80s.



Opening montage

I find your reference to Chifley betraying the miners very interesting ...

Some people might indeed see the connection with the '49 Coal Strike — one hopes it's not just labour historians. It has resonances with what happens later in the film — notably Hayden's promises on the lawns of Parliament House, and Hawke's backtracking on those same promises at the end of the film. Historically, miners have distrusted the Labor Party — and it is useful to build up this idea quite early in the film.



The break-in.

The re-enactment was done by four of the original "stay in" miners. It was shot on the run with a good deal of speed — we only had access to the pit for three hours! Setups were done with sunglasses and a hand held camera. The result feels in keeping with the urgency of how it must have originally happened. Later on the editing bench, we had a philosophical discussion which went on for several weeks about whether to label the break-in as a re-enactment. I finally decided that we had to subtitle it for reasons of maintaining perfect honesty with the audience. Everything that wasn't covered by our cameras during the strike had to be sourced.

I bet in ten years time, someone uses it and doesn't subtitle it as a re-enactment. It will be called an "authentic representation" just like Hewers Of Coal.

EXCERPTS DRAWN FROM COAL TRIBUNAL HEARINGS

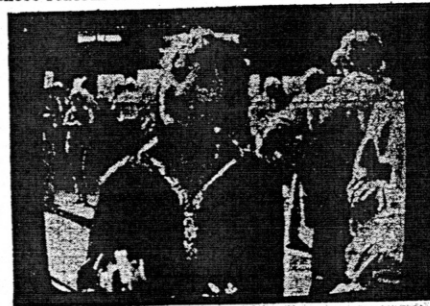
... We weren't to know that 10 per cent of our members were going to be sacked by the end of this year.

This was one of the stylised Tribunal sequences which were put together after much thought. We found we had to constantly make references back to the Tribunal because decisions made there affected the direction the strike took and partly explained the responses of people at pit top.

Most people say that this sequence works really well. I still have trouble with it. In a way it depoliticises the Tribunal — because it's a form that usually accompanies what we are led to believe is the truth on television. What characteristics of the Tribunal did you have in mind when you finally decided to use that method?

I wanted to convey the idea of physical displacement — of voices coming from a distant bureaucracy quite remote to pit top or street level as far as the miners and their families were concerned.

I think one of the good things about the whole first part of the film is that it can be read as a series of introductions to different documentary styles, beginning with the social realist representation, moving into the television news representation. And the Tribunal can be seen as consistent with that. For those reasons it works.



"We bought our home eight weeks ago, eight weeks we've been in there, now it's gone down the drain."

A lot of people have commented on the fact that you were able to get such good "performances" from people in the film and that you were able to work so warmly and collaboratively with the interview subjects.

We stayed around pit top for a long time. The helicopters came and went with the news crews. But we were building up an identity as an independent crew sympathetic to the strike. We knew they wanted the film made — a retired miner had contacted us through an intermediary, and this was all the excuse we wanted to come down and cover the strike. There were three of us involved — myself, Fabio Cavadini (cinematographer) and Russ Hermann (sound recordist). Fabio and Russ had just come down from Brisbane after working with the Black Film Unit on the Commonwealth Games project. They said immediately that they were prepared to come down to Kemira with me and work on deferred wages. I had only \$3,000 to start the film and that paid for stock and processing.



"If they want to they can solve this problem tomorrow — stop extracting the coal at the rate we are ..."

What is the political economy of the miners who speak in the film, is their analysis accurate?

It is accurate, and in many ways it resembles some of the arguments put up by the British miners — don't close these pits down because they contain valuable national resources which, once abandoned, will be lost forever. The miners had an interest in the ongoing survival of the pit, not only for their own material gain — they were genuinely concerned at the squandering of the country's mineral wealth.

One of the things I really like about films like this — it is very true about your film and other labour movement films — is that they make it



"The whole campaign was, mate, we weren't talking about how much money we were going to get when we finished. We were talking about our jobs ... They've conned us out of the pit mate, and as far as I'm concerned we should have still been in there."

However, there still appeared to be some miscommunication between the officials and the underground strikers, as in this scene. Were you ever tempted to discuss this further in the film?

I never got to the bottom of it. The unions denied there had been any misunderstandings and the men didn't want to talk about it. Yet it's very clear in this scene that they are annoyed at being "conned out of the pit". They apparently genuinely believed that the Coal Tribunal would still hear their case for a moratorium on retrenchments.

