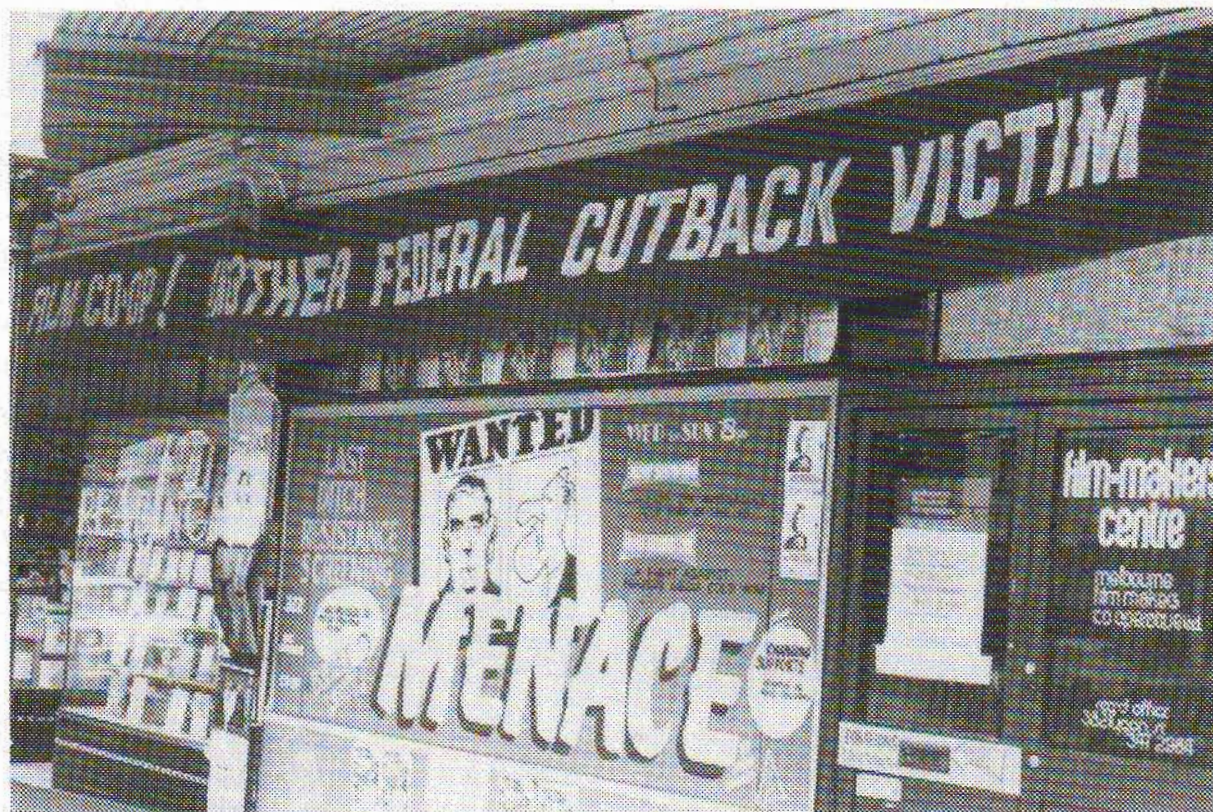


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MELBOURNE FILM MAKERS CO-OP

John Hughes



"The motion picture is to real life in America what any image is to the commodity or corporation it stands for. The motion picture, seen abroad, is of course synthetic. It is believable. It is passive. It is concrete. It is simplified, and it is ambiguous. Thus the world has been flooded with images of America. The selling of American images abroad is a remunerative business." — Daniel Boorstein, *The Image*

Three components make up a film industry; production, distribution and exhibition. It is well known that Australia produced the world's first feature film, *Soldiers of the Cross*, in 1901. Before the First World War 198 features were made by Australian artists, directors and producers. By 1919 there were 750 cinemas and an annual attendance of 67½ million. By 1929 this figure had doubled even though the rise in population was only 20%. During this period distribution and exhibition was controlled by Australian companies, notably Hoyts and Union Theatres.

