

Representations of Aborigines in Australian Documentary Film 1901 - 2009

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Statement of Originality

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Attention

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Community Members

This thesis contains names, images and words of people who may have died. Readers of this work should be aware that if members of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities see names or images of the deceased, particularly their relatives, they may be distressed. Before using this work in such communities, readers should establish the wishes of senior members and take their advice on appropriate procedures and safeguards to be adopted.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which Indigenous Australians have been represented in twelve documentary films made in Australia between 1901 and 2009. As historical artefacts, the films examined provide an emblematic visual representation of the scientific, political and social debates about Indigenous Australians that were in play when they were produced. The purpose of the thesis is threefold: to explore the role of documentary film in representing Australia's Indigenous peoples to a dominant white Australian audience over a long period of time; to trace the ways changes in film and camera technology, policy making and social attitudes have collectively altered the relationship that Indigenous Australians have with documentary film as a medium of communication; and to demonstrate how changes in the process of making documentary films over the past century has been a force for both change and empowerment for Indigenous Australians.

Although, some of the earliest documentary films made in Australia were about Indigenous Australians, as a collection they have not been the subject of serious study. Making films about Indigenous Australians initially had close connections with science, both natural and medical. This helped to re-enforce and sanctify the 'objectification' of Indigenous Australians as subjects of scientific enquiry within the context of the discourse of Social Darwinism. The visual images contributed to their positioning as the anthropological Other in which they were considered as outside of history; an image that is now under challenge by contemporary Indigenous filmmakers.

It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that Indigenous Australians began to emerge from these ethnographic narratives. Documentary films made from that time began to recognise that Indigenous Australians were living in the political and social present. Public perceptions about how Indigenous Australians were coping with the dispossession of their traditional lands and living at the interface of two ideologically opposed cultures were dramatically challenged.

As changes in perception continued to shift in the 1970s and 1980s, astute white documentary filmmakers began to collaborate with Indigenous people to make films about their lives. These filmmakers recognised that Indigenous Australians had a lot to talk about and with access to funding available from recently established public instrumentalities, filmmaking about Indigenous Australians reflected the changing attitudes about Australia's Aboriginal people.

By the latter years of the twentieth century, a vibrant and dynamic Indigenous film industry was emerging in Australia. With Indigenous filmmakers and technical experts in control of film production, white Australians have been witness to further shifts in the ways in which Indigenous Australians are represented on film. Indigenous filmmakers with a more intimate understanding of cultural protocols and with a high degree of social investment are taking on the responsibility of representing the Indigenous perspective on film. They have taken the medium that once positioned them as a people on the brink of extinction and are now demonstrating their acuity and skill with the visual medium. Their innovative and dynamic approach to the craft defies earlier preconceptions of a primitive and static culture unable to participant in a modern Australia.

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Acronyms

AASEAL	American-Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation ACMI Australian Centre for the Moving Image
AEDP	Aboriginal Employment Development Policy
AFC	Australian Film Commission
AFI	Australian Film Institute
AFTRS	Australian Film, Television and Radio School
AIAS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies
AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ANFB	Australian National Film Board
ANRC	Australian National Research Council
ANU	Australian National University
APA	Aboriginal Progressive Association
APB	Aboriginal Protection Board
APU	Aboriginal Programs Unit
ATOM	Australian Teachers of Media
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
AUSSAT	Australian Communications Satellite
CAAMA	Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association
CFU	Commonwealth Film Unit
CRM	Civil Rights Movement
FCAATSI	Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
FFC	Film Finance Corporation
IPU	Indigenous Programs Unit
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament

NAIBA	National Aboriginal and Islanders Broadcasting Association
NAIDOC	National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee
NFSA	National Film and Sound Archive
NFU	National Film Unit
NIDF	National Indigenous Documentary Fund
NIMAA	National Indigenous Media Association of Australia
NITV	National Indigenous Television
NUAUS	National Union of Australian University Students
PMG	Post Master General
RCTS	Remote Commercial Television Service
SABAR	South Australian Board for Anthropological Research
SAM	South Australian Museum
SBS	Special Broadcasting Service
SMH	<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>
UCLA	University of California – Los Angeles
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States
VAAL	Victorian Aborigines Advancement League