You could have thrown up the questions on the screen and pointed the accusing finger.

I think in this instance that the ambiguity is a good thing. It will make the film a talking point, particularly for audiences of shop stewards. It should clearly illustrate the problems of communication between leadership and rank and file in situations where people are under great stress to make decisions.



"You work here, mate. Do you? Do you only except decisions when they go your way?"

I always thought you should have dropped this scene because it is the kind of scene that commercial television stations, or television news, would love to be able to run because it is possible to paint the workers as intimidating a more or less innocent member of the public. This guy is a representation of a member of the public, there he is in his suit and tie on his way to work and there are these guys with their arms seemingly folded in aggressive positions following him down a blind alley?

Viewed outside the context that this scene is located in I would agree with you. However, the average viewer, who is made to identify with the plight of the striking workers by the film, interprets this scene as the workers being demoralised in the face of an intractable company. That sense of demoralisation I particularly agonised over in the cutting room — yet to have left it out would have been dishonest.

What are Will and Ngaire doing now?

They are both involved in relationships with different people. During the early part of the separation, Will took the whole thing particularly badly — even put himself under hypnosis to get over the pain. Ngaire, however, seemed to develop as a much more independent, self-assured person. Whatever ill feeling there was between

Will and Ngaire seemed to pass quickly though. At the film's opening in Wollongong in July the four of them sat together looking at the film.



"No matter what happens I'll manage somehow. I'll make sure that the kids are alright and I'm alright, but there's no way you're getting me out of here. This is home and this is where I'm going to stay."



Coal Dust

Where does that footage come from? Eddie Allison's film *Coal dust*. It was made in 1947 about the anti dust campaign.

Coal dust is a work of real skill. It should be seen. Very few people have seen it in recent years. Only one copy survives in the archive.



"I'd love to be able to stand in front of you and say: 'don't worry, go home. By my action I'll save the 363 jobs' ... but I can't."

If you are looking at the framing of the two shots of Hawke and the other politician addressing the miners in the previous black and white frame, they are almost sitting in the same spot in relation to the frame. Why didn't you cut between them? We didn't have Hawke in sync. It was a cutting problem.

You could have put his voice over the archival material.

I can't remember why we didn't do it. I think the reason was to do with the music where it finished and ended — it had to cover that whole sequence, otherwise it would have felt rhythmically unbalanced. One of the hardest problems we had was to try and work out how to tie up various elements tangential to the strike but that were important to the film; the future of Wollongong, the role of new technology in coalmining, the idea of history repeating itself, etc. Music was the only way to link these separate, yet interconnected ideas. The result is not unlike the montage at the start of the film.

Did you consider going into more detail about the international political economy that was constructing the situation?

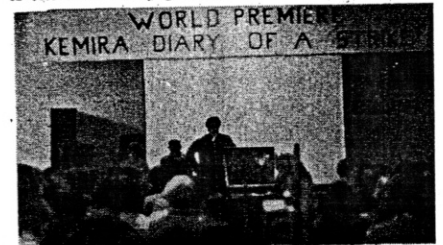
I certainly wanted to. But we were careful not to impose our own analysis. We wanted to bring out the point raised in discussion amongst the rank and file. To do otherwise would have looked very patronising, so we waited for an appropriate moment, and one finally came — the demonstration in front of State Parliament House against the Shell Oil Company. The scene clearly states that multinationals are also retrenching workers on a grand scale, and that Labor governments are doing very little about it. This forms a natural transition into the historical flashback which suggests that miners have always been suspicious of any one political party having their true interests at stake.

It sounds as if cassette sales are going really well. Is it a real model for independent distribution. Is it all helped by the fact that Kemira is oriented so directly to a specific community?

Probably thirty-five copies have been either sold or give away in the Wollongong community since July. It is a very effective way of getting people to see it and discuss with others without having to force them to move out of the privacy of their own loungerooms. It is particularly useful for activists like Sally Bowen — she recently invited home the newly formed Coalcliff Mine Women's Auxiliary to show them the film. Coalcliff, by the way, is where six hundred miners' jobs are threatened by the latest retrenchments.

It is a very sociological film in that the emphasis placed on systems and structure, which is true of your films, there is a strong sociological perspective. I see it as more political than sociological, ok, structure but structures which have some sort of controlling influence.

The film quite obviously takes up a position, locates itself in relation to those structures, it works situation from which it is possible to extrapolate lots of other situations, to the whole situations, which is one of the very good things about the film.



