Do Nothing and Do It Well: Making Radical Activist Historical Documentaries

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Liam Boswell Ward

3rd March 2017
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I completed this project on the lands of the Wurundjeri people and the Bunurong people both of the Kulin nation, who never ceded their sovereignty. The land around the bay, like all land on this continent, is stolen. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I pay respect to their elders and freedom fighters, past and present.
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Abstract

Radical activist documentaries are frequently agitational and ‘present tense’, reflecting their typical aim of shifting audiences into action around a specific contemporary cause or struggle. But a radical activist approach to making films about history poses problems distinct from those confronting film-makers producing a non-radical historical documentary or a ‘present-tense’ radical activist film. By adopting an approach to such film-making that embraces elements of archival film-making and essayistic self-portraits, along with select fictionalising devices, a new form of radical activist historical documentary emerges. This outcome develops our understanding of how radical activist documentary can function and how experimental approaches to documentary form can enrich historical documentary practice.
“...it has to do with the collective experience of watching film and the idea of the screening being a community meeting in a way... If you're in a room with people, you can immediately turn and say "what can we do about it" and that's the question... Okay, so what now? What do we do? And the people who might actually answer that are around you. I think that is what is really unique about documentary.”

Naomi Klein (interviewed by Ezra Winton 2008, p.xviii)

“History is not inevitably useful. It can bind us or free us... It can oppress any resolve to act... [or it can] untie our minds, our bodies, our disposition to move to engage life rather than contemplating it as an outsider.”

Howard Zinn (1970, p.54)

The Advertiser, 30 September 1903, page 5

**Introduction**

As activists, we tend to turn our film-making practice towards the present. We make films promoting a particular struggle or a particular campaign, highlighting some issue that requires action here and now. We urge viewers, for example, to offer solidarity with people currently taking a courageous stand somewhere, or to join in a campaign to change government policy. Whatever the immediate content is, we hope viewers respond in the fashion Klein describes, looking to each other and asking “what are we going to do about this now?”
But activist traditions also include a practice of looking at the past. History is a political battlefield, and one that perhaps gains particular importance when the immediate battles between oppressed and oppressor are precious few. Ascribing meaning to past struggles, or sometimes even revealing the very fact that they happened at all, is a crucial element of keeping the flame alive. It offers an explanation for aspects of our present while offering inspiration and encouragement to take up the baton and fight for a better future. In that sense, history can be agitational. At least, that is the ideal.

The problems here are firstly that the scenario Klein describes is one that draws heavily on her own experiences as both the child of a film-maker who was very active during the last wave of mass radicalism in the western world, and also as a famous author and film-maker in her own right. She recalls growing up in the heated atmosphere of those community film-screenings, where masses of people did ask what are we going to do about racism, about the war in Vietnam, about women’s liberation, about gay liberation, about capitalism? Secondly, Klein was a famous author by the time she made her first film, and also happened to be making it in the context of the almost-but-not-quite mass radicalisation of the late 1990s and early 2000s (around the ‘global justice’ movement and later the early days of the movement against the war on Iraq). So the question arises: in a country like Australia in 2017, when arguably the presence of radicalised layers in the population has never been so small, and when the general political drift seems if anything to be tending increasingly to the Right, how might a practice of radical activist documentary pitch itself?

To compound the matter, we need to consider how such practice might best articulate stories not about immediate struggles but about struggles in the past, and in a way that maintains a commitment to propagating both radical ideas and radical activity in the present.

In short, how can we make radical activist historical documentaries that are engaging and informative, that are agitational and historical? And how can we do this in a time and place in which activism in general is fairly marginalised?

In setting out to make this specific documentary, *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, I faced additional challenges since some of the standard building blocks of a historical documentary don’t exist in this case. Namely, there are very few photographs of the participants, no film footage, and no forgotten interview transcripts lurking in a library basement. The struggles these people waged on the streets of my hometown, almost a century before my birth, exist today only in the archives of old newspapers and fleeting references in a few history publications.

My film focuses on Chinese furniture makers living and working in Melbourne, Australia from around 1880 through to the 1920s. While such a description could easily be construed as
describing a harmless piece of feel-good edutainment celebrating the diverse multicultural history of this city, that’s certainly not this film. Instead, I set out to make a film that is part radical history, part agit-prop. A film that attempts to subject the history of racism and the workers movement in Australia to a partisan and cutting critique while encouraging resistance and activism in the present. In that sense, the film is about Melbourne, about its hidden history of resistance and oppression, with the aim, as Zinn suggests, of making history useful in the struggles of today, to “untie our disposition to move to engage life rather than contemplating it as an outsider” (Zinn 1970, p.54).

The challenges involved in making this documentary have led me to adopt an unconventional formal approach. The final outcome of this project is a film that draws on a re-appraisal of documentary concepts and which encapsulates a new practice. It uses elements of fiction, of first-person essay film, and of archival film-making, while remaining decidedly agit-prop in both tone and purpose. Hence the project develops our understanding of how radical activist documentary can function and how experimental approaches to documentary form can enrich historical documentary practice.

Research Design

This project centred on the production of a 60-minute documentary, conceived and developed in light of my ongoing scholarly engagement with the field of documentary studies. I established particular goals from the outset: the film was to be radical in content and experimental, or perhaps playful, in form; and it was to explore alternatives to the ‘Ken Burns’ approach to using archival material, which is arguably the defacto standard of the category, and which, according to Burns himself, is primarily about balancing “an exquisite tension between art and science” (cited in Cripps, p.752). I address my disagreement with that statement in Chapter 2, but it will suffice for now to simply note that Burn’s view of that relationship between art and science is manifest in his approach to film-making. His formal style centres on archival photographs and period music, frequently paired with first-hand written accounts read by contemporary voice-actors. Meanwhile, on the political front, he aims to be non-partisan, and even to avoid giving a single viewpoint. Instead, he maintains that his approach to film form prioritises having a plurality of voices often in opposition to each other (Cripps, p.746). In fact, Burns severely overstates the extent to which his films offer a genuine diversity of views, because they are all couched in an overarching unifying historical narrative – and for Burns that narrative is usually one of national identity, national pride, and national progress. Nichols is correct, therefore, to point out that Burns is “a fundamentally conservative historian and filmmaker”, albeit one whose “acknowledgement of a marginalized community that experienced discrimination and injustice [in the specific case of Mexican Americans during World War II, but as a general pattern across his body of work] makes clear
that the expository mode need not serve to promote only the dominant point of view” (Nichols 2010, p.171). In contrast to Burns’ approach to archival history, I set out to make a film that both presents a conscious alternative to the Australian national myth, and which lays out a single viewpoint, and stridently polemical viewpoint at that.

I also saw this project building on my existing film-making practice, which in turn is fundamentally shaped by two over-arching interests. First, I make political documentaries, and second I’m interested in exploring the edges of documentary – particularly in terms of formal conventions. In Chapter 1, I explain why I decided to make a film about the Chinese cabinetmakers in Melbourne c.1900, what this story offered me in terms of politics, creative challenges, and attractive conceptual obstacles. In a sense, I was continuing along an activist film-making path I had already started in previous films, though the specific characteristics of this story posed particular problems for me as a film-maker. It was in tackling these problems that the film’s final form took shape.

Before addressing the developments in my practice that those problems prompted, I take some time in Chapter 2 to define my views on some of the relevant debates and concepts in documentary studies, laying out a theoretical frame that gives important context for grasping the arguments and conclusions laid out in subsequent chapters.

I start with the debates between Nichols and Bruzzi over the question of documentary taxonomies. While avoiding too much uncomfortable fence-sitting, I aim to explain why I see benefits in both their positions. Documentary is both argument and performance, though as an activist first and foremost, my emphasis and interest is largely on the former. In explaining the overlap, I draw on the work of Renov, who conceptualises documentary practice as an act of making which fulfils specific human desires - including both to persuade or promote (a la Nichols) and to express (a la Bruzzi).

I then move to consider some useful perspectives from scholars proposing documentary is best understood either as a genre, with its own historical relationships of practice and its own conventions of purpose and form, or as an adjective applicable to essentially any form of media object. These views offer quite nuanced and fruitful alternatives to the frustrating obsession documentary scholars have often held with debates around truth and veracity.

Nonetheless, it remains the case that documentary does tend to be defined in ways that prioritise ‘visible evidence’ and hence attribute central importance to the power of the photo-realistic indexical image. So I move on in this chapter to explain why I think this emphasis on indexicality is mistaken, and what it says about our understanding of the concept of realism, using the growth
of animated documentaries as the key discussion point. Here I draw on the work of Honess-Roe in particular.

Finally, I finish Chapter 2 by attempting to draw out what this all means for radical activist film-makers, and thereby to frame chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. These chapters trace developments in my practice through completing the project, and attempt to explain and contextualise my new insights.

In Chapter 3, I look at the question of politics and documentary, making the case for a specific understanding of the term ‘political documentary’. I take it to mean any documentary that seems to be deliberately expressing political viewpoints rather than simply exhibiting the more or less subterranean influence of ideology in the society that produced it. In other words, while I acknowledge that all documentaries are political in a sense, I insist on the value of designating only certain films as ‘political documentaries’.

I then drill down toward a narrower consideration of specifically activist documentary as a subcategory of political documentary. The importance in establishing such a framework rests in the aim of activist documentary. Namely, activist documentaries seek not just to explore an issue, nor even to simply give an opinionated and political take on that issue, but to move audiences into some sort of action in response to the film. This in turn raises questions around the aim of activist history films, which I draw out in Chapters 4 and 6.

I finish Chapter 3 by asking what it means to make agit-prop in Australia in 2017, and discussing some ways in which contemporary radical activist documentary film-makers might usefully re-consider the relationship between radicalism and film form.

In Chapter 4, I cast my attention to archival film-making, and the act of representing history on film. I begin by surveying some of the debates around writing history, with a focus on Hayden White and some of the responses and critiques his work has prompted. As a starting point for considering my own process of writing history during pre-production, I demonstrate that White’s work is quite useful, notwithstanding my strong sympathy for some of the critiques.

I move on then to look more closely at the debates around representing history on film. I draw on Rosen, Rosenstone, Landy, Sobchack and others, and seek to pinpoint some of the ways in which my particular project both demonstrates and challenges aspects of their work. My key point here is that films which are both historical and activist are simultaneously about the past, the present and the future. In this way, they are quite distinct.
Finally, I conclude Chapter 4 by considering what the traditions of ‘popular history’ and ‘radical history’ in the written word might offer to those of us interested in making radical histories for the screen, and I look at how these considerations significantly impacted the shape of *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, moving it beyond a traditional archival film approach.

In Chapter 5, I address the complex conceptual issues that arose when having already produced some rough-cut scenes, I took a sharp turn in my approach through the inclusion of a first-person or self-portraiture element in the film. Despite my initial hesitations, I came to understand how such an approach can be boldly political.

To explain this, I begin by looking at the relationship between essay films and politics. This represents one of the key insights into my own practice that this project spurred. Before this point in the process, I had never considered myself an essay film-maker. After all, my works bear little resemblance to any of the archetypes of the genre. Hence, this chapter dwells at length on considering the ways in which my film might be considered essayistic, and what that means for my grasp of the possibilities and precedents that other film-makers have opened for me in this regard, particularly in relation to the issues of narration, self-portraiture and history. All of this is couched in a consideration of the ways in which these political dynamics might relate to the particular external political climate in which we are currently operating as activists, historians and film-makers.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I look at the overall impact these challenges and my solutions had on *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*. The film’s experimental aspects are rooted in the practical difficulties I faced – albeit in some instance self-imposed (for example, my desire to avoid making a Ken Burns style archival film). But bringing all this together here highlights some central issues relating to radical politics and cinematic or documentary realisms. Most pertinently, the project has pointed toward new understandings of how radical activist documentary film-makers might go about the perennially problematic task of attempting to “show what is”.

Hence I begin by outlining my positions in relation to the long-running debates around realism and the politics of form. I explain my disagreement with those in the radical left who insist radical content demands radical form, but I do see a relationship between these two aspects of creative practice. This is primarily because film form is historically conditioned. Audiences in one place and time bring different formal expectations to audiences in another place and time. If as activist film-makers we are seeking to move audiences into some sort of action, then we have an interest in grasping the formal conventions of the day. On the other hand, as Brecht would perhaps remind us, there can be moments when the deliberate puncturing of those very conventions serves to make clear the politics behind the content. This flexibility on the question of form emerges
from my understanding of realism not as a set of formal conventions, but as an aim. This aim, moreover, is one that activists (especially Marxists like myself), should see as central to our projects.

I conclude Chapter 6 by touching briefly on the issue of music in the film. In compiling a soundtrack based on Chinese punk and hip-hop, I have illustrated that radical history films can bring new polemical techniques into play, utilising the weight of any music’s connotations and associations, all the baggage it brings in terms of genre, subculture, and politics in general. This is an area ripe for further consideration and experimentation.

Taken together chapters 3 through 6 reflect the overall progression of my practice through this project and the development of my new insights. My aim here is to illustrate how my attempt to tell this particular story from an activist perspective necessitated an exploration first of archival film-making, and historical film more broadly, leading to a realisation that the film would benefit through an element of self-portraiture. Finally, the film’s somewhat experimental, or at least playful, aspects are shown to have emerged organically through this overall process.

Before proceeding further, I need to state that the film itself is only ‘complete’ insofar as I’ve reached the limits of my own skills and my own budget. Despite having worked professionally for many years as an editor, and produced my own very low-budget films, I’ve never worked as a screen-writer or an animator or a motion graphics designer or a sound designer. Had I money to pay experts in those fields, the film would undoubtedly be significantly improved. I would also love to re-record my narration, which suffers greatly when intercut with the beautifully recorded and professionally acted Cantonese narration of Nelson Wu. But those are tasks for another time. Bearing all this in mind, I would ask viewers to consider the version submitted here as akin to say a solid blue-print or a scale-model. It hopefully demonstrates the points I’m addressing, despite not being quite up to the finely polished standards I’d like to see and hear.
1. **The Project: Radical activism, film-making, and race as a central question in Australian society**

My motivation for undertaking this project stems from my long-term involvement in anti-racist activism and my commitment to developing a deeper understanding of the nature and history of Australian racism in particular. As a film-maker and an activist, I approach the task from an avowedly radical perspective.

To hold radical views, or to be radical, is to maintain that fundamental change to the existing social order can alone solve the apparent problems facing humanity. I became radicalised in 2001. Such is the strength of anti-Muslim sentiment in Australian society today that the very term “radicalised” now seems loaded with negative and specifically Islam-related undertones. Indeed, in 2015 the Australian Federal Government launched a high-profile suite of ‘de-radicalisation’ programs, the reporting of which was invariably accompanied by photos of Muslims or interviews with Muslim leaders. In the context of contemporary Australian politics, it’s almost as though we are expected to see synonyms where none exist: radical, terrorist, Muslim.

That such a dynamic has become so prevalent illustrates some of the reasons I drew radical conclusions in the first place. Confronted by the brutality being perpetrated by the Australian government on refugees and asylum seekers, I became convinced that racism is intrinsic to Australian capitalism – from the original European invasion and subsequent genocide, through to today's network of offshore immigration camps. As such, I maintain that the Australian state itself is the key purveyor of racism and that genuine anti-racist politics must start from opposition to the state. Modern Australia’s systemic racist policies and practices are evident during the 2001 Tampa incident, the practice of indefinite mandatory detention of asylum seekers and refugees, and culminate in the eventual emergence in 2015 of Australian Border Force, the heavily-militarised Government security agency enabled by a partial merger of the old Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs with the Australian Customs Service.

The significance of Border Force can’t be understated, as McKenzie-Murray explains:

> What has changed, rapidly and profoundly, is the raison d’être of the Immigration Department. Its DNA has been forsaken…

Mike Pezzullo – Mr Secretary – oversees a dramatically militarised department, one that functions with increasing secrecy. There is now a command and control system; its senior bureaucrats wear military tunics. Long-term public servants, asked to exchange policy for army salutes, have left. About a
quarter of senior executives are gone. Remaining immigration staff are now the beta tribe to the big dogs of Border Force, creating internecine angst, while the media team field daily questions about abuse exercised in their name (2015).