In Australia and in many other countries local production was destroyed by distribution and exhibition monopolies, with vested interest in production controlled from UK and USA. Although its findings were never debated in Parliament a Royal Commission on the Motion Picture Industry (1927-8) documented how this was done and then made recommendations

which,

"...were a victory for the forces that opposed an independent Australian cinema." (The Australian Cinema, John Baxter, p. 42)

In 1932 Twentieth Century Fox bought out Hoyts. During the same period Britain's Rank organisation bought out Union Theatres, which had distributed Cinesound films. After (Sir) Norman Ridge took over in 1937, Cinesound was closed down as a feature production house in 1940. For the following 25 years there were virtually no feature films produced in Australia.

A Tariff Board Report in 1973 put it neatly, *"...the origins of ownership and distribution and exhibition sections of the industry have been responsible for the practically non-existent production... the practical absence of a viable production industry has been one of the major encouragements for the perpetuation of the distribution-exhibition oligopolies."* (Financial Review, 20.7.76)

Although the last six or seven years have evidenced the beginnings of a new commitment to the development of a local production industry, the central problem has not been tackled, and distribution and exhibition now remains firmly in the fat hands of Uncle Sam. Eighty percent of the films we see are American.

Four years ago the Tariff Board Report warned the Federal Government of the strategy necessary if we were to begin solving the problem, "...the objectives of the inquiry can best be realised by reducing the present concentration of control within the industry. This will only be possible if the dominance of the prime exhibition outlets by the Greater Union/Village Group and by Hoyts can be removed and the necessary measure of genuine competition created by restructuring the industry to provide a greater number of suitable alternative outlets for any film."

Power might be said to be the capacity to induce others to behave according to patterns in one's own mind.... The new states must face the fact that no one is absolutely sovereign, that co-operation is the price of responsible independence. We must make it clear that US power will be used to control the course of events...

Admiral Arleigh Burke, 1962

There is nothing unique about the challenge facing the Australian industry. The patterns of control which exist here conform to the American industries' international procedures. Reference to *American Film Industry Practice*, a handbook for American film companies operating abroad, makes this clear: "The Motion Picture Export Association has done a generally good trouble-shooting job.... A few American distributors have found it advantageous to combine their offices in some countries, and also to take over the distribution of native (that's us) productions."

Screenwriter Cliff Green, who wrote *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Rush* and *Power Without Glory*, among others, pointed out on the ABC's *Guest of Honour* that, "...although co-production with overseas interests is already an inescapable reality... Australia has to be vigilant if it is to avoid the fate of the British and Spanish film industries." He added that those are now "largely defunct" and in another interview referring to the BBC/ABC/Twentieth Century Fox production, Ben Hall, said, "...Twentieth Century

Fox wanted a Western." (*The Age*, 13.12.76; *The Age*, 21.7.76)

What does *American Film Industry Practice* have to say on "co-production"? "In theory subsidies and screentime quotas are established by foreign governments to protect and support their unprofitable local film industries. But in practice many American producers have been able to hurdle and circumvent these barriers to free competition... have qualified to participate in subsidy payments and greatly reduced financial risks." (My emphasis)

Following the Tariff Board Report some distributors began to invest money in production, notably the Greater Union Organisation (Rank). However, "the whole Hoyts Theatres/20th Century Fox structure is the most significant offender, having at least once in the last five years backed away at the last minute from a local producer in his hour of need. Columbia Pictures (except for their recent excursion into the funding of *Barney*); United Artists; Paramount-MGM-Universal have not deigned to spend one red cent of the millions of dollars they remit from Australia each year to their parent companies, on local production." (Tony Ginane, *Farago*, 9.7.76). These companies are all participants in the American owned Motion Picture Distributors Association.