Film's premiere at the Trade Union Centre Wollongong.

Have there been any criticisms made of the film so far that you found particularly insightful or useful?

I could have delved deeper into the whole political economy of mining, but I don't consider it a subject of this film. The film was first and foremost about a strike and the people involved in it and what happened to them. To have gone onto a tangent would have disrupted not only the structure, but the whole feel of the film wanted to make people angry about the amorality of companies like BHP and I wanted this anger to stay at people left the theatre. The end montage sequence poses various questions about the role of the Labor Party relation to the multinational ownership of coal resources. A film can only ask questions — it can't lecture. If you like the latter, then you ghettoise political films by making them propagandist. I think political film has to be able to reach a wide public to be truly effective — I think the lies in communicating issues by fostering emotional identification rather than propagandising ideas suppose the other thing I could have done was to unnerve the identity of the "secret operative" in Parliament House. I'm not sure how I could have handled that.

Whether it was true or not it would have been libellous, and if it was true it would have been illegal. Either way, you could go to jail for five years. What other distribution do you have planned for the film? As well as national screenings, I'm currently organising screenings in mining districts in the north and west of state, as well as in Queensland. I'm also organising on job screenings at Chullora and Clyde railway worksheds as well as at Cockatoo and Garden Island Dockyard.

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speaks of a story with no underlying causal principle/origin or singular destination, but multiple chains of connections and traces — like a metaphorical chain with no base, privileged or generative term. It is a story which forms and disperses, whilst Potter's "sets", spiralling in on itself so to prove and re-solve its own riddle. In this way the latter recalls some of the debates around "traditional" documentary cinema as one which offers "proof" (rather than analysis), just as in Potter's spiral it is always a changing/channelling in the same direction. (Whilst she speaks of letting "something unfold in such a way that it comes back on itself to change itself again" it would seem that the direction of this change is carefully controlled). *Gold Diggers* permits little more than acknowledgement of its own connections and references.

But to return to ideas of political cinemas, I'd like to use a distinction Susan Sontag makes' between:

- **Analysis**, as substantive, always offering further angles of understanding, new realms of causality, an interminable mode of argument, by definition always incomplete; and
- **Proof**, as formal, by definition always complete, only what is already contained in the beginning is proven in the end.

The first does not aim to reveal/re-veil a static underlying reality content, but rather further questions such content's right as a *a priori* subject matter, challenging and dispersing it. The second would be closer to the case Potter presented and some documentaries (and perhaps the "anthropological discourse" which Gill Leahy pointed to as being distinctive of many documentary approaches — a locking of historically "true" past to a present, the two being connected, resolved and dismissed). Within this second type — political

fiction of the Potter variety or traditional documentary — the "value" of a film is often seemingly assessed by equating the amount of difficulties encumbered filming or getting the film exhibited with so much "political effectivity" (though in certain areas of the forums this term was avoided like the plague). Or else, in a similar vein, the "value" is assessed more in terms of the skill or accuracy the film shows in proving its argument. But in both forms of this second type, film is only seen as a means to express predetermined "content".

Something Which Changes, Creates

What would perhaps be more productive would be Bressonian ideas of cinematography where it is treated as a language to be used to its utmost (which is not to speak of its "essence" or purity, but rather of the multiplicity of its forms and possibilities). Bresson speaks of film as a "new way of writing and therefore a new way of feeling" and such an approach necessarily displaces the filmmaker vs film theoretician division in favour of something more like Ross Gibson's practice of "film thinking" and "social habit of analysis". And if for Potter film is not a language — something which changes, creates, moves boundaries — but rather a "vocabulary", then perhaps this is why she seems to be aiming to reach *through* film, in what she calls a "reworking of where we came from", and perhaps this can be more of a trap than a challenge to change.

"... a political film is a film which disconnects the normal links of reality, which suddenly breaks the world apart and gives you space, where suddenly you can think and breathe and deal with the element."