In a demonstration of how seamlessly the persecution of asylum seekers flows into broader racist practices, one of Border Force’s first official operations involved a plan to conduct random spot-checks of people’s visas on the streets of central Melbourne – presumably with all the racial profiling necessary for such a task to be undertaken at all. The operation was to be announced with much fanfare on a Friday afternoon in August 2015, via a media conference inside the city’s busiest central train station. But after several hundred of us surrounded the venue in protest, Border Force command promptly cancelled the operation and tried to blame the whole thing on some poorly formulated words in media release allegedly written by a low-level employee (Mills et al 2015).

I recount all this here to demonstrate my own long-standing commitment to understanding and tackling racism, but also to illustrate the importance Australian governments accord to the infrastructure of so-called ‘border security’ even in areas physically remote from the country’s actual borders – like the centre of the country’s second-largest city. Most importantly, it serves as an indication of how far the race-focused politics of Australia have developed in that fifteen-year-period between the M.V. Tampa and the rise of Border Force. But the key turning point came five years before the Tampa, in 1996 when John Howard’s Liberal-National Coalition took office, and when the newly elected independent Senator Pauline Hanson campaigned for a total ban on Asian immigration. Almost exactly twenty years later in September 2016, Hanson gave her second maiden-speech in the Australian parliament after re-emerging from semi-obscurity and scandal to have her party win four Senate seats. This time, reflecting the shifting terrain of Australia’s always-flexible racism, Hanson’s maiden speech called for a total ban on Muslim immigrants.

As has been noted elsewhere, the years of the Howard government from 1996 to 2007 saw the issue of race regain its role as the key focus of Australian politics following its more subdued status since the formal abolition of the White Australia policy in 1973 (see Kuhn 2009; and Markus, Andrew 2001). The pattern has continued after the end of the Howard government, and in 2016 racism remains one of the key faultlines in this country, particularly in relation to Muslims. As I write, data from a newly released survey suggests 49 percent of the Australian population supports Hanson’s call for a ban on Muslim immigrants - up from an already disturbing 28 percent in October 2015 (Kenny and Koziol, 2016).
While Islamophobia has a long history in Australia (see Kenway 2015), it has taken a sharp upturn since the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Understanding the process that has seen Muslims become racialised is an important insight for understanding the nature of racism in general. After all, an “Asian race” is in some ways just as nonsensical a concept as a “Muslim race”, but this fact has not protected either group from being subjected to racism.

As Sayid explains, the internal contradictions of racism have historic roots:

\[
\text{The science of race… was concerned with the production of race, rather than simply with its discovery… [But] This fundamental inability to sustain race as a stable category did not prevent the deployment of the panoply of practices developed to sustain the racial order…}
\]

He adds:

\[
\text{Racism… did not and does not depend on the actual existence of races… Races were never exclusively biologically determined but rather socially and politically produced. Bodies were marked at the same time as religion and culture, history and territories; these markings were used to group socially fabricated distinctions between Europeaness and non-Europeaness. A woman who dons the hijab becomes subject to all the effects of mundane racism: from the dirty looks, to random threats of violence, regardless of her phenotype (Sayid 2008).}
\]

The anti-racist movements of the latter 20th century made it difficult for those espousing purely ‘biological’ racism. Hence in a bitter irony, today’s racism often focuses on groups who may not be immediately classifiable as a “race”, but who find themselves subjected to racism on the basis of their supposed culture, which is itself treated as something inherent to their being. Sayid explains:

\[
\text{The figure of the Muslim is vital for this racism without racists. Because Muslims are not a race, any and all forms of discrimination and violence disproportionately directed at them is thinkable and doable. Because Muslims are not a race the systemic violations directed against them cannot be racially motivated. Because Muslims are not a race their subjugation is not racism. Thus most themes associated with previous expressions of racism can be (and increasingly are) brought back}
\]
into style. Muslim extremists can join the black mugger, the Gypsy thief, the Jewish anarchist as the stars of racism’s narratives (2008).

Grasping this aspect of contemporary racism also sheds some light on older forms of racism. In Australia this relates most obviously to the history of the White Australia policy, which for almost three-quarters of the 20th Century reserved immigration and citizenship rights only for those deemed white enough. Through my years as an activist and a researcher, I have focused much of my attention on this history. But as a film-maker, my interest in anti-racism has centred on contemporary manifestations of racism, most notably the issue of refugee rights. This project with its focus on the past brings together my radical activist film-making practice and my interest in history.

I set out to tell this particular story because (a) it challenges some persistent and frankly racist myths about Chinese workers in Australian history, (b) it offers a vehicle for mounting an alternative radical history of Melbourne, and (c) it poses exciting political and formalistic challenges for an activist documentary film-maker.

**The Chinese cabinetmakers’ story and its vagaries**

The film component of this research, *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, tells the story of the workers in Melbourne’s Chinese furniture workshops around the turn of the 20th century, together with a consideration of my own family's history in the labour movement.

Between the 1880s and the 1920s, the city’s furniture industry was segregated with explicitly Chinese and non-Chinese workshops. Though the Victorian government never officially directed this segregation, a series of laws enabled and maintained the separation. For example, the government classified as a factory any workshop in which a single Chinese worker was employed, and hence subjected those employers to stringent regulations. The aim here was to discourage any non-Chinese employers from hiring Chinese workers. In addition, the Government’s furniture stamping laws, in place until 1963, stipulated that every piece of furniture produced for sale in Victoria must be stamped to indicate the ethnicity of the workers who made it, either “Chinese labour” or “European labour”. If a single set of Asian hands had been involved, then the “Chinese labour” stamp was compulsory (see: Beaton 2007; Markus 1974; and Ward, L. 2015).

What lifts this story beyond being just a pedestrian indictment of obvious racism and industrial apartheid is that the Chinese cabinetmakers organised to resist their oppression. By 1885, they had formed themselves into a powerful union and waged a series of protracted strikes over the next two decades in pursuit of equal pay with white workers (see Markus 1974).
The peak of their activity came in 1903 when for 12 weeks, several hundred Chinese workers representing up to 70% of the furniture trade in Melbourne’s Chinatown district (The Argus, 6 October 1903, p.5), struck successfully for job security and an increase in wages (Yong, 1977, pp.43-44). These 12 weeks brought some of the sharpest industrial conflict that this city has ever seen, with several riots in Russell and Latrobe Streets, a number of strike-breakers hospitalised, and even a threat to burn down the workshops in Lt Bourke Street (Adelaide Advertiser, 19 November 1903, p.5).

By the 1920s the Chinese cabinetmakers’ union had disappeared. Rapid industrialisation had brought a shift in furniture production away from workshops and into factories, sending many of the old workshops out of business. Meanwhile, the impact of the White Australia Policy drove many Chinese people out of the country (see Ward, L. 2015). In the end, the union itself seems to have merged with the organisation that should have been its natural enemy – the Chinese furniture industry employers (see Couchman 2001). No doubt the racism those workers had been subjected to, and the almost total lack of solidarity they’d received from the rest of the union movement, with a few notable exceptions (see Ward, L. 2015), must have played some part in driving them away from a positive and progressive identification as members of a diverse but unified working class and into a race-based identification as Chinese above all else.

Countering a prevalent stereotype

One of my aims with this project is to tell a story that challenges established racist stereotypes. The arguments used to justify Victoria’s discriminatory laws tended to centre around a baseless caricature of Chinese workers as cheap, pliant, non-union labour. But in forming their own union and fighting to improve their working lives, Melbourne’s Chinese cabinetmakers prove how baseless the stereotype is. Their actions provide us over a century later with reason to ask whether some of the most longstanding assumptions regarding Australian history, and the roots of the White Australia policy in particular, warrant further examination.

The established account of that history locates the social roots of the White Australia policy in the organised working class. This view takes the genuine anti-Chinese attitudes and rhetoric of the union officialdom and the Australian Labor Party, and concludes that the workers movement drove the policy. Hence the blame and the shame in this story are forever attached to the labour movement (for an extensive overview and critique of this view see Griffiths 2006).

Not only does this ignore the role of the ruling class in propagating the dominant ideas in society, it is also founded on a racist caricature of Chinese people. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is clearest
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when you read early proponents of the argument. For example, in her influential 1923 account, Myra Willard puts forward this familiar picture of the impetus for White Australia:

The calm patient energy and endurance of the Chinese, their extraordinary economy and indifference to comfort...made them dangerous competitors for Australians, because their standard of living was much lower... [They] were to a great extent indifferent about the conditions under which they worked. Their presence, therefore, was a dead weight to the Trade Unions... The whole of Australia came gradually to sympathise with the view of the industrial aspect of Asiatic immigration taken by the workers... Australians could not accept conditions which non-European labourers were as a rule content to live under. (Willard (1967 [1923], pp.197-198)

While it is certainly true to say the ALP and many unions were stridently racist in their anti-Chinese activities, it's also the case that with the exception of small but important groups on the far Left, including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Victorian Socialist Party (VSP), such racist sentiments were common to all the major political parties in Australia until the rise of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in the early 1920s. To the horror of the Australian political establishment, the CPA announced as one of their founding principles the aim of smashing the White Australia Policy – even if it took a few years to start putting meat on those bones (see Gould 1999).

When the Immigration Restriction Act was passed at the first sitting of the new Federal Parliament in 1901, the Prime Minister was Edmund Barton of the Protectionist Party, i.e. one of the conservative, pro-capitalist (and anti-socialist) political groups that later fed into the modern Liberal Party. Barton’s party-mate Alfred Deakin was responsible for writing the legislation itself, and during the 1903 election campaign he linked it directly not with placating the supposed demands of the workers movement, but with diverting workers’ economic struggles away from strikes and picket lines and into legal and orderly channels:

You probably believe that a white Australia is secure. I hope it is, but it won't be secure unless a vigilant watch is kept upon proposals to tamper with it... The next necessity for a white Australia will be to pass the Arbitration Bill, to prevent strikes, and lock-outs... (Deakin, 1903)
In 1909 Deakin’s and Barton’s Protectionist Party merged with the Anti-Socialist Party (formerly the Free Trade Party), to form the Liberal Party. In his campaign for the 1913 election, Liberal Party leader Joseph Cook announced: “I invite your attention to the following proposals of the Liberal party. In the first place our objective is an Australia—white, free, federal” (Cook 1913).

Even Robert Menzies, famous for overseeing a softening of the policy throughout the 1950s, always defended the fundamentals: “We will continue to maintain Australia’s settled immigration policy, known as “The White Australia Policy”; well justified as it is on grounds of national homogeneity and economic standards.” (Menzies 1949).

In summary, in propagating White Australia racism the ALP was culpable, no doubt. But so was every party that sought to manage the Australian capitalist state. Indeed, by the time of World War II, when the CPA had well and truly abandoned its revolutionary goals under the influence of Stalinism, even that party engaged in episodes of vicious racist behaviour (Griffiths, 1990).

Of course, the British Empire instituted varying degrees of racial segregation wherever it founded colonies, with Australia being a notable though certainly not an isolated example. In other words, the ideas encapsulated in White Australia were an expression of the general racial supremacist ideals of the British Empire (see Fryer 1993 pp26–32) – an empire which, as is frequently overlooked, were actually occupying and at war with China from the 1840s on.

Writers from the far Left of the labour history field have prosecuted these arguments many times over the decades (see Lockwood 1964; Burgmann 1978 & 1984; Small 1997; and Griffiths 2006). Most significant is Griffiths’ (2006) persuasive call for the White Australia policy to be seen as a central plank in the agenda of the Australian capitalist class, finally formulated and passed into law at a time when Australia was far from the egalitarian, ultra-democratic “working man's paradise” of folklore. He argues the policy reflected both long-term international rivalries with rising Asian powers and the aim to foster a national mission and identity, the better to quiet the working class here.

Nonetheless, in most historical accounts the ‘original sin’ continues to be ascribed to the workers movement. This is compounded by the fact that the ALP was all too willing to proudly claim the mantle as the true defenders of a White Australia right up until the policy finally disintegrated between the 1950s and 1970s. Thus it is taken as gospel that the workers movement spearheaded the policy. For example, in 1994, Sydney’s Daily Mirror ran a feature article with the headline “White Australia Policy sprang from workers’ uprising”, and during his successful campaign to defeat the Keating Labor Government, John Howard (who less than a decade earlier had campaigned aggressively to cease all Asian immigration) told one audience: “it was the Coalition which finally put an end to Labor’s White Australia policy” (Howard 1995).
In attempting then to explain this history and to make sense of the prevalence of racism in the workers movement, many historians have consequently argued that white workers held more-or-less justifiable fears of having their wages undermined by Chinese workers. Racism does have material roots, and economic hardship can provide fertile soil for racism and hatred. But in this case such an explanation rests on the assumption that Chinese workers themselves were invariably “cheap”, anti-union, un-organised, etc. I have responded to these claims at length elsewhere, detailing numerous struggles by Chinese workers in Australian history (Ward, L 2015). The activities of the Chinese cabinetmakers in Melbourne are particularly important, because they are one of the most obvious examples puncturing the stereotype. These workers were organised, militant, and were occasionally even acknowledged by the Victorian Government to be receiving wages higher than their white counterparts – a situation brought about precisely because the workers were so militant (Ward, L 2015, p.91).

This story’s relevance to Australia today and to my own family

In 2016, with the rise of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee political forces across much of the globe including Australia, and with the Australian government still overseeing laws that grant less rights to particular workers on the basis of their nationality (see the 457 visa for example, explained in Small 2013), we still face the urgent task of clarifying this country’s racist history and grappling with its racist present.

Coming in the same year as the passing of the Nationality Act that barred non-Europeans from becoming Australian citizens (Rolls 1996, p.417) the 1903 Chinese cabinet-makers strike touches on many themes that resonate throughout 20th Century Australian history. This was a time of dramatic developments in the Australian political and social landscape. It was a period when the colonies were federating, the union movement had surged and collapsed within a single generation, and the two great parties of Australian labour and capital were cohering (the Australian Labor Party and the precursor to the Liberal Party, respectively). It was also a time when the emerging Australian state was taking the first steps towards its imperialist future – with Australian troops being sent to put down anti-colonial uprisings in several places including in 1900-1901 the Boxer Rebellion in China itself. As such, the cabinetmakers’ story also offers itself as a vehicle to explore a broader story. Hence my film aims to also offer a dissident, radical history of the city of Melbourne – from the invasion and occupation in 1835, through to today. This is an historical account quite consciously focusing on aspects of race and class.

But the story touches a personal note for me too. My great grandfather on my dad’s side was a shearer in the Riverina, one of the strikers who changed the history of this country in the 1890s Great Strikes, and coming out of that shattering defeat, one of the founding members of the
Labor Party. I’m told he was stridently racist. Another great grandfather, on my mum’s side, completed a furniture-making apprenticeship in the 1910s. The sofa he made is stored in my parent’s shed. Somewhere on it, as required by law, will be a stamp identifying that it was “made with European labour” as opposed to the alternative stamp “made with Chinese labour”. Today, most of my family remain part of the workers movement. I’ve been a union delegate for most of my working life. But, in an indication of the deep changes this country and our workers movement have been through since my own birth, each of my siblings, two of my cousins and I myself have Asian partners. We have Chinese, Thai and Cambodian in-laws. My deceased great grandparents now have Thai and Chinese great-great grandchildren. My family, whether they like it or not, are a useful case-study.

What this story brings. The challenges. How do I tell this story?

Part of my drive here is to resolve the story, to examine Australian history though the two vehicles of my own family and the Chinese cabinetmakers union.

However, the cabinetmakers themselves were never interviewed or photographed, and the White Australia policy pushed many of them out of the country. Tracking down their descendants would be nigh on impossible. While we can have access to Chinese Australians descended from the cabinet-making employers, the descendants of the employees remain a sorry hole in the histories.

The story of Melbourne’s Chinese cabinetmakers has never been seen on-screen. Several historians have published very brief written accounts since the 1970s, and taken together these paint a tantalising, incomplete picture (Markus 1974; Yong 1977; Sparrow and Sparrow 2001; Beaton 2007). In fact, important details are still only coming to light in the last few years – partly though new access by bilingual scholars to the Chinese language archives of the Australasian Kuo Min Tang (most notably in Kuo 2013).