In the first half of this year, the Greater Union has contributed production money to several features, and there are indications that Fox may invest in local production this year. (*Cinema Papers* Jan. 1977; April 1977)

During 1976 distributors' profits were down in Australia. Prices have recently risen in some cinemas and, if the rise is widely accepted, Australian tickets will be among the most expensive in the world. In 1975, Australia followed Italy as the second largest market for American cinema. According to *Variety*, in the first six months of 1974, 13 million Australians shelled out \$21,000,000 to American producers for film rental. Film rental is calculated after the exhibitor's (i.e., theatre) cut. (*Film News*, Vol. 5, No. 1, February 1975)

In July, 1976, the Trade Practices Commission described the relationship between the distributors and exhibitors as "sick, unhealthy and unbelievably restrictive." The Commission ruled that their standard form contract had an anti-competitive effect and was therefore illegal. The Commission also pointed to evidence from the few independent exhibitors that, "if they did not accord with the requirements of distributors, supplies of film would be withheld and their busi-

nesses threatened." (*Financial Review*, 20.7.76)

This process is known as "block booking" where a distributor insists on a cinema taking, say, six mediocre films for one which can be expected to draw good audiences. It is one of the mechanisms which has been used for years to "dump" worthless American product on Australian audiences and simultaneously restrict the capacity of independent exhibitors to screen films produced with Australian capital.

Activities of the Labor Party administration in this area have been described, under the heading "There is nothing to Report", by Susan Dermody in *New Journalist*, No. 14. There is no space to go into it here, but a detailed study would reveal an intriguing pattern of events.

Following the return of the Liberal/Country Party administration the situation has not improved. Funding of local production has become more restrictive, and is tending more and more to support the co-production strategy. The Film, Radio and Television Board of the Australia Council has become part of the commercially oriented Australia Film Commission, and had its

budget cut by \$160,000. Tom Jeffrey, the Board's Chairman, predicted that anything that had been achieved in recent years "would wither away." (*The Age*, 28.9.76)

Ok, so, in this environment no-one should be surprised when, on July 4th, the "Australian" Film Commission cut off funds for 1977-78 to the Melbourne Film Makers Co-operative. The decision was made without consultation, without comment on the detailed submission made by the Co-op, and without recognition of its dire repercussions. Effectively, the staff was out of work, without notice, from the end of the financial year. Film makers, film goers and users of the sizable alternative film library were denied access to another unique community resource. Like 3ZZ, the argument that was used was "duplication of service" and, like 3ZZ, the alleged criterion was economic efficiency.

However, the staff are "working in," and local film makers are offering their films free to support the fighting fund. Meanwhile, across the community the question being asked with increasing solidarity is "who's next?"

NINDEEBIYA ABORIGINAL WORKSHOP

Sharon Firebrace

Fitzroy is one of Melbourne's inner city suburbs five minutes by tram from the heart of Melbourne, and occupying some 373 hectares of what was once the tribal grounds of the Bunerong people, an Aboriginal tribe whose tribal grounds extended some 250 miles in radius from the Werribee river in the west to Wilson's Promontory in the south-east.

Fitzroy is a typical working class area and since the outbreak of world war 2 has developed a community of 3500 - 4000 Aboriginal people. Our ancestors originally were forced onto government reserves such as Cummeragunja, Frammillingham, Lake Tyres and Maloga as early as 1864 and some of these government missions still exist today. Life on missions is appalling, educational opportunities are almost non-existent, housing conditions are disgraceful and inadequate to the needs of the people, and there is very little hope of employment.

Ironically world war two brought new hope to the Aboriginal people. The cities became an attraction for those seeking work and so, the community of Aboriginal people in Fitzroy today stemmed from the migration of these families. Problems on the missions and in the cities were very similar and these same problems were unresolved. Certain leaders and individuals within the Aboriginal community attempted to establish organizations to be controlled by Aboriginal persons to deal with the problems facing the Aboriginal Community.

Today these very organizations, such as the Aboriginal Advancement League, Aboriginal Medical Centre, Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Housing Co-operative and Nindeebiya Workshop who understand their own people, their problems and needs, who should be in control of Aboriginal money are suffering immense cut-backs by the Frazer government.

HOUSING

The Victorian Housing Co-operative budgeted for ten houses urgently required for families. The