J P Gorin¹⁰

If the emphasis can be moved from the idea of proof to analysis, where to analyse is to move and challenge (positions and

assumptions), then the differences between documentary, fiction and other such readily labelled (though constantly moving) categories need not be acknowledged solely in terms of "alternatives" for a Political Cinema (a term which, functioning as a future singular, seems to have a blinding effect). For, under the burden of this Name, it seems to be an either/or approach to cinemas, relying a little too readily on a historical notion of replacing the "outworn" with the "new", (the idea that there was a period when Griersonian documentaries had "effect"). By moving the emphasis to "film thinking", one need no longer choose between "good" and "bad" objects, as to varying degrees all "styles" can be used to challenge or to prove. Such a displacement (in favour of Ross Gibson's "social habit of analysis") will no doubt require rethinking what is meant by Political Cinema, and this in turn should move the present impasses in talking/thinking films so as to enable the development and acknowledgement of a multiplicity of cinemas. For if "independent" is "political", what are such films independent of when they are smothered under the very weight of these terms? Perhaps it is only through such re-examinations that it will be possible to free films from the orthodoxies before which they have to validate themselves, and from terms whose only operative value is in the (negative) constraints they impose on film thinking".

Jodi Brooks

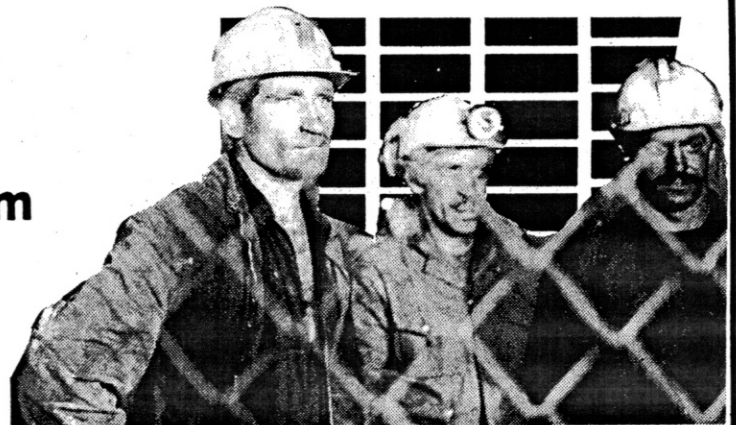
Notes

- 1 Which is not to equate their spoken theories or intentions with their film product, but is because to a large degree it was aspects of their *talks* that were taken up.
- 2 Peter Lehman "Style, Function and Ideology: A Problem in Film History" in *Film Reader* 4, 1979, Northwestern Uni, Illinois.
- 3 Martin Walsh *The Brechtian Aspects of*
- 4 *Radical cinema*, p 61, BFI Publishing, 1981.
- 5 This seems to me radically different from Rivette's *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, a film with which *Gold Diggers* was frequently likened in the forum. In *Celine and Julie* the two girls generate the fiction inside the house (rather than uncover it). It is a melodrama which endlessly repeats itself and into which they can enter (as spectators/participants) though remain separate (ie it is not an uncovering/retracing of their "truth"). Their participation in this "inner" (staged) story does not lock them into it so they must break free. As spectators, they fill in the gaps in this story till it can close itself (and be left to drift up the river as a frozen tableau). Their own story, however does not close because of it.
- 6 This video is available from the National Film Library.
- 7 Susan Sontag "Godard's *Viivre sa Vie*" p 197 in *Against Interpretation*.
- 8 This can perhaps also account for some of the notions of what constitutes "film practice" which are circulating. In Alec Morgan's letter to *Filmnews* (July '84), "practice" is seen not only as the act of getting "hands onto the little strips of plastic" (in which case "practice" is only available for a few, and always completed for the rest), but seems to be preceded by "feelings, frustrations, passion, thought, desire, hope, lack of hope, dreams, intellect, balance, gamble, laughter and tears". In such an argument the film seems to disappear, lost between the incredible weight given to the struggles and development of the filmmaker (a cause in him/herself) and the "truth" of the "subject matter" (here being seen as the external reality).
- 9 *Presson Notes On Cinematography*, p 15, Urizen.
- 10 J P Gorin quoted in "Godard and Me: Jean-Pierre Gorin Talks" p 126 in Martin Walsh, op cit.
- 11 An activity to be undertaken by "practitioners", "viewers" and "theoreticians".

The Creative Development Fund and the Women's Film Fund of the Australian Film Commission would like to congratulate the winners in the non feature section of the 1984 Australian Film Institute Awards, particularly:

Lee Whitmore for NED WETHERED Winner, Best Animated Film

Tom Zubrycki and his crew for KEMIRA: DIARY OF A STRIKE Winner, Best Documentary



Neill Bell and Kathy Mueller for EVERY DAY, EVERY NIGHT Winner, Best Achievement In Sound