But as Chinese Australian historian Chris Lee (cited in Murphy 2008) observes, one consequence of systemic and official anti-Chinese racism in Australia is that modern historians encounter particular difficulties in writing Chinese-Australian histories. Murphy explains:

While Chinese Australians… have been writing an increasing number of publications themselves, the majority are still being produced by people outside those communities. The approach taken by those from within the communities is revealing. For both, the motivation can be seen as a search for identity and a seeking of one’s place in modern Australia… However the difficulty for many Chinese Australian historians is the absence
of Chinese people from both the historical record and the mainstream national narrative. As Chris Lee noted in his essay ‘Unfolding the Silence’ in the recently published La Trobe collection Secrets, Silences and Sources: Five Chinese-Australian Family Histories, ‘the first and major difficulty in researching my Chinese family history is the “silence” around the role Chinese immigration played in Australia’s modern history’. He also highlighted another issue confronting those writing Chinese Australasian history: that is, its often impersonal nature. As he states, ‘Has not my disagreement with much of written history been just this issue? So often in the reportage and recreation of past stories, the lives and loves, the feelings, the humanness of its characters are presented in a feeling-diminished mode’.

The combination of silence, exclusion, and an academic and impersonal style that denies the humanity of its subjects, continues to be an ongoing issue for those writing histories of the Chinese in Australia… Issues of exclusion and racism, and the place of the Chinese in society also mean that writing that history is never value-free. How to address these issues often becomes like dealing with the proverbial elephant in the living room. Is it best to simply ignore it, or to pretend it is less obvious than it really is? … Strangely, considering the subject, the question of racism in Chinese Australian history seemed at times to be minimised and circumvented. Even the word ‘regulation’ seems intended to avoid the harshness of words such as ‘exclusion’ or ‘racism.’ A further difficulty is what might be called the Chris Lee problem. There is, with some notable exceptions, little sense of real, living and breathing people… (Murphy 2008, pp134-135).

It seems Lee’s concerns as a historian intersected with my concerns as a film-maker and my desire to represent the Chinese working class in Australian history. Lee’s observation about the lack of Chinese Australian voice or agency in most historical accounts can be easily overstated, and in recent years many historians have uncovered first-person accounts from Chinese Australians from that period. It is the case however that the overwhelming majority present the voices and stories of the Chinese merchants, diplomats, and even envoys, as though they stand-in unproblematically
for “the Chinese” in general. The desires, thoughts, and opinions of the many thousands of Chinese people who were not part of this elite, continue to be marginalised. Unfortunately, no amount of historical digging will ever stumble across a hidden treasure trove of that oral history, because for the most part it was simply never recorded. And the reality of the White Australia policy and its impact on the Chinese diaspora throughout the first half of the 20th Century makes this doubly so.

As the White Australia policy became entrenched, it had the desired effect of lowering the overall Chinese population in Australia. Fitzgerald notes that the decrease is difficult to accurately measure, and represents deaths as well as repatriations, but he does remind us nonetheless of a brute statistic:

The number of Chinese people resident in Australia fell by around half over the first four decades of the 20th century from 30,000 to 15,000 (2007, p.53).

We can reasonably assume it was disproportionately those people from the ranks of the working class who were forced to leave. Business owners, entrepreneurs, or others with some money and a respectable public profile were certainly not subjected to the same pressures, either on an interpersonal level or as an expression of what Marx might have called “the dull compulsion of economic reality.”

For example, in the 1880s, while the Victorian and NSW colonial governments were infamously refusing entry to hundreds of working class Chinese – like those on the Afghan, some of whom actually lived here and carried residency permits – they were simultaneously fawning over wealthy Chinese Australian merchants like Lowe Kong Meng and Louis Ah Mouy. They appointed Kong Meng a commissioner for the Royal Melbourne Exhibition, and both men were invited to join the Board of Directors of the Commercial Bank of Australia (Welch 2003, p.80).

Victoria’s liberal press gushed over these Chinese Australian capitalists, often attacking working class Chinese Australians in the very same breath:

Kong Meng is a Chinese citizen resident in Melbourne. He is a man of great importance, holding equal sway amongst his countrymen with that of a petty prince in India. Mr. Meng is rich and . . . highly respected… Kong Meng is superior to filth, and “comes out strong”. He waits upon the architect of the Parliament houses and orders a design for a building… There arises a beautiful edifice with a front of elaborately carved
freestone. Kong in short is soon to be master and owner of a really handsome building but – alas for his taste – it is built in Little Bourke-street (The Star, 16th March 1861).

The real history that demands to be told is not that of the Chinese merchants, but of the Chinese workers.

Thankfully, we have seen glimmers of these stories. Allan O’Neill (2005), for example, has examined the oral history of Chinese labourers working the Darwin-Pine Creek railway in the 1880s-1890s. In this case the descendants of one worker, Jimmy Ah Yu, managed to tough it out through the White Australia period and even passed down Jimmy’s verbal accounts and memories of those days building the rail line. Jimmy’s grandchildren, now elderly Australians themselves, told O’Neill of strikes and of go-slowes, and of stoushes with the Chinese foremen or the Caucasian head contractor. In one incident, the company threatened to cut the Chinese labourers’ wages by a third, so the men responded by getting out their tin snips and cutting a third off the heads of their shovels. The threatened pay cut was quickly withdrawn.

Another important recent contribution comes from Fitzgerald (2007), who focuses on the businesses, the cultural and social organisations and the many varied and often intensely partisan political activities of generations of Chinese Australians. His material demolishes the stereotype of the passive Chinese victim being pitifully bashed about the head by the White Australia regime. In its place, Fitzgerald gives us a portrait of a complex and fractious segment of the broader Australian population – a segment subject to specific and extreme persecution, to be sure, but also a segment of the population with its own subjective agency and fractured by the same divisions of class and politics as any other section of the Australian population.

In December 2013, Taiwanese scholar Mei-Fen Kuo published two ground-breaking volumes as part of her tenure as a visiting scholar in Melbourne’s Latrobe University. Being from Taiwan, Kuo was granted unprecedented access to confidential material in the Chinese language archives of the Australasian Kuo Min Tang. Her two books (Kuo 2013; Kuo and Brett 2013) constitute a significant intervention into Chinese Australian histories, particularly the neglected history of political organisations, industrial activities and even revolutionary political currents.

This focus has been extended recently through an important collection edited by Couchman and Bagnall (2015), in which a range of contributors detail specific political and organisational histories among Chinese Australians through the 19th and 20th centuries.

While all these contributions have been vital, and do mark out a new terrain for research, unfortunately none of them dedicate much space to the story of the Chinese cabinetmakers in
Melbourne. Again, those oral histories or primary source materials that do exist on this topic tend to focus on the employers rather than the employees. Leckey (2003) is a case in point, providing an extremely useful insight into the nature of the industry at the time, and drawing on a wealth of statistics and even oral accounts. But the focus of Leckey’s work is quite explicitly on the entrepreneur and employer, Lim Kee Tye, rather than on his cabinet-making employees.

One important exception is Kuo’s work, which in a brief one-page mention, provides for the first time in English, a name and even a photograph of the president of the Chinese Furniture Employees Union, 雷鹏 aka Harry Louey Pang (Kuo 2013, p.193). This small breakthrough finally provides the material to link the leaders of the union with the later radical and revolutionary currents organised among Chinese in Melbourne, Sydney and Darwin – particularly through Pang’s associate Samuel Wong, who went on to become the leader of the communist-leaning Left in the Australasian Kuo Min Tang (see Fitzgerald 2007 and Benton 2007). But that precious thread of organisational continuity is still devoid of significant biographical detail. So it remains the case that my efforts to tell the story of these Chinese workers requires a degree of fictional creation.

My solution was to develop a sort-of hypothetical or imagined narrator who can tell the story in the first-person as though he were a Chinese cabinet-maker living in Melbourne at the time. I expected this level of artifice would tend to push the boundaries of what we define as documentary, notwithstanding the many examples of similar approaches. Herzog’s LESSONS OF DARKNESS (1992) for instance adopts a similar device, suggesting that the narrator is from some other planet. In Herzog’s case, the artifice is overwhelming, and not the same approach I was envisioning. Rather, I saw my use of this device as an attempt to ground the narration in some type of factual scenario, but using an adopted persona in order to avoid the petri dish effect of simply “studying the Chinese” as an object rather than as subjects with their own agency.

In tackling these challenges and shaping a film, I knew I had access to raw materials with a lot of potential. I had a strong story and a strong argument to pursue. I collected a vast archive of newspaper articles giving a solid timeline of events from 1850–1905, and which display the intense levels of racism in society. I had a compilation of images relating to the general question of the Chinese in Australia at the time, plus a few that relate directly to their presence in the furniture industry. I had useful figures, graphs, stats and details relating to the home-made handtools that the cabinet-makers used, and which were very different from those of the non-Chinese cabinet-makers. I had a number of oral histories describing contemporary life in Chinatown, including some that relate to cabinet-making but none that mention the union or the strikes.
My challenge then was to forge all this material, with a degree of artistic licence, into a radical historical documentary. In later chapters I will detail how I attempted to do this, and how the process itself changed my understanding and my practice as a film-maker. But first I need to deal with that loaded term: documentary.
2. Documentary: The Theoretical Frame

What is documentary and why use it?

My practice is influenced by a familiarity with debates in documentary studies over the last two decades. These debates have centred around the seemingly perennial problems of defining documentary, of considering what distinguishes it from fiction film; of considering the ways in which documentary functions; and asking how viewers relate to such films. Such concerns have seen documentary studies re-visit discussions that had earlier outings in the broader field of cinema studies, through Vertov’s lauding of the camera and the edit suite (“I am the kino-eye, I am the mechanical eye, I am the machine that shows you the world as only a machine can see it”, cited in Michelson 1984, p.17), Bazin’s argument for the power of photo-realism (“The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it”, in Bazin 1974, p.14), and a reappraisal of the questions around representation and identity that emerged through the 1970s and 1980s.

When Nichols published his key work, Representing Reality (1991) he set a baseline for engaging with documentary forms that continues to be perhaps the most influential (and the most criticised) approach in documentary studies. His work is most famous for its articulation and development of a taxonomy of documentary modes, and it poses issues of particular importance for activist film-makers. In essence, Nichols puts aside the issue of veracity or capital-T truth (debates that Renov (1999, p.316), incidentally, characterises as “the traditional and now oversaturated documentary debates around ‘truth’ and ‘reality’”), and focuses instead on what documentary does and how documentary does it. Most importantly, he maintains that documentary should not be defined by its supposed approximation to reality but should rather be seen as a type of film-making that prioritises argument about reality. In other words, every documentary proclaims itself to be true somehow, and proceeds to prosecute an argument about the way the world is, or why such a thing happens, etc. As part of its arsenal in prosecuting that argument, a documentary pitches itself as ‘truthful’ in a number of different ways – and these can be classified into a taxonomy of documentary modes.

Nichols refines and sometimes renames these modes through various writings over twenty years, but in his latest articulation he briefly summarises them as follows:

- **Poetic mode**: emphasizes visual associations, tonal or rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization…This mode bears a close proximity to experimental, personal, and avant-garde filmmaking.
• **Expository mode**: emphasizes verbal commentary and an argumentative logic… This is the mode that most people associate with documentary in general.

• **Observational mode**: emphasizes a direct engagement with the everyday life of subjects as observed by an unobtrusive camera…

• **Participatory mode**: emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement from conversations to provocations. Often coupled with archival footage to examine historical issues…

• **Reflexive mode**: calls attention to the assumptions and conventions that govern documentary filmmaking. Increases our awareness of the constructedness of the film’s representation of reality…

• **Performative mode**: emphasizes the subjective or expressive aspect of the filmmaker’s own involvement with a subject; it strives to heighten the audience’s responsiveness to this involvement. Rejects notions of objectivity in favor of evocation and affect… The films in this mode all share qualities with the experimental, personal, and avant-garde, but with a strong emphasis on their emotional and social impact on an audience (2010, pp.31-32).

So, for Nichols even those films that openly acknowledge their status as a crafted work of rhetorical persuasion are doing so partly in order to be taken as more trustworthy – not in a cynical ploy on the part of the film-maker, but simply because the act of making a film about the real world pre-supposes you have something you wish to say about that real world, even if you admit that such a task is fraught with contradiction or even impossible.

Nichols’ taxonomy of documentary modes has been subject to much criticism, most importantly from Bruzzi (2006). She points out that in order for the modes to be recognisable, the boundaries end up being drawn so tight, that virtually no single existing film actually fits into any of them. Moreover, Bruzzi points out that in Nichol’s “Darwinian… family tree” (p.3) of documentary, the development of new documentary modes supersedes previous ones, driven by the aim of finding
better ways to represent reality. According to Bruzzi, this model naively implies that somewhere in the future a mode will emerge that entirely collapses the distinction between representation and reality (p.4).

In fact, Nichols himself would never put such a position. On the contrary, he is at pains to point out that each mode exists only in relation to other modes, with each essentially expressing a dissatisfaction in the others' ability to represent reality. For Nichols, the underlying idea is not that a “perfect” mode will one day emerge, nor that any given mode is somehow better or more truthful than previous modes, but that the evolution of various modes expresses a constantly shifting understanding of the difficulties in representing reality on-screen.

Bruzzi’s criticisms serve only to open up further debate. At the root of it all, Nichols sees documentary as an act of rhetorical argument, whereas Bruzzi sees it as an act of performance – quite explicitly drawing on Judith Butler (p.6). I see merit and flaws in both positions. Certainly in terms of my own film-making practice, I agree strongly with Nichols’ starting point that documentary is primarily a means for making arguments about reality. Nonetheless, I agree with Bruzzi that pursuing a taxonomy of documentary modes, à la Nichols, most likely ends up in a situation where the list of films not fitting any mode at all is longer than the sum of those that fit into each.

Also significant for my own practice is Renov’s ‘Towards a Poetics of Documentary’ (in Renov (ed) 1993). Here Renov aims to counter habits rooted in traditions of analysis that he sees cleaving a great split between science and art, truth and beauty. Take for example, Ken Burns’ comments that documentary is primarily about balancing “an exquisite tension between art and science” (cited in Cripps, p.752). For Renov, such problematic splits have been inherent to Western philosophy since the Enlightenment.

It has frequently been presumed that the creation of beautiful forms and documentary’s task of historical representation are altogether irreconcilable… Raoul Ruiz quotes Grierson to that effect. “Grierson says: ‘The trouble with realism is that it deals not in beauty but in truth.’” It then becomes the work of the film to confound that pronouncement, to produce a “pleasure of the text” capable of merging intellectual inquiry and aesthetic value (Renov 1993, p.24).

Renov maintains that such a view of documentary’s purpose fundamentally misunderstands the matter. Instead, he sets out to adapt Aristotle’s Poetics toward addressing the question ‘what is documentary and what can it do?’ Key to Renov’s contribution is his proposition that documentary
practice is best understood as a practice of “active making” that functions to fulfil particular desires and does so through four modalities. In other words, he sees in documentary discourse four distinct but fundamentally overlapping and mingled tendencies, a sort of braid with each of the four strands articulating a yearning to form a particular relationship to ‘the real’: (1) to record, reveal or preserve; (2) to persuade or promote; (3) to analyse or interrogate; and (4) to express (p.21).

Renov’s conviction that the four tendencies can never truly be separated also grants his work some accord with that of Nichols. Consider for example, Renov’s remark that “…the persuasive or promotional modality is intrinsic to all documentary forms and demands to be considered in relation to the other rhetorical/aesthetic functions” (1993, p.30). Nichols echoes this, claiming that documentary sits within the rhetorical tradition, and is finally distinguished from fiction only through its organising principles – namely that a fiction film is primarily organised around story while a documentary is primarily organised around argument.

These approaches are useful because they move documentary studies away from the circular debates about truthfulness, and place it instead in a field also occupied by, say, opinion pieces in the mainstream press. More to the point, positioning documentary as a fundamentally argument-based category also helps explain the long-standing tradition of radical activist documentary film, and helps answer Thomas Waugh’s strategically naive question – “why do documentary film makers keep trying to change the world?” (Waugh, T., 1984).

This is obviously useful for me in that it allows the political polemic to displace the naturalistic image as the apparent heart of the documentary impulse.

**Documentary in the wake of post-modernism**

Drawing on the work of writers like Thrift (2007), some recent approaches to conceptualising documentary offer one path out of the ‘crisis of representation’ that developed through the 80s and 90s, and which culminated in a post-representational approach to documentary studies.

FitzSimons et al (2011) suggest we should treat documentary as a genre (or even a set of genres). As they accurately note, many writers already treat documentary as a genre, and in a variety of ways. It’s even the case with important and widely-taught writers like Nichols, who acknowledges that this putative genre encompasses such a diversity in forms it cannot be defined on purely formal criteria (FitzSimons et al, pp.5-8). The conclusion FitzSimons et al reach is that these multiple ways in which documentary seems to already function as a genre:
suggest a pragmatics of genre, an attention to the often-intersecting ways in which the label is used in specific practices. Within these terms, questions of form as well as content remain important for the production, distribution, analysis and cultural reception of documentary. But the aim [for FitzSimons et al]… is not to arrive at a definitive taxonomy of self-contained ‘textual’ forms. Rather, it is to explore… how representational modes and conventions are used in historical relationships of practice, through which documentaries find their purpose and form (FitzSimons et al, p.8).

The key insight in this approach is that it focuses on “historical relationships of practice” and emphasises both “purpose and form”. In other words, conceiving of documentary as a genre in this way immediately frames documentary as something that cannot be understood without considering the existing practices and conventions, the existing expectations of audiences, and the relationship between viewers and the film itself. In that sense, it is a “genre” unlike others – a genre defined not primarily by a set of generic traits (as is most obviously the case in say, romantic comedies or horror films) but by a shared purpose. Of course, all genres have a purpose, from scaring the heck out of audiences to making megaprofits for the studio. The point here is rather that if we take documentary itself to be a genre we immediately confront the fact that very little similarity exists between the films that would constitute that genre except their purpose (namely, to declare themselves non-fiction and to make some statement about the way the world is).

From a similar starting point but drawing different conclusions, Corner (2002) argues we should stop using the term documentary as a noun and instead use it solely as an adjective, capable of application to any media object that expresses what he calls “the documentary impulse”. This is an appealing path, in many ways. Its simplicity allows it to be adaptable to the broadest range of media objects, and eschews any fetishisation of debates over documentary form. Most importantly, Corner’s approach prioritises the perceived purpose of the film. This implies an active audience with a shared understanding of social conventions of production and distribution that posit a distinction between fiction films and documentary films.

The documentary-as-genre and the documentary-as-adjective approaches share a common baseline. They take for granted that there is something unique to particular media objects we call ‘documentaries’, which casts them as distinct from other media objects. Ultimately this identifying quality is difficult to pin down, but I see it as perhaps related to the notion that any ‘documentary’ must on some level be attempting to make reference to the real, historical world, regardless of the epistemological positions of the film-maker or the formal qualities of the media object in question.
Indexicality and photorealism, versus performativity and animation

Notwithstanding the contributions of those writers discussed above, it remains the case that the debates about documentary and capital-T truth are ongoing. This is partly because so many scholars continue emphasising the centrality of the photo-realistic image in explaining documentary’s particular function.

For example, Nichols suggests that the importance of the indexical image in documentary is a result of the expectations that viewers bring. He argues:

> documentary conventions… call for evidence drawn from the historical world indexically, as it was seen and heard to occur rather than with metaphorical likenesses (if we do not recognize the authenticity of the evidence, we may misinterpret the film as fiction) … (2001, p.117).

Elsewhere, and earlier, he pre-emptively qualifies this statement with a useful observation:

> …indexicality plays a key role in authenticating the documentary image’s claims to the historically real, but the authentication itself must come from elsewhere and it is often subject to doubt (1991, p.153).

The doubt he refers to is that in the mind of the viewer, reminding us again that the viewer is an active, socially- and historically located person.

Another common tendency is to fixate on the strength of the indexical photo-cinematic image as evidence for the claims being put forward in the film, and arguing therefore that such images when used in a documentary are taken by viewers as operating on an altogether different (and more real) level than similar images in a self-avowed fictional film. This is essentially what Nichols means when he talks of the ‘indexical whammy’ in photo-realistic documentary images (2001, pp.39–40), and is echoed by Chanan’s claim that the documentary image is:

> both index and icon… as index, the image refers directly to the profilmic scene; as icon, it has the capacity to evoke a host of secondary meanings… (2007, p.52).

But all this presupposes that the documentary has already established itself as such outside of the images in question, i.e. That the viewers already know they’re watching a documentary, and hence are already placed to attribute an extra level of meaning to the images in question. Otherwise, any
film with a 'realist aesthetic' could elicit the same reaction, the same indexical whammy. So the function of documentary can’t be reduced to the indexical nature of the images. And if that’s the case, then logically the images can be potentially anything at all.

Hence some of the most important contributions in recent years have addressed the issue of animation in documentary, or rather the subgenre of animated documentary in which sequences or even entire films are animated and yet claim documentary status. Honess-Roe’s (2009) superb take on this phenomenon tackles many of the shibboleths, and raises important questions. It also serves as the most detailed response to David Bordwell’s searching call (2009) to “rethink what documentary is” in response to the arrival of animated feature-length documentaries like WALTZ WITH BASHIR (2008).

A useful starting point for engaging in this debate is again the work of Nichols, with his documentary modes distinguished by the manner in which they seek to represent the real world: the expository; the observational; the interactive or participatory; and the reflexive. Nichols emphasises that the fourth mode, the reflexive mode, differs from the other three in a number of significant ways. Some of these can seem like purely formal differences, for example, the use of particular devices that foreground the film’s construction. But underlying those devices is what Nichols sees as a fundamental shift. Whereas the central focus in the other three modes is on the relationship between the film-maker (or the camera) and the real world, the reflexive mode is instead concerned primarily with the relationship between the film-maker and us, the viewers.

The importance of that shift, and the extent to which it genuinely was a new development, are debatable. But the reflexive approach, whilst assuming the impossibility of reality ever being captured on-screen, shares with the other three modes a sense that they are nonetheless referring to reality in some way. In reflexive films, indexical images are still presented as evidence of something, even if that something is the very inability of the evidence itself to ever be trustworthy.

So it’s important to see that when Nichols returns to his taxonomy some years later to add a fifth mode, the so-called performative mode, an even bigger shift takes place. Nichols identifies this explicitly. He notes that films in this newly identified mode, share a:

- deflection of documentary from what has been its most commonsensical purpose – the development of strategies for persuasive argumentation about the historical world (Nichols 1994, p. 92).

He continues:
Performative documentary marks a shift in emphasis from the referential as the dominant feature. This window-like quality of addressing the real world yields to a variable mix of the expressive, the poetic and rhetorical aspects (p.106).

In other words, there is a focus on feeling, on mood, on attempting perhaps to elicit a physical response in viewers in ways well-known in fiction films. Likewise, we get less of the particular, the specific, the nitty-gritty reality of life, and instead we get allegory, metaphor, poetry. We get the local being used to comment on the global, the universal.

A perfect example is Fridolin Schoenwise’s *IT WORKS* (1998). This film is a documentary, though what it documents is not facts or figures, but a feeling. We don’t have an expert explaining to us how difficult it is to be a child with a disability, we don’t observe his difficulties Pennebaker-style, nor do we have the film-maker inserting himself into the action to explore the issue. What we get is a hint of the feeling of being that child. We are made to share even if just for a few minutes, the frustration that he deals with daily. And because we never see his face, the film is not actually about the difficulties experienced by *that* child, but it becomes a film about the difficulties faced by all children with disabilities.

Likewise, John Smith’s *BLIGHT* (1996) is not just a film about that particular un-named street or that particular un-named community slated for destruction to make way for a freeway. Instead, the argument the film is making is very much removed from such specifics. Paradoxically, it shows us fragmented details of peoples’ lives, but holds us at bay from being drawn into the specifics of who, what, where, when. It launches a heartfelt reaction to modern urban development ensnaring us, spider-like, in its inhuman web. And it makes this argument not through interviews with the people whose homes are being demolished, nor through following them around with a camera. Again, as with *IT WORKS*, we never even see the individuals who are in a sense the subjects of the film. It’s significant that the only people we see are the demolition crew, and they feel distinctly inhuman almost alien to this landscape.

What we see and what we hear doesn’t give us much in the way of facts and figures. Werner Herzog’s famously describes observational film as presenting “an accountant’s truth”, just a string of facts (see Ebert, 1999). Smith’s *BLIGHT* then is the anti-accountant. In a sense the film actually presents us with nothing in the way of facts or figures. It gives to us a deeply moving representation of the destruction of a community – but not in a way that enables us to say with certainty that x happened and it was caused by y and people responded by doing z. This is a film about grief, loss, nostalgia, powerlessness. These are things that can’t be filmed, you can’t just point a camera at them. They are intangible and in a sense internal. We know what *BLIGHT* is
about first because we feel it, we are familiar with grief and loss. Moreover, the film resonates with our own condition, our own experience of reality. It’s non-fiction in that sense. It’s also a distinctly realist operation, despite its severe abstractions.

BLIGHT, as an example of Nichols’ performative mode, illustrates the false dichotomy between the terms “fact” and “fiction”, as if the opposite of fiction is just “facts”. Instead, BLIGHT and other performative films seem to suggest there’s more to this issue of truthfulness than even the longest list of facts and specific details could convey.

Now if the aim of a performative documentary is to evoke a feeling in us, then logically the question of the photo-realism of the images, of their fidelity to the real world, becomes far less important.

Nichols ponders this, drawing the conclusion that this shift of focus from the referential to the evocative liberates the expressive, the subjective elements from their subordination to standard documentary logic. In other words, elements like emotional music, expressive camera movement, powerful montage editing; all these things that were traditionally viewed as secondary concerns for documentary become instead the primary concern of a performative film.

In fact, this opens the door for something with deeper implications for our understanding of documentary, and with implications for my own film, namely the animated documentary.

**Animated documentaries**

Documentary films have long made use of animation, going back at least as far as Windsor McKay’s mostly-animated short THE SINKING OF THE LUSITANIA (1918) But over the last decade debates have circled around whether animated films can be considered documentary at all. As Honess Roe correctly identifies (2009), this preoccupation reflects the newness of this field in scholarly research and discussion. Paul Ward highlights the core of the matter:

> Animation – and animated documentary in particular – ‘suffers’ from the predisposition to equate notions of realism with an indexical correspondence to a pro-filmic actuality… Animation represents one of the clearest challenges to simplistic models of what documentary can be, quite simply because you cannot have an animated film that is anything less than completely ‘created… [D]ocumentary must now be seen as a range of strategies in a variety of media; we can no longer cling to
essentialist notions of what the term might mean (2005, pp.82-85).

Thus, there seems need to renegotiate documentary discourse. Accepting the useful concepts currently operating (namely, documentary as rhetoric/argument, and documentary as primarily distinguished through articulating truth claims), we can potentially jettison the stale fixation on indexicality.

Wayne’s call for a new understanding of realism, and a defence of the very concept of realism, is vital. He explains that standard documentary discourse, particularly from the 1970s onward:

…saw a sharp turn away from the concept of realism. Any distinctions between realism and naturalism were collapsed, and any sense of realism itself as a complex and differentiated tradition was erased… (2007, p.171).

He adds:

This critique was certainly a strand of thought in the political modernism of the 1920s and 1930s. But what theorists like Brecht and Walter Benjamin never forgot was that questions of “form” always had their roots in a broader social content that was dynamic and contradictory. By contrast the avant-garde approach of the 1970s separated the question of form off from its broader social context.

This sweeping dismissal of anything that might remotely be termed “realism” produced an extremely reductive account of mainstream cinema (2007, p.171).

Wayne has highlighted the classic bind that post-modern scepticism forced upon the documentary project. One illustrative account is that given by Reinke who argues that:

Ethics is, of course, now that we have dispensed with veracity, the primary concern of discourses of documentary representation… And an ethics of new media has, so far, been bogged down in a concern all other areas have deemed irrelevant: the veracity of the possibly no-longer-indexical image (2005).
But veracity is not contingent on the indexical image, for it is not actually a question of form. It is, as Wayne argues, largely a question of content and of social context.

Realism in film requires a plausible range of character action and interaction within the specific circumstances depicted…

[T]he “specific circumstances” of a fictional world do not at all have to correspond with our everyday notions of “the realistic”. The most fantastical settings/scenarios can function, as Marxist cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has said, allegorically in relation to the real. Real world dynamics and processes are converted into stories and images that manageably deal with and represent them (2007, pp.165–167).

In a later article, Paul Ward addresses the same issue, but adds the perceptive insight that even within an individual animated documentary, there can be a “narratively motivated” shift between “naturalistic style” and “cartoony style”, with the former being used to equate particular content with “notions of “truth” and seriousness” (2008). He also points out that this shift towards a naturalistic style is in effect “a shift in modality” towards what Nichols identified as the expository mode.

Paul Ward summarises Wayne’s argument that manipulation is not the problem:

Wayne argues that we need to move away from ontological objections to any manipulation - i.e. "this is a manipulation in essence, and therefore wrong" - to epistemological objections - i.e. "this is manipulating in order to make an argument and I dis/agree with that argument". The former logically doesn’t allow documentary to exist… ; the latter recognizes that documentaries are constructs but equally recognizes that a textual manipulation can also engage with and perhaps reveal some truth/s. The key with documentary is the notion of it referring to an historical antecedent (i.e. the real lived reality of the world) rather than any formal strategies on their own. In this sense, there is no reason why an animated documentary should be considered less valid (or "less real") than a live action one (2008).
I maintain that the value in this approach is that it highlights the weaknesses and the strengths in Nichols’ standard account of documentary. It moves on from the debates about the ‘ontological status of the image’, acknowledging and explaining precisely why the question of indexicality is a red herring, but it also provides a more theoretically solid explanation of why the central feature of documentary is its ability to reveal truth/s by making an argument about the real world.

But Paul Ward does more than just mount a defence of animated documentaries. He argues that because animation is inherently subjective and always foregrounds its own construction in a way that ‘live action’ footage can’t, animation can offer:

- a more critically distanced and reflexive form of documentary. It can comment on and argue about real issues and relations but do so in a mode where “transparency”, “correspondence” and “mimesis” do not (irony of ironies!) obscure the real issues, as so often seems to be the case with live action documentaries (2008).

He adds further that animation can work to remove specificity, to generalise or to “make strange… the stuff of everyday life.” Using the example of an animated autobiographical film by a victim of domestic child abuse (Karen Watson’s 1988 short DADDY’S LITTLE BIT OF DRESDEN CHINA), Ward argues that these qualities give animated documentary particular suitability for “representing the potentially unrepresentable.”

Freed from the constraints of the pro-filmic event and the indexical image, animation allows documentary to “move beyond naturalistic, surface representation and embrace real relations between things in all their magnitude.”

Paul Ward’s point can be taken as referring to animation’s ability to portray on-screen intimately internal phenomena like mental illness or grief, but also perhaps those complex aspects of our lives or our society that are hard to pin-down in photographs or spoken word, such as exploitation, power, oppression. Honess Roe agrees, arguing “animation has the potential to expand the realm of documentary epistemology from the “world out there” of observable events to the “world in here” of subjective experience” (Honess Roe, p.323).

But animation can do much more than that. For example, while the depiction of ethnicity or “race” in fictional animation has already been identified as problematic (see Lu 2009), this issue has special importance for animated documentary. The capacity for an animated film’s participants to be represented in an infinite number of ways is certainly a political minefield but at the same
time it is an indication of the exciting possibilities for animation to deal with these questions of representation in a fairly reflexive and complex manner.

When Ari Folman’s *WALTZ WITH BASHIR* was released, part of the controversy the film generated (even beyond just its content), was the fact that this animated film was labelled a documentary. Journalist Nick Dawson once asked Folman precisely this question: “why did you call the film an animated documentary?” Folman responds in a sort of non-committal way “I don’t know...” he says, “Who decides these things anyway? Is there a committee somewhere?” (Dawson 2008, pp. 93-95).

This ongoing debate around the issue of animated documentaries has recast long-standing assumptions about the ways in which documentary films articulate their claims to be a representation of reality. This has implications not just for that particular subset of documentary films that happen to be animated, but for all films claiming documentary status. Needless to say, the debate bears heavily on my understanding of how a film like mine, heavily constructed and with a degree of fiction, functions regardless as a documentary.

**Documentary studies for activists**

What we’re seeing in this tangled debate is a tension between perceptions that film is on the one hand a ‘recorder of life’ – unproblematic, objective – and on the other hand, film as a ‘representation of life’ – with all the complications that notion implies. In her highly regarded critical response to the work of Nichols, Bruzzi (2006) identifies this as the crux of the issue. Seeking to counteract the line of argument that rejects the realist project entirely, Bruzzi poses a useful approach. While she is “not advocating the collapse of reality and representation,” she argues for:

an analysis of film as record from an alternative perspective, namely that documentary has always implicitly acknowledged that the ‘document’ at its heart is open to reassessment, reappropriation and even manipulation without these processes necessarily obscuring or rendering irrelevant the document’s original meaning, context or content. This relationship between form, the spectator and the document is crucial (p.16).

The appeal of Bruzzi’s approach to understanding what makes a film a documentary is that it shifts the focus from the formal characteristics of a given film, and instead looks at the expectations and assumptions of viewers, and the negotiating processes that mediate between them and the film. Such an approach starts from the apparent truism that any audience is
intelligent enough to understand that there are multiple ways of telling a true story and hence multiple ways of telling the truth on film.

This orientation is in fact implicit in Nichols' ideas, but Bruzzi is correct to argue it should be the key focus. For Nichols, despite the tendency of his taxonomy to become merely a question of different formal characteristics between documentaries, the distinction between documentary and fictional film as such is actually a question of how a film is structured, and more importantly, of how that structuring entails a particular relationship between film and viewer. In essence, Nichols claims that where the principal organising concern in fictional films is story, for documentary the primary concern is argument. He notes, in a separate passage, that the argument is accompanied by a question:

The world, in documentary, is destined to bear propositions. ‘This is so, isn’t it?’ is the gist of the most common and fundamental proposition we find. It is the basic proposition made by realism. This question, as much or more than Louis Althusser’s ‘Hey, you there!’ is the basis for the social construction of reality and for the work of ideology. In documentary what ‘is so’ is a representation of the world, and the question, ‘isn’t it?’ has to do with the credibility of the representation (1991, p.114).

William Routt covers similar terrain, pointing out that the documentary’s question (funked up a bit by Routt from “This is so, isn’t it?” to “can you dig it?”) also necessitates an answer:

[T]ruth is not simply a matter of stating something, nor is it simply a matter of seeing something. It is a matter of asking and answering a question: of agreement, of communitas. We must be together in this business, the film and I (1991).

What I find appealing about such an approach is not just that it reminds us audiences are active, thinking human beings, but that it takes this observation as its starting point. We can all acknowledge that the ‘evidence’ in a documentary doesn’t (and cannot) exist in a vacuum, and is put forward as part of an argument. But it is also the case that viewers will always ask themselves a question along these lines: “what is this film trying to say about the world, what is it trying to convince me of?”
More importantly, acknowledging that a label alone cannot define a film as documentary suggests the central issue should perhaps be a consideration of the claims to truth that the film makes – whether such claims are embodied in a label or in the film itself. According to MacLennan:

the problem of the truth status of nonfiction films cannot simply be solved by a rhetorical definition. The definition of a nonfiction film as a film that takes the assertive stance of saying that the state of affairs it projects occurred in the actual world, surely asks us to say something about the film’s truth claims (1998).

In other words, the Holocaust-denier David Irving can produce a film and call it a “documentary”, but it is less truthful than a fictionalised biopic like SCHINDLER’S LIST (1993). Hence, in asking the question of how a documentary articulates its truth claims, or why viewers might seem willing to consent to those truth claims, it's worth remembering, as John Corner reminds us (1996, pp.26-27), that viewers are not so naïve as to see the issue of veracity in absolutes of “truth” versus “fiction”. Too much emphasis on the importance of the indexical image and the unscripted pro-filmic event underestimates the activity of viewers.

These are important considerations for activist film-makers seeking to have an affective impact on viewers. In the case of my film DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL, sequences are not animated as much as composited. And those sequences mostly comprise images of newspaper clippings and archival photos. Such images do in fact function as a type of ‘evidence’. In a sense, they are not so different from the approach of film-makers like Ken Burns, which is why in Chapter 4 I will address the topic of archival history films. It's worth noting first though that I've used archival material in a fashion that aims to have an animated feel. That is, they sit on a textured background, and they often swirl into being as if some ghostly figure is marking them onto the paper. They are not pro-filmic and not photo-cinematic, and they have a definite ‘constructed’ feel to them. But my view on the question of animated documentary and on the overstated importance of the ‘indexical whammy’ should make it clear that I see such techniques as well within the scope of documentary film. In fact, I believe they are part of the tool-chest of a new realism needed by activist film-makers in an era that comes after the ‘crisis of representation’ which incidentally swept aside any imagined dichotomy between realism and modernism.

But the end of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st have patently brought a renaissance of totalising and systemic concepts – based on real world phenomena. Globalisation. Imperialism. Global financial crisis. Even capitalism and revolution. If the modern world is so fundamentally fragmented and enormous as to be inconceivable and hence unrepresentable, why
are such grand totalising concepts again common currency? How can we comprehend for example that 2015 and 2016 witnessed the largest single movement of refugees in human history? That sentence is true, but what can it even mean without a sense both of totalising concepts (most obviously, “human history”) and of a real world that can be understood and represented?

Such developments open new avenues for radical activist film-makers in terms of how we might attempt, in the words of Raymond Williams, to “show things as they really are”. I will explore the further implications of that in Chapter 6, but for now it suffices to note that here I am pointing quite deliberately at a reinvigoration of realism. In his *Theses on Realism and Film*, Mike Wayne makes a strong argument along the same lines:

> Despite the decline of postmodernism, the concept of realism has yet to recover from the intellectual assault it sustained. This should not be an acceptable situation for Marxists, however, for whom the concept of realism remains central as a philosophical principle. On aesthetic matters, realism does not hold quite the same universal applicability. It may, for example, be less relevant to a lot of music or poetry. But in film (and in the novel), where storytelling of an extremely diverse sort predominates, realism deserves the priority which Marxists have traditionally accorded it (2007, p.173).

In sometimes surprising ways, this general principle shapes my work as a radical activist film-maker producing a historical documentary in 2016, and this provides some important context for the following chapters.
3. Making the Film: Politics and documentary

To a greater or lesser extent, every documentary necessarily articulates an argument about the world as soon as it declares itself to be a truthful depiction of the world. You can, therefore, make a fairly low-level claim that *every* documentary is political.

However, in raising a category of documentaries that might be deemed *expressly* political, I am referring to films exhibiting particular characteristics. They are films that embrace the argumentative essence of documentary, and hence adopt a clearly partisan viewpoint on the issue at hand. They constitute an intervention into a debate, take a side in a struggle, or openly challenge establishment views. Usually, though not always, these films are politically left-of-centre.

In a 2005 piece, the long-running leftist cinema journal *Cineaste* examines what the editors label a “recent proliferation of topical political documentaries”. Responding to a common set of questions from the editors, a cast of film-makers, scholars, and critics offer their insights into matters relating to the intersection of documentary film-making and politics. Critic David Walsh makes a pertinent case for the importance of political films, arguing that “[the] response to *Fahrenheit 9/11* revealed a vast hunger for critical films” (p.30). He is highlighting what I believe is a key dynamic of the last ten years, that there have been underlying social tensions in much of the world which were bound to eventually find mass public expression. Developments since 2005 seem to verify this, for example: the mass resistance to economic austerity across Europe in the wake of the global financial crisis; the Arab revolutions from 2011; the pro-democracy movements in various parts of Asia (particularly Hong Kong in 2014); and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA.

But Walsh also makes a more general point worth noting here, because it reminds us that the question of ideology and hence of politics is always present when discussing films, whether they proclaim to be documentary or fiction or something else entirely. He writes:

> In fact, all filmmakers have preconceptions and all films make social and cultural arguments, no matter how free-form and haphazard their creation may appear to be. Insofar, however, as these preconceptions and arguments are not made conscious and available for criticism, they tend to reflect prevailing, official ideology (p.30).
This nuanced understanding is vital because it stresses the inherently political nature of works that appear to be stridently apolitical. Hence Walsh is essentially saying that filmmakers have an obligation to identify and articulate their political views, not least because hiding one’s views hampers others from entering into a genuine critique or debate with you.

In terms of my own film then, my starting point is a disdain for concealing my own views. In fact, from the outset I aimed to make those views plain. This is what I mean in describing my film as “partisan”. It presents an interpretation of Australian history with little regard for pretences of impartiality. On the contrary, it focuses on an evident conflict and declares itself on one side. Even in its earliest iterations, when the film only had one narrator – namely, the Chinese cabinetmaker’s ghost – the narration was polemical. Despite writing it to be spoken by a long-dead fictional character, I deliberately wrote the narration in a style I usually employ when writing my own protest or activist speeches. Consequently, the narration sounded like an angry socialist radical. For example, the narration accuses Queen Victoria of being “a dog-stealing drug-dealer and war criminal” – a factual account though certainly heavy on interpretation. This approach did change significantly as the film progressed, which I discuss in subsequent chapters. But the point I’m making here is that unlike the omniscient ‘voice of god’ narrator in the sort of films Nichols labels ‘expository’, the narration in my film is not setting out to explain the images to viewers through a veil of false objectivity. Rather, the narration is openly geared towards persuading and agitating.

In a sense, this polemical approach shouldn’t be seen as unusual since the history of the documentary form is tied somewhat to the political and activist Left. Michael Renov, contributing to the same Cineaste piece as Walsh, explains:

…”I would argue that these recent breakthroughs – the new commercial life for documentary, the higher profile of the documentary filmmaker often as a polemicist – deserve to be considered in the light of history.

At least since the late 1920s, documentary practitioners have sought to bring dramatic social conflict to screen sometimes in synch with the state, sometimes in opposition to it. Dziga Vertov (Kino Pravda), Joris Ivens (Misery in the Borinage), and the collective members of the Workers Film and Photo League all recognized the power of the image to rally support for those who struggled (p.29).

Renov’s emphasis on activist politics (“to rally support for those who struggled”) is important, because despite the apparent left-leaning history, political documentaries are not necessarily
activist documentaries. So under the broad umbrella of political documentaries, the particular tradition I place myself in here is that of activist film-making.

**Activist Documentary**

In an influential 1984 piece, Thomas Waugh addressed the apparent link between documentary practice and leftwing activism. He raises concepts that have since become common currency, including the idea of the ‘committed documentary’:

> By “commitment” I mean, first, a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical sociopolitical transformation. Second, I mean a specific political positioning: activism, or intervention in the process of change itself. To paraphrase Marx, a committed filmmaker is not content only to interpret the world but is also engaged in changing it. But Marx’s utopian ideal is expressed through very pragmatic applications by the filmmakers discussed here. Few would disagree with the French radical collective Iskra’s reminder that filmmakers themselves cannot make revolutions but can only provide “working tools” for those who can (1984, p.6).

Hence ‘activist’ films promote a particular campaign or tell of a particular struggle *with the aim of affecting some kind of change in the real world*. They are openly partisan and usually aim to encourage explicit political action on the part of viewers or perhaps to ‘educate’ viewers into supporting a struggle or campaign. This brings into play conventions of style and content, but in the history of this tradition there are also aspects of a definition that centre around matters like budget, independence, and the pervasive matter of ‘power’ – however it is defined.

It has been common for example to see activist documentaries produced to varying extents by the peoples or communities involved in the given struggle. A particularly pertinent example is the practice of the Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit in Sydney through the 1950s (see Milner 2003 for the definitive account). In those circumstances the film-makers may quite deliberately function as a collaborative rather than an authorial presence. Indeed, many such films prioritise the empowering experience of film-making over the finished film itself. There are clearly articulated political reasons for taking such an approach (perhaps most famously explicated by Ruby, 1992). While some films may certainly adopt a less subject-centred model, they can still be gathered under the shared label of activist documentary.
Activist documentaries are therefore also distinct from merely political documentaries in their conscious attribution of agency to the people who are the film’s subject. This demarcation has been noted by others, including Brian Winston (cited in Nichols, 2010) who justifiably attacks the conservative heart of the liberal, progressive documentaries typified in the Griesonian tradition. While such films may well be full of righteous scorn for the depredations and injustices of society, and may even call for dramatic changes in legislation, government funding or in people’s everyday behaviour, they tend to see the solution to the problem-at-hand as something necessarily brought about ‘from above’ as it were. Here people are presented as victims, or as objects of pity, never as potential fighters with their own subjective agency. As Nichols explains, Winston identifies John Grierson’s Housing Problems (1935) as a key instance of this paternalistic approach, noting that the film:

![Image of Housing Problems](image-url)

...gave slum dwellers the opportunity to speak for themselves, in a synchronous sound interview format set within their own homes. The words of actual workers appeared on British screens for the first time, a sensational achievement in the days long before television or reality TV. But they appeared as if they came with hat in hand, to explain their miserable living conditions politely in the hopes that someone else would agree to do something about it. (Housing Problems had the Gas Light and Coke Company as a sponsor since government slum clearance, the proposed “solution” to the workers’ plight, served the company’s own interests of ultimately increasing gas consumption.) There was less militancy than supplication. The stage was set for a politics of charitable benevolence (Nichols 2010, pp.212-213).

An activist documentary takes an approach starkly at odds with the Griersonian tradition’s ultimately conservative approach. It assumes that the people whose stories are being presented have the capacity to take action themselves in pursuit of their own interests. The purpose of the film becomes not a plea for charity, but a call for solidarity.

This all leads to a situation where we can say with a degree of confidence that activist documentaries tend to be agitational. That is, they agitate for action on the part of viewers. But in their most politically radical moments, activist films both agitate and propagandise. By the latter I mean, they offer some kind of systemic critique wherein the problems being presented are seen as embedded in the existing social order rather than, for example, being simply an isolated incident of bad policy – and hence they require radical solutions. Indeed, the very term agit-prop, first used
by the Soviet film-makers of the 1920s and later used by countless self-avowed revolutionary film-makers through the 20th century, might conjure the frenetic and urgent work of avowedly revolutionary film-makers like Santiago Alvarez, whose archetypal example of the genre, NOW (1965), features a demand for immediate and radical justice as its title – a title which is machine-gunned into existence no less. Even less insurrectionary activist films maintain an agitational character, because they focus on representing the present and in urging viewers to take some sort of action.

Agit-prop in 2017 Australia?

It might seem incongruous to emphasise the activist nature of my practice on the one hand, while noting the lack of contemporary activism in my film DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL. This needs further teasing out.

Gaines gives a detailed account of the ways in which activist documentaries seek to mobilise viewers, particularly through showing struggles on screen. As she notes:

[Activist film-makers] … use images of bodies in struggle because they want audiences to carry on that same struggle… The whole rationale behind documenting political battles on film, as opposed to producing written records, is to make struggle visceral, to go beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling (1999a, p.91).

While my film certainly aims to be a radical activist documentary, it is quite palpably different in mood and in purpose from the type described by Gaines. Most notably, though my film prioritises struggle, it does so with remarkably few “images of bodies in struggle”. My film is agit-prop of a sort, but it is agit-prop in a period where the audience for agitational propaganda is perhaps smaller than it has been for several decades1. So this film does not aim to fulfil the same purpose

1 As this project neared completion, Donald Trump became President of the United States. In that context, with the arrival of terms like “fake news”, “alternative facts”, and “post-truth”, it is worth taking a moment here to expand further on what the term ‘propaganda’ has traditionally meant for those of us on the radical, and particularly the socialist, Left. In a nutshell, we don’t use the term as a pejorative description of fraudulent material, but as a description for material that is partisan and which aims to shift its audience in certain directions. Hence we might label FOX news or a Trump press conference as ‘propaganda’ not because they are full of lies (though they invariably are) but rather because they push a political or ideological agenda. This means, despite its rather contested definition these days, we have no particular qualms in referring to our own material as ‘propaganda’ while simultaneously upholding its commitment to being honest and truthful (though certainly having strident opinions about the given topic).
as classic agit-prop produced during the high points of mass social radicalisation. In a sense, this mirrors the distinction socialist activists have traditionally made between *general* (or *abstract*) propaganda and *concrete* propaganda (see Armstrong 2007). The more concrete propaganda exhibited in films like those of Alvarez reflect the fact those films were produced with an *organising* purpose. This presupposes the existence of forces whose organising into mass political action is the immediate question of the day. Such is not the climate in Australia today. Both the radical left and the union movement have shrunk significantly since the high-point of agitational activist documentaries – which in Australian terms, might be the mid 1970s through to the early 1980s (Sport, 2003). These circumstances are really why my film aims to be a touch more “prop” than “agit”. It attempts to offer a generalised critique of society from a dissident, anti-capitalist perspective. And while I do want to urge resistance and struggle, my film doesn’t call for immediate *concrete* action on the part of viewers.

Of course, even those agit-prop films produced at the height of social crisis and rebellion demonstrate an overlapping of concrete and general propaganda. Consider a film like *FINALLY GOT THE NEWS* (Bird, Lichtman, Gessner, 1970). Produced in association with members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in collaboration with the crew from Newsreel, the film details the insurgent struggles of Black workers in Detroit’s automobile industry, offering a concrete strategy to fight for Black liberation. But that concrete strategy is strengthened rhetorically and conceptually through the film’s effort to trace the history of Black oppression in the United States from the days of slavery to the late 20th Century, alongside its articulation of an analysis that places the particular exploitation of Black labour power in the central position of US capitalism. Thus the concrete is *grounded* in the general.

Consider too the Third Cinema film-makers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, also producing revolutionary agit-prop films at the height of post-WWII radicalism. Their manifesto, penned by film-makers Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanos, gives a flavour of the times, while highlighting both the voluntarism and the insurrectionary intensity of the film-makers:

> I make the revolution; therefore, I exist. This is the starting point for the disappearance of fantasy and phantom to make way for living human beings. The cinema of the revolution is at the same time one of destruction and construction: destruction of the image that neocolonialism has created of itself and of us, and construction of a throbbing, living reality which recaptures truth in any of its expressions…
3. Making the Film: Politics and documentary

In this long war, with the camera as our rifle, we do in fact move into a guerrilla activity. This is why the work of a film-guerrilla group is governed by strict disciplinary norms as to both work methods and security. A revolutionary film group is in the same situation as a guerrilla unit: it cannot grow strong without military structures and command concepts…

The camera is the inexhaustible expropriator of image-weapons; the projector, a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second (1969, pp.123–127).

Any attempt to discuss agit-prop film-making in relation to the contextual question of the depth of social upheaval and rebellion must include a consideration of the post-revolutionary soviet film-makers, particularly Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. As the quintessential agit-prop film-makers, producing work as an avowed contribution to the largest revolutionary wave modern Europe has ever experienced, what their films illustrate is in some ways the high-water-mark of radical activist film-making. Vertov in particular, with his commitment to documentary, still offers a touchstone for works like my own, almost a century later. We see in films like STRIDE, SOVIET! (1926) a Brechtian approach to the perennial question of realism. Consider the sequence in which backwards-running film shows a loaf of bread being broken down into its constituent parts and labour processes, finally ending with stalks of wheat swaying in the breeze. We see here a calculated attempt to use film as a political educational device, with little regard for cinematic naturalism. The reification of bread as a commodity is reversed, and the human element of the commodity is made central. Vertov is mounting a general analysis and argument about production and labour in society, while using this as part of the more concrete call for action to defend and develop soviet power (as the film’s name makes plain).

My inclination to focus more on general rather than concrete propaganda flows quite deliberately from my assessment of the current historical political climate. In one extreme, and at its most obvious, to call for the revolutionary overthrow of the Australian state in 2016 and its replacement with a network of self-governing soviets is hardly going to find much of an audience – despite my own belief that such a development would be a positive one. But even short of such extremes, calls to action need something concrete to point to. Support these refugees in their fight for equal rights! Support these workers in striking to defend their jobs! Or, join this campaign to fight for x, y or z. What though is the concrete course of action that can be drawn out of a film about Chinese workers in Melbourne over a century ago? Certainly, lines of continuity can be drawn out to highlight contemporary racism in Australia, and the film does that. But the emphasis is of
necessity on attempting to offer an argument and explanation of Australian history, which might or might not feed in turn into more concrete outcomes.

As Gaines also identifies, there is a long-established tendency for activist film-makers to overstate the impact of their work, or indeed of documentary film in general. She notes:

…the existence of a mythology on the Left, telling me that many of us want to think that documentary film has a legacy of social change. We not only hope for social transformation in our lifetime, but we hope that independently produced documentary film and video will have something to do with this upheaval (199a, p.95).

One obvious counterpoint is Michael Moore, whose career took off dramatically some years after Gaines pointed to that mythology and who as of 2016 has four feature-length documentaries among the twenty highest-grossing of all time, including FARENHEIT 9/11 (2004) which occupies the top of the list (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm). Moore’s work is not independently produced, but is both highly critical of many aspects of society and widely viewed. It also demonstrates the fluid nature of my suggested demarcation between political documentary and activist documentary. For example, with FARENHEIT 9/11 Moore demonstrates an activist, even agitational, agenda in pursuit of concrete aims. In interviews and media releases he openly described the film as part of a campaign to bring down the Bush administration (Kasindorf and Keen 2004). By contrast, in CAPITALISM: A LOVE STORY (2009) Moore articulates a generalised, systemic critique of the economic order. He did hope audiences left the cinemas ready to take action, and he even published a detailed fifteen-point guide to post-film action (Moore, 2011) – but short of offering those guides in the film, let alone calling for revolution, the film itself necessarily remains a generalised anti-capitalist propaganda piece rather than an instance of concrete agitation.

To summarise thus far, my point is that we should see at least a nominal distinction between political and activist documentary, and understand that activist documentary tends to be what is best labelled as agit-prop. The issue here then is one of grasping the political climate and pitching your agit-prop film accordingly as either more ‘agitational’ or more ‘propagandistic’ – though the lines are blurry. I believe the balance is in large part determined by the political, social and historical context in which you operate. For example, even without romanticising the era it is arguably the case that through much of the 1970s the opportunities and the difficulties confronting radical documentary film-makers were of a very different scale than those in the 2010s.
If you're looking to make a documentary about workers involved in industrial struggle, for example, the statistics suggest you'd have a lot more difficulty even finding those workers in 2016 than you would have had in the early-mid 1970s. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) records of days lost to industrial disputes (strikes and lockouts) illustrate my point. In the year 1974-1975 the figure was more than 1,200 days lost per thousand employees (Bramble, 2008, p.7). But from the mid 1980s the number of days lost in dispute has fallen to today's record lows. As the ABS explains:

The number of working days lost due to industrial disputes provides an indication of the impact of industrial disputes on the total economy and on particular industries… Overall, the number of working days lost per thousand employees fell from 219 in 1987 to 5 in 2007 (Australian Social Trends 2008, Industrial Disputes).

While the number of days lost to industrial disputes gives some indication of the general degree of social struggle and upheaval, social *radicalism* is of course much harder to define, let alone to measure. In the 1970s, the surge of industrial disputes intersected with, and spurred on, the radicalising social movements of the time – from the movement against the war in Vietnam, to the Womens’ Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation movement (see Wood, 2015; and Ross, 2013). In a sign of the difference today, Rowan Cahill, a co-author of *Radical Sydney* (Irving and Cahill, 2010) notes the questions he is most frequently asked are: What is radicalism? ; Is radicalism dead? ; and where is radicalism today? He adds that:

the radicalism and social protest movements that convulsed Australian society during the 1960s and early 1970s transcended class lines, involving middle and working class people and organisations in a wide range of issues and causes. In this process also, traditional and long standing distinctions and barriers regarding age, race, sexuality, gender, were variously, at times painfully and/or tentatively, confronted, with varying degrees of success, by participant activists (Cahill, 2012, p.67-68).

But as film-makers we operate in both a social/political context and an industrial (or as some argue today, a *post*-industrial) context. Separating these in such a fashion is obviously problematic, and I do so here only as a heuristic device that helps illustrate a particular aspect of contemporary radical documentary. Part of the context to consider is the apparent rigidity of the 1970s film-making
industry itself relative to the situation today. As Michael Chanan notes, in a valuable re-visiting of the Third Cinema manifesto several decades on, it is:

…easier now to make films within the interstices of the system and find them taken up, albeit modestly, than in the period of revolutionary militancy in the ’60s and ’70s, since the outlets have diversified and multiplied. Indeed we can hardly speak of a movement in the traditional sense, which is bonded together by shared stylistic tendencies, the way we think of Italian neorealism, for example, or American Direct Cinema of the 1960s. The new documentary of the past ten or fifteen years is not an artistic movement but a wave of activity. Nonetheless, what has emerged in so many of these films is a new kind of documentary discourse which asserts the prerogative of the film-maker to have their very own take on the world (2007, p.12).

So, in attempting to understand the state of radical activist documentary we find ourselves prioritising two aspects of context. First the social, political and historical context – from which springs the radicalism and activism of which we wish our films to be part; and second the ways in which changes to technology and industry have potentially or possibly loosened the hold of generic conventions. In other words, we perhaps find ourselves at a situation where despite being at a relatively non-radicalised moment we have the emergence of new forms of radical activist film.

DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL: A Radical Activist Film Form?

Through much of the 20th century, discussion of radical art or radical media centred on debating the politics of form. In a nutshell, the key question was – and to some extent remains – does radical art require radical form?

While I am sympathetic to all sides of the debate, and don’t seek to do explore the topic at length here, I do believe the underlying issue is again a matter of one’s social and historical position. There is after all an aspect of the debate tracing back to classical Marxism’s basic premise of dialectical materialism. So Getino and Salanos, for example, convey a sense of urgency in explaining their approach to film form (1969, pp.107-132). These seminal agit-prop radical film-makers are convinced their audiences will agree with their films views and will act appropriately.
Getino and Solanos must assume either a degree of existing social radicalisation a priori, or that the film itself will create such a radicalisation. In other words, either we are in a radicalised period where the social contradictions are so heightened that audiences will respond to a mere film by taking political and social action, or we are disregarding the dynamic relationship between contemporary material conditions in society and the role of political ideas, and instead placing all the power to ‘activate’ audiences in the simple strength of the idea itself (or perhaps in its formal eloquence). For a politics that declares itself dialectical, as Getino and Solanos do, the latter approach would be decidedly idealist – except of course that they were making films at the height of post-war radicalism.

I will return to Getino and Solanos in Chapter 6, but my point here is that I don’t hold to a view of film-making practice that sees breaking with dominant formal techniques as a necessary or definitive element in making a film ‘radical’. Radicalism is also about content, as should almost go without saying. But film form itself reflects in turn much more than simply the politics of the film-maker. It is, perhaps above all, a question of context. Certain historical junctures give rise to certain attitudes on the question of form, and this in itself reflects a dynamic in which audiences’ expectations and screen-literacy are shaped by their exposure to particular forms. It’s a complex topic and, again, outside the realm of this project to fully explore. Nonetheless, despite my stated position that radical films do not require radical form, it remains true that my film is somewhat experimental. Yes, it has a narrator and a protagonist (of sorts), and plots out events in a sequence, and conveys a sense of resolution rather than finishing in an open-ended manner, but in terms of the common tropes of documentary, and activist documentary in particular, some of these elements are precisely the ones that run counter to type. Partly this reflects my own interest in exploring the edges of the genre, but it also grows organically from the nature of the project itself. This process starts with the challenges of making an activist film that is also an archival film.

Central to this problem is my view that an archival film’s form is necessarily inflected through one’s theory of history. If history is inherently unknowable and un-representable then all we can do is grasp at fragments. But if by contrast, history is in some way representable, then film-makers can attempt to represent it – and in ways that are not necessarily fragmented or partial, but which at least seek to suggest a totality, a system, even a ‘grand narrative’. And in the context identified by Chanan, in which new forms of radical documentary are apparent, those representations of reality may well be expressed in forms that don’t sit squarely with commonly accepted notions of realism.

As I discuss in Chapter 6, we are today in an era where perhaps the realist project is not at all hindered by the fact of systemic and contradictory complexity. Rather, the realist aim once characterised by Williams as ‘showing things as they really are’ (Lovell, p.84), overrides formal conventions usually offered as the very definition of realism.
But first, I look in the following chapter at how this understanding of politics and history applies to the task of making an *archival* historical documentary.
4. Making the Film: Archives and the act of representing history

In producing the film **DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL** I have made a historiographic piece, taking an avowedly radical position and drawing on some degree of archival material. Hence, I begin this chapter by drawing out my own context in the discourses and practices around what might be called ‘representing history’.

Through a broad interest in both the history of racism in Australia and the history of the labour movement, this story appeared to me, urging me to take it up – but as with any project it brought some particular problems. For example, there are enormous gaps in the existing primary source material. So the people I’m casting as protagonists, namely the Chinese furniture-trade employees in Melbourne c.1880-1900, have seldom been individually identified, and certainly never interviewed, transcribed, or filmed – though I have managed to find a photo of their union president 雷鹏 aka Harry Louey Pang (in Kuo, 2013, p.193). For the most part these workers’ very existence has a sort of ‘secondary source’ feel to it. There exist hundreds of breathless newspaper reports from the time, but little of this material has made its way into historical accounts. Today we can find these workers’ struggles discussed only in a smattering of journal articles (most notably Markus, 1974) and a chapter in Jeff & Jill Sparrow’s *Radical Melbourne* (2001), alongside occasional fleeting references (sometimes only a single sentence) in a select handful of books about Chinese Australian history (for example: Yong, 1977; Rolls, 1996; Kuo, 2013). Obviously, the absence of such material when writing history is so much a standard issue as to be essentially a given. Furthermore, the process of creating a story (and prosecuting an argument) with the raw material of the past has long been an important focus of investigation and critical thinking for scholars of history and philosophy.

In recent decades, for better or worse, the writings of Hayden White on this topic have been particularly influential. Indeed, White’s three central claims in relation to narrative and historical writing seem to be born out strongly in my own practice with this film.

First, White claims the historian has to begin by representing the historical event to herself, in order to prefigure the event or events as a possible ‘object of knowledge’. In other words, the raw documents and source material are compiled or arranged, the historian trying to figure out the big picture, the chronology, and so forth. Consider my statement above: “there are enormous gaps in the existing primary source material”. From White’s perspective, such a statement reveals I have, to at least some extent, approached the material with a pre-determined order I’m seeking to impose on the parts. The gaps I’m referring to are not just temporal gaps, but gaps in the threads
of the story I already have in mind. The ‘missing’ material is significant only because I feel I require it to effectively make my case.

According to White, this act of gathering the parts into a story, ready to be ordered or emplotted, is itself a process of representation. White lays out a taxonomy of tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) into which these prefiguring acts of representation must fall, with each trope carrying an associated mode of emplotment. But White also sees a hierarchy here, with irony being the favoured trope. Hence he regards the postmodern trend towards an ironic metahistory as highlighting the fact that any history's truth claims are necessarily relative, and that a historical perspective can only ever be partial (White 1973, pp.31-38).

The specific emplotment, and hence the ‘mode’ of a particular piece (essentially its genre, be it romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire), is not a function primarily of the nature of the parts, but is rather an outcome of choices shaped by the ontological and epistemological position of the historian, and hence an inherently ideological and political process (p.427). In other words, while I have identified specific difficulties with the material I face, and the apparent gaps in it, the fact is other historians working with the same primary material would tell a story expressing their political views and ideological assumptions and beliefs. This is White’s key contribution to the discourse around historiography, and its appeal in an age of post-modernism and beyond is self-evident.

Notably, White is arguing there is a default chaos in history, and the historian imposes order on it twice. The important one, the focus of his work, is actually the second instance of ordering, the act of imposing a narrative on the events. But he also argues there is a separate act of representation happening before the imposition of a narrative, and that this is a process of creating a “chronicle”. Interestingly, my own attempts to piece together the ‘big picture’ of the Chinese cabinetmakers in Melbourne, undertaken before I’d actually encountered Hayden White, did in fact follow that very process. Indeed, the most useful area of my early research for this film was a blogpost I labelled “an opinionated timeline” (it’s worth noting that the title itself also exhibits that playful irony with which White’s work is so concerned). I was in fact creating a chronicle, and the logic of compiling such a work prior to and in distinction from the historical work itself seemed obvious to me on a practical level at the time.

White’s second key point is identifying the role of narrative as the key issue, rather than the debates about how closely a given account might be said to resemble the reality it claims to represent. This seems clearest in my film when considering the frequently heavily stylised and suggestive images, alongside the fairly straightforward chronological plot with its cause-and-effect relationships. Moreover, narrative for White is neither something that is inherent in the material
4. Making the Film: Archives and the act of representing history

nor is it something that the historian simply selects as they would colour from a paint palette. Rather, the narrative a historian imposes on material is an expression of choices which are shaped by epistemic and ontological factors, and which carry political, moral and ideological implications. At its most mundane level, this is evident in the very fact that historians select material from an infinite amount of possible details. But White is drawing our attention to the broader brushstrokes – the claims put forth, explicit or implicit, in any sequenced arrangement of historical data and in the editorializing that’s always necessary to fill the gaps, to concatenate, to summarise, etc. Most importantly, for White narrative produces the “meaning” of the overall work.

Finally, White argues that historical narratives demand closure, and thus they present to audiences a world that is final, complete, integrated and stable, free of dissolution or ambiguity. They therefore play a social role in contributing to the production of law-abiding citizens (White 1980, pp.18–25). In other words, a historical narrative, according to White, must be understood as a form of ideology. The lineage here is clearly descended from Barthes, with his lauding of open-ended, ‘readerly’ texts, but also perhaps from Althusser – whose profoundly Stalinist view of society sees ideology being pumped into passive workers from on high with no room for working class consciousness to emerge in opposition. He maintains, in an echo of White’s comments on the social role of historical narratives, that “Ideology (as a system of mass representations) is indispensable in any society if men [sic] are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence” (Althusser, 1969 [2010], p.235).

White’s ideas have been critiqued at length in the decades since he first published them, but they remain common currency for contemporary postmodernist history – perhaps an odd development given White’s own denials of the postmodern label (Domanska 1998, pp. 26, 51–55), and in fact his apparent, though in my opinion misjudged, belief that his work is fundamentally Marxist (Partner 1997, p.108).

More recently, historians Ann Curthoys and John Docker (2010) have summarised some of the key poststructuralist criticism of White’s ideas. Most importantly for Curthoys and Docker, they argue that White’s rigid articulation of a particular set of tropes or genres, denies “any particular text its individuality, nuance, subtle difference, its own tone, rhythm, voice, grain, markings, and oddities”, and is furthermore “a little misplaced, for most historical writing worked – wittingly or unwittingly – within one genre” (p.193).

For those of us in documentary studies, this critique of White bears some interesting parallels with the critique of Nichols put forward by Bruzzi (2000). Namely, both critiques allege an over-emphasis on a sort of taxonomic classification of texts. However, while Curthoys and Docker argue 20th Century history texts were remarkably homogenous in terms of genre, at least until the
apparent development of more reflexive, multivocal and non-authoritative histories associated with the postmodern climate of the 1980s and 1990s, Bruzzi is at pains to point out that some of the earliest examples of documentary film are quite astonishing in their level of critical self-reflexivity. The most apt example she puts forward is Dziga Vertov’s *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA* (1927).

This leads us then to look more precisely at the question of representing history on film.

**History on film**

One could argue that *all* documentaries are about history, since even those shot under the most forthright declarations of direct cinema or verité are forever dealing with moments that have already happened by the time the reflected photons enter the camera lens, let alone by the time a finished film is screened. Philip Rosen for example distinguishes between broadcast media with its capacity for liveness and “the media of indexical traces, such as photography, phonography, and cinema…” [which] generally presupposes a temporal disjunction between the referential events producing them and audience apprehension of them, so that their representations become fixed as preservations from a past” (2001, p.227). As he notes, this fact has an impact on viewers, since it “suggests that documentary cinema, whose reality is necessarily from the past, may embody different, more ‘historical’ expectations than those possible in a newscast” (p.227). This is an important nuance in understanding how documentary viewers might approach documentary as a genre, though there are of course instances in which a given documentary seems to position itself quite deliberately as a ‘present tense’ if not an entirely ‘live’ communication. Such is clearly the case in the agitational activist videos often produced as part of a specific campaign and seeking viewers’ immediate support, where the tone tends to be ‘this is happening NOW, we need your support NOW’.

Notwithstanding all that, there is also a clearly distinct tradition of documentary whose films quite explicitly pitch themselves as representing issues or events ‘in the past’. Indeed, the ‘historical documentary’ subgenre is so prevalent that an entire television network exists solely for airing such films – the History Channel. Associated with this admittedly broad tradition of practice is a field of academic discourse and critical inquiry that helps us conceptualise the subgenre.

Rosen makes a valuable contribution with two key points: (a) he notes that while the changes in conceptualising history through the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in changed historiographic *forms*, it is easy to miss the continuities and interplays – which are most apparent in the existence of “mixtures of old and new, the temporal hybridities that constitute the present” and within which, “cinema has occupied a special ‘historical’ position” (2001, pp.XVII-XIX); and (b) he
undertakes a useful exercise “comparing disciplined historiography based on the document to
documentary filmmaking as two practices aimed at conveying something of the real” (p.XXV).
Through this he sets out a claim “that the classical documentary tradition was never predicated on
a so-called naïve realism” but rather it “envisions a filmic indexicality seeking centred sense-
making and a temporality controlled by a social or cultural expert.” He notes that “certain kinds of
leftist theorists and filmmakers quite properly embrace that process as an arena available for
contestation” (p.XXV).

Rosen’s claims here resonate with my own views as a radical activist and documentary film-
maker. His notion of a “filmic indexicality” seems to align with those writers who note that an indexical
relationship can be based on things besides photorealistic images – such as the soundtrack,
particularly in the form of oral testimony which can bring a sense of authenticity even to animated
images (for example in DADDY’S LITTLE BIT OF DRESDEN CHINA).

Corner (1996 p.18) argues that “general truth claims in documentary cannot be seen to be fully
grounded in primary fidelity since such fidelity underdetermines them.” In other words, truth
claims extend beyond the indexical nature of the image to include “expositional organisation,
forms of argument, modes of adducing visual and verbal evidence and the lines of causality
indicated in the narrative scheme.” Nichols (1991 p.153) echoes this, arguing that “indexicality
plays a key role in authenticating the documentary image’s claims to the historically real, but the
authentication itself must come from elsewhere and it is often subject to doubt.”

Rosen’s qualification, that his proposed filmic indexicality involves “…a temporality controlled by
a social or cultural expert”, seems at first to recall quaint practices of omnipotent narrators.
Nonetheless, he is correct to point out that this has been embraced by leftist film-makers who
conceive it as a site of contestation. After all, it is a politically loaded question to ask who
constitutes an expert. Silverman (1988) explores this issue at length, drawing out the gender and
power politics of cinema’s traditionally male narrators, and pointing to the independent and
radical films of third-wave feminism as some of the earliest instances of women narrators.

The narration in my own film certainly seems to further bear this out. The simple act of having
the narration partly spoken in Cantonese rather than English is an expression of my political
views. Having those sections of the narration also delivered in first-person and attributed to a
long-dead anonymous (fictional) migrant worker is also a political statement, but it is one that
involves a playful questioning of the nature and identity of society’s “cultural experts”.

Furthermore, it is in the anti-establishment, critical tone of my film’s narration that the film
arguably finds its radical content most coherently shaped. In other words, my film’s political
arguments about Australian history seem to reside in the words more so than the images. This in
itself is somewhat at odds with the most common tradition of radical, particularly Marxist, filmmaking whose approach to theorising agit-prop emphasises the centrality of dialectical theories of Soviet montage film-makers, essentially either Eisenstein or Vertov as the case may be. Consider for example the clashes and juxtapositions common in films from Marxist documentary film-makers as diverse as Antonioni, Marker, or Alvarez. Indeed, many of those making films through the last great wave of radicalism in the 1970s chose to eschew voice-over altogether (Youdelman, 1982).

In summary, it seems one issue highlighted through the production of *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL* is a potential re-appraisal of the role of a narrator (reliable or otherwise) in radical activist historical documentary. I address some of the implications of this, and the connections it has with other existing documentary practices, in Chapter 6.

Returning to the broader discussion of history on film, it’s worth considering the work of Robert A. Rosenstone, a historical consultant on Warren Beatty’s *REDS* (1981) and perhaps the most notable exponent of adapting Hayden White’s ideas about history to the study of films. His most forceful intervention argues for a new type of documentary film (1995), a postmodern cinematic historiography, he labels “New History”. One of the key examples Rosentone puts forward is Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991) – a noteworthy move given *JFK* doesn’t claim to be a documentary. The film’s fragmented and speculative representation of an actual historic event was controversial at the time, but for Rosenstone it expresses perfectly the sort of uncertainty and provocation that “New History” should.

One implication of Rosenstone’s broad body of work is that the notion of a history film is not necessarily synonymous with the notion of a documentary. He correctly assumes that a ‘fictional’ film (or perhaps more precisely a fictionalised film) can reveal just as much truth about humanity and our history as any documentary might. It should be clear then that Rosenstone’s implicit collapsing of the documentary genre does not arise from a postmodern scepticism or despair rooted in the ‘crisis of representation’ but rather from the more fruitful view that ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ are not in fact opposites. Here, he echoes Nichols provocative assertion that “every film is a documentary”, with those we call “fiction” actually representing very real elements of the human condition and functioning as “documentaries of wish fulfilment” (2001, p.1 – though interestingly this comment does not appear in Nichols’ 2010 second edition). Rosenstone’s work is useful and persuasive, though I continue to label my film a history *documentary* rather than a history *film*. This is partly to deliberately emphasise the factual content that is present in the film, as a counter to the weight of the fictionalised narrator and the personalised self-portrait aspect.
Echoing the call for new forms of historical film, and celebrating those already emerging, Landy points to Deleuze’s important work on the historical shifts in cinema’s apparent conceptualisation of time, concluding that:

if one is to follow Deleuze, one learns not only that the cinema is a major source for learning about the various forms that history has taken in the twentieth century, but also that particular cinematic styles signal important cultural changes closely tied to pedagogical conceptions of the nation or its critique (2001, p.6).

This is an important insight, because it simultaneously places cinema (perhaps the industrial artform par excellence) squarely in the context of capitalist nation-building projects, and potentially in a critical relationship to that project. But more importantly Landy’s view rests on the conviction that the meaning attributed to or bound up in a given cinematic style is not fixed. Taken as a package, this has significant implications for those of us producing historical documentary films, particularly those that pit themselves against power or that adopt some degree of stylistic experimentation – or as in my own case, films that do both.

Finally, it’s worth bearing in mind Sobchack’s reminder that the public nature of history carries a:

burning pertinence… [and that] if history – like shit – ‘happens’, it happens only in the present, in the temporal space between the past and the future… [where it gains] a magnitude and significance that emerges from historiographic reflection and makes out of that present unshaped material something that deeply matters (1996, pp.13-14).

In fact, the act of representing the past in a documentary film is usually part of an argument about the present, often through attributing explanatory power or causation to some event in the past in a more-or-less deterministic fashion (ie. things are the way they are today because x happened in the past). In other words, even films about history are simultaneously about the present. This dynamic has particular implications for history films that draw on archival material, since the experience Baron (2010) usefully labels “the archive effect” depends on viewers recognising the temporal distance between “then” and “now” in order to draw certain meanings from the material.

In my case, I’ve produced a film that attempts to draw connections between events that have transpired over more than a century-and-a-half. It attempts to place those events in relationship to each other and to a larger whole. So the film is a historical documentary, or perhaps an act of
historiography in the medium of film (or digital video if you want to be so precise), but we can be more specific. The film is also partly an *archival film*.

**Archival Film**

*DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL* makes use of old photos, old newspaper cartoons and old newspaper articles. In those moments, it draws then on an existing set of generic conventions. But close examination of the seemingly self-evident category of “archival film” reveals the definition to be slippery. For example, this sub-genre includes most obviously the work of film-makers like Ken Burns, whose archival films for PBS (for example *THE CIVIL WAR* (1990) and *JAZZ* (2001)) have gained enormous audiences and played a part in defining the genre for contemporary audiences, alongside the fragmented post-modern works of film-makers like Su Friedrich who, as Hendriks explains:

> uses found footage filmmaking strategies to weave together disparate fragments of imagery, sound, and text to create a unified and coherent whole… [producing films] about the totality of human experience and the potential of film to explore this totality in ways that no other medium can. Found footage strategies are the key to Friedrich’s exploration of human experience (2003).

My approach is akin to Freidrichs’ work in several ways, as I’ll address shortly. First though, a few words on the archival film as a category. Notwithstanding its intrinsic diversity, it is arguably true that the archival film is the dominant form of documentary production today – at least in Australia. As FitzSimons et al point out (2011, pp.154-155), the identifiable ‘historical documentary’ drawing on media archives and detailed research, emerged in the mid 1980s and took firm root through the 1990s partly due to institutional factors (the primary one being the rapid growth of Film Australia’s huge library of archival material). By the 2000s this category of film had been embraced by the Australian state, with the 25-part series *OUR CENTURY* (1999) being published with a study guide and promoted to schools (FitzSimons et al p.155). Soon after, the conservative Howard government dragged this genre of historical documentary onto the battlefield of the so-called ‘history wars’, where rightwing historians were waging a concerted attempt to undermined and delegitimise the work of social historians and other critics of Australia’s white-washed historical narrative (for the definitive overview of this issue, see Macintyre and Clark, 2004). So in 2005, the Howard government launched their History Initiative, which was founded upon ‘the largest single grant ever given by an Australian government to a television initiative’ (Balint, cited in FitzSimons et al p.155).
4. Making the Film: Archives and the act of representing history

[These]… documentaries—about such topics as explorers, prime ministers and generals—broadly accorded with the kinds of history that the Howard government was championing… [They included] the Constructing Australia series, about the building of national infrastructure such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the water supply of the Western Australian goldfields… [and] were closely tied in to various educational curricula. (FitzSimons et al, p155).

But as Baron reminds us, the archival film is itself a broad and messy category. Not least of all because, as she points out, film-makers today draw on an increasing variety of sources for such material:

“…both inside and outside official archives – from private collections, grassroots archives, and online databases – [hence] we are in need of a new way of thinking about archival documents. Instead of defining these documents in terms of the locations in which they have been stored, I have suggested that we may think of them, rather, in terms of an experience they produce for the viewer watching a given film that appropriates ‘found’ documents…” (p.301).

Baron here identifies the two-way relationship between archival material and viewers, which aligns well with my argument about documentary films in general (namely, that viewers are always engaged in assessing the arguments a given film seems to be prosecuting). Importantly she points out that archival material is frequently employed with a degree of irony. Primarily this is because as viewers we recognise that the archival material presented to us on-screen has already previously occupied different contexts and conveyed different meanings. Baron observes that some films play down this duality (she notes Ken Burns as perhaps the key example), while others actively emphasise it. In the latter category she points to Michael Moore who “often appropriates seemingly ‘naïve’ footage in order to mock it and ‘reverse’ its meaning” (p.303).

It is precisely this dynamic relationship between archival material and viewers that enables archival material to be deployed in films that are experimental. Consider for example, films that go beyond Moore’s “mocking” of archival footage, and instead deliberately distort the temporal and intentional integrity of said footage. Baron identifies Martin Arnold’s PASSAGE À L’ACTE (1992) as an obvious example. The film runs over eleven minutes but is built entirely with just a few seconds of footage appropriated from a single scene in TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD (1962).
Arnold subjects the footage to intense recutting. Sounds and frames are repeated, new rhythms build and then disperse. The original meanings of the film (and certainly of the book on which the film was based) are arguably broken beyond recognition – except in the sense that the viewer recognises something in the original material, whether it be Gregory Peck and all he connotes, or the particular scene in *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*, or just a general comprehension that this material is drawn from somewhere in classic Hollywood. Either way, as Herbert (2006) points out, Arnold’s film comes to viewers loaded with intertextuality. The game that Arnold is playing with viewers relies on the “archive experience” that Baron unpacks so well.

Formal experimentation aside, a radical political tradition also runs through the broad field of archival documentary. For example, I’ve already mentioned Alvarez’s *NOW* in the context of agit-prop films, but it is also clearly an archival film – albeit one that mobilises archival material for stridently agitational purposes. In a sense, Alvarez’s work shouldn’t be seen as unusual, because the relationship between the Left and the archives traces back to the earliest days of documentary cinema. After all, it is the Bolshevik film-maker Esfir Shub who most writers credit for having created the archive film sub-genre in 1927 with her epic *THE FALL OF THE ROMANOV DYNASTY* (Petric, 1989, p.22).

Here in Melbourne, John Hughes has produced a number of films making heavy use of archival material and taking an openly left-wing stance on history, particularly in relation to the communist party and the workers movement. His *THE ARCHIVE PROJECT* (2006), for example, tells the little-known history of the Communist Party of Australia’s Realist Film Unit through the 1940s-1950s, including a great deal of archival material produced by the organisation itself, alongside interviews conducted decades later. But the film also functions as a clearly partisan examination of Australian society in the Cold War, and the anti-communist actions of the conservative Menzies government.

My film only employs archival material as one element in the overall composition. And moreover, it employs that archival material in a fashion that is reflexive and heavily stylised. Nonetheless, the film clearly draws on traditions of radical historical documentary practice – and the associated commitment to a radical and dissenting view of history.

**Radical histories**

I have noted the distinction between concrete and general propaganda in the Marxist activist tradition, and suggested that agit-prop cinema traditionally falls on the more concrete (hence “agitational”) side of the board. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that more abstract or general propaganda is somehow divorced from the broader agenda of encouraging people to take
action. This is most important when looking at the other tradition my work draws on, that current of practice best described as ‘radical history’. I see this current as a particular sub-category of social history, also evident in some instances of subaltern studies or postcolonial studies, and distinguished through its avowed commitment not only to “history from below”, as the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson famously labelled such work (Thompson, 1966), but to activism in the present.

One of this tradition’s key figures is Howard Zinn, whose *A People’s History of the United States: 1492 – Present* (1980) is at once a sweeping dissident history and a call to action. Zinn summed up his approach in an earlier paper *What is Radical History?*:

> Why do we need to reach into the past, into the days of slavery? Isn’t the experience of Malcolm X, in our own time enough? I see two values in going back. One is that dealing with the past, our guard is down, because we start off thinking it is over and we have nothing to fear by taking it all in. We turn out to be wrong, because its immediacy strikes us, affects us before we know it; when we have recognized this, it is too late—we have been moved. Another reason is that time adds depth and intensity to a problem which otherwise might seem a passing one, susceptible to being brushed away. To know that long continuity, across the centuries, of the degradation that stalked both Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X… is to reveal how infuriatingly long has been this black ordeal in white America. If nothing else, it would make us understand in that black mood of today what we might otherwise see as impatience, and what history tells us is overlong endurance (1970, pp.38–39).

Zinn openly embraces historiography as intrinsically an exercise in argument and persuasion. He wants people to be “affected” and “moved”, to recognise the “depth and intensity to a problem” that “can’t be brushed away”. His purpose is neither false objectivity, nor inward-looking navel-gazing. A radical historian aims to agitate, to create activists, not to justify or to normalise the existing order of things.

It’s in this light that I do see some merit to the observation that *all* documentaries are historical. Not only for the trivial reason that any events recorded by cameras and microphones have already transpired, but because I agree with Nichols that documentary sits in the rhetorical tradition (Nichols, 2010). If indeed all documentaries are about the past no less so than they are about the
present, then they are also all engaged in an argument about the past. They make claims that some elements of history are more important than others, and endorse particular interpretations of those events. It’s here that agit-prop and historiography can overlap. The word ‘propaganda’ may have negative connotations for lay audiences as a synonym for lies and dishonesty, but the revolutionary Left has always used it in a non-pejorative manner. For us, propaganda is about ideas and arguments not about lies and manipulation. Asked about those who dismiss his classic anti-war agit-prop film *IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG* (1968) as simply propaganda, De Antonio replies: “There is out and out propaganda in the film, obviously, although sometimes I don’t know what the distinction is between propaganda and passion, and propaganda and politics” (Crowdus, Georgakas and Antonio, 1982).

I maintain then that the best works of agit-prop are exhilarating partly because they are openly partisan, which is not at all the same as being dishonest.

In the case of *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, I have produced a work of historiography that is also a work of agit-prop. It is a partisan and radical history that aims to move viewers not just to inform them, and it uses particular devices and approaches in order to do so. But as historiography it also attempts to narrativise the events it represents.

**DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL: Radical history on film**

In light of the prevalence of extremely popular history films, particularly as typified by Ken Burns, academic historian David Harlan considers the implications for his own discipline. He covers a diverse collection of topics, noting for example the uneasy relationship between Burns and the academy, the allegedly “boring” formal style of Burns’ films, and the differing processes used by Burns on one hand and academics on the other. He frames this broad terrain as one which academic historians have tended to look with an elitist disdain towards popular history films:

We academic historians do not know quite what to make of all this. We are delighted to see so many people interested in the past, of course, but we tend to view the documentaries themselves as little more than historical melodramas, long on misty nostalgia but short on critical analysis. When we bother to review them at all – which is not very often – we invariably dismiss them as superficial, sentimental, simplistic…

Although Burns does have a small circle of defenders within the academy, they have utterly failed to convince their colleagues that his documentaries are anything more than a
mind-softening, saccharine-like substitute for real history.

Burns knows this, of course. He once told the editor of the
*Journal of American History* that ‘it’s only in the academic
community that I’ve found a particularly – and for me, a
particularly sad, painful – sort of rejection’ (Harlan 2003,
p.169-170).

In fact, the comments Harlan attributes to Burns come from an extended interview in the
*American Historical Review* (Cripps 1995, p.744), not the *Journal of American History*. The
interview provides a fascinating insight into Burns’ defensiveness in the face of criticism from the
academy, which goes well beyond the seemingly throw-away line Harlan cites. Clearly Burns feels
the need to defend himself at length, and to position his work as being popular and emotionally
compelling on the one hand, while maintaining a degree of academic rigour on the other.

Of particular relevance to my own project though, Harlan draws a very useful analogy between the
process of making a historical film and writing a historical novel, both of which he sees at
somewhat at odds with the protocols of academic history:

> Academic historians often try to enter into the thoughts and
> emotions of the people they write about, of course, but they
> hardly ever use voice as a means of entry, even though historical
> novelists have been doing exactly that for longer than anyone
> remembers. And like their film-maker counterparts, they have
developed protocols and conventions for doing so that we
> academic historians can no longer afford to ignore – at least not
> if we hope to become thoughtful readers of what is rapidly
> becoming one of this culture’s most important and interesting
> ways of talking about the past (p.186).

*DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL* is a history film, but it differs in many ways from the Burns-
model Harlan is focusing on. Mine is not what Harlan might label an ‘academic history’, but it is
thoroughly researched and sourced – and perhaps more ‘dry’ than a typical Burns-style piece.
Nonetheless, Harlan’s comments prompted me to re-visit some of the material I’d previously
removed from the film. I was struck by his insistence that ‘popular history’ as a general category is
marked by a fascination with the “everyday detail” of the time and place in which the story
unfolds. For example, he notes that historical novelists:

> typically re-create the past by (among other things) trying to
> recover the specific details of everyday life – details that are
often so fine-grained and seemingly insignificant, so deeply
embedded in the ordinary experiences of ordinary people, that
we tend to overlook them (p.185).

He illustrates this with some remarks from Margaret Atwood about re-creating the world of 19th
Century Canada for her novel *Alias Grace* (1996). According to Atwood:

> [Academic] history is frequently reluctant about the now-obscure details of daily life… Thus I found myself wrestling not only with who said what about Grace Marks but also with how to clean a chamber pot, what footgear would have been worn in winter, the origins of quilt pattern names, and how to store parsnips (Atwood, cited in Harlan, p.185)

During my early stages of gathering potential material for the film, I had come across a pair of 1999 articles by Kevin Chamberlain in a niche publication called *The Tool Chest*, the journal of the Victorian Hand Tool Preservation Association. Chamberlain’s focus is on examining the tools hand-made by Chinese cabinetmakers in Victoria around the turn of the century. He details a range of tools found in Victorian archives and archaeological digs, and gives some history as to how and why such tools had been made by Victoria’s Chinese cabinet-makers.

Chamberlain notes that the tools featured a dark red wood, similar to those he’d seen in South East Asia, which:

> … raises an important question about the Chinese planes found in Victoria. Were these planes brought here by the Chinese immigrants, or were they made here? The Victorian planes are usually made from a hard, heavy, dark-red timber with a fairly coarse interlocked or wavy grain. To remove the nagging uncertainty about this wood, I showed a range of planes to a wood identification expert at CSIRO Forestry and Forest Products. He confirmed that the typical smoothing planes I showed him were made from [locally sourced] eucalypt timber (1999b, p.7).

Chamberlain then set out on an exhaustive study in pursuit of more Chinese-Victorian woodworking tools, and in doing so has provided an intriguing picture of the “everyday details” so important to Harlan’s account of ‘popular history’ writing. For example, Chamberlain explains the
circumstances surrounding the largest collection of hand-tools he encountered (“53 planes, with a few other tools”):

The large collection of Chinese planes at the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo belonged to… Harry Louey Jack, who migrated to Melbourne from the Taishan district of Guangdong Province (near Canton) in 1898, aged 18 years. He spoke good English and was employed as a court interpreter. At different times in Melbourne he was involved in police work, cabinetmaking, lay preaching, and hospital work. He married a Chinese lady born in Bendigo and in the 1920s moved to Bendigo where he practiced as a Chinese herbalist for many years. He passed away at 82 years of age. The woodworking tools he brought from Melbourne eventually ended up in a sack in the back shed, and [his son] Russell just managed to rescue them as his brother was taking them to the tip. Harry Louey Jack was making furniture in Melbourne at the peak of the trade between 1900 and 1920 and the planes in this collection are very typical of the Chinese planes found in Victoria. (1999b, p.8)

Being a handtool preservationist, Chamberlain also provides minute details concerning the specifications and uses of the Chinese-Victorian tools:

One intriguing aspect of the Victorian planes is the fact that a significant number of them have a name stamped on the toe. In the sample of 165 planes which I have inspected, the name LOUEY WOON appears 18 times (11%) and LIM TOON appears 14 times (8%). The names are usually incised in capitals 1/8" high, but I have one bevelling plane in which LOUEY WOON is stamped twice in letters only 1/16" high. (1999b, p.8)

He then tracks down the Melbourne addresses at which Louey Woon and Lim Toon lived in 1899, but notes:

Unfortunately, in the absence of further information, it is hard to decide if Louey Woon or Lim Toon were specialist plane-makers, owner-makers or simply owners. The fact that their
planes were stamped at all, and in English rather than Chinese characters, indicates both these men were adopting some of the ways of the European cabinetmakers. (1999b, p.9)

Chamberlain includes material perfect for working into a film. For example, he includes isometric drawings of the planes, alongside some more naturalistic drawings, and the precise measurements in table form of each variety he encountered. He also provides descriptions of the technique each tool required to use:

The upper surface of the Chinese plane curves smoothly downwards from the throat area towards the heel and toe of the plane, but there is usually a slight rise again towards the front. Occasionally the front face of the plane is angled backwards like the prow of a ship. All the edges of the Chinese plane are smoothly rounded or chamfered. Unlike Western wooden planes, the edges of the sole are also chamfered to reduce the nicking or splitting. When using the Chinese smoothing plane, both hands are placed symmetrically on the cross-handle close behind the cutting edge of the iron, allowing considerable force to be exerted. (1999b, p.11).

The value of these descriptions caught my eye immediately, but as the drafting proceeded I judged them to be a bit superfluous. After all, I was not producing a detailed history, but building something polemical, opinionated, argumentative. I have an agenda to pursue and I wanted my narrator to personify it. So in the first full draft of the script, I included none of the material from Chamberlain’s studies. Only later did it dawn on me how useful the material really is, and I’ve thus worked it into subsequent cuts of the film.

The function of this material is to build a sense of the actuality of the time, to move us away from considering the hand-tools as mere ‘objects of knowledge’ acquired on an archaeological dig, and instead to ponder the lived experiences of Louey Woon, Lim Toon, Harry Louey Jack, and their contemporaries among the Chinese cabinet-makers of Melbourne’s 1880s to 1910s. The point here is that I eventually realised ‘everyday detail’ is not counterposed to mounting a broader political polemic. In fact, by shifting the authoritative narration off-stage and dwelling for a few moments on the details of life, the film potentially gains an extra element of persuasive force, especially in a situation where I’d already established a first-person narrator who claimed to be a participant in the depicted events.
Interestingly, Harlan also argues that Burns’ builds his histories through images deliberately lacking in specifics. This apparent contradiction makes some sense if you consider the ways in which images in particular can be generalised by viewers:

[Burns] withholds every detail that might anchor that person to a particular historical context, anything that might narrow or limit the appeal of his image. After all, Burns has chosen this particular image – and whatever letter or diary the narrator may read while the man or woman’s face lingers on screen – not for their ability to represent a particular person in the past but for their ability to represent lots of people in the past – and to touch even more people in the present. (p.174)

I’m drawn to this idea that an image of a person, even an image that lingers in tight close-up on that person’s face, with all its specific identifying features, can function as a universalising image. Harlan adds that Burns seeks out images that are “both compelling and incomplete” (p.174), hoping to prompt viewers into filling the gaps with experiences, insights, and emotions drawn from our own understanding of the present – and, I’d add, with our existing perceptions of the past.

Such an idea is central to particular sequences in my film. At one point for example, we see a succession of photographs of women and children. They are at once anonymous and yet overtly, perhaps obscenely, identifiable. So on one hand their images serve as simply examples of a “type” or person – all are Asian, and all gaze directly at the camera lens, emotionless. But each of their photographs sits within a ‘White Australia’ registration certificate, branding them for eternity. The sequencing of these particular individuals, complete with not just their photographic likenesses but also their place-of-birth, date-of-birth, and other identifying features deemed relevant by the early 20th Century Australian authorities, paradoxically de-personalises them. I’ve appropriated them into my film to deliberately generalise their experience. These few individuals represent the experiences of countless thousands of others confronted by the cold and bureaucratic racism of the Australian state.

I realised in hindsight that the same generalising drive is at work in my use of the invented anonymous narrator. He is so devoid of those specific, identifying “details that might anchor that person to a particular historical context”, that he cannot but function as a stand-in for so many other Chinese Melbournians. But this also creates some possible tension. He is, after all, plainly an expression of my own views, my own background, and my own agenda. He speaks in my ‘voice’ as it were, despite his Cantonese language and the use of a professional actor. It was for this very
reason that I eventually found myself making the decision to include two narrators – the fictional narrator and myself. The more I thought about my own family’s long history in the labour movement and the increasing presence of people of Asian backgrounds within my immediate family (see Chapter 1) the more it became apparent that this decision would introduce a new layer of complexity to the film. In other words, in my pursuit of more effective techniques to tell this particular historical story and to prosecute my radical arguments, I found myself deciding to make the film partly a self-portrait.
5. **Making the Film: A first-person essay**

In developing the early stages of this film project, I envisioned the fictional ghost character being the sole narrator. My aim was to avoid having a voice-of-god expository narration and to avoid dramatic re-enactments. Within these constraints I felt would be a path for exploring a different approach to narration, and the idea of a fictional first-person narrator seemed to carry some interesting potential. In particular, I expected it would help me to personalise or ‘humanise’ the film’s protagonists – the Chinese cabinetmakers – who are mostly absent from historic records, at least in terms of their specific identities and stories (though even as a collective they have tended to be overlooked). I re-visit this question of ‘humanising’ people later, but for now I will focus on the other significant portion of the film’s voice-over – the decision to include my own, completely non-fiction, first-person narration.

I had originally been quite averse to such an act, despite having experimented with it in a previous film project. In this chapter I’ll address that project, and the apparent pattern now forming in my practice. But it’s important to state at the outset that my general view of first-person, or self-portrait, films is well captured by Lebow who notes “…the all-too-readily accepted impression of first person films as self-absorbed, myopic, ego-driven films that only a mother could love” (2012, p.1). How and why then did I eventually include quite a large component of such material in *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, and what does this reveal about developments in my film-making practice? Furthermore, what can it suggest about new approaches to making radical activist historical documentaries?

Upon completing my first significant rough cut of a handful of scenes, I realised a number of weaknesses in relation to the fictional narrator (at that time only ‘existing’ as silent subtitles). First, he seemed at times to be generally saying things I would say myself. In other words, what was the benefit of giving him another identity at all? This was particularly so in relation to those aspects of the narration that were less about the details of daily life and more about an over-arching interpretation of Australian and Chinese history. In other words, the moments that were most stridently political jarred somewhat when they were presented as the alleged words of a long-dead cabinetmaker from over a century ago. No doubt, a more skilled writer could still have bent this material into shape, but for me the idea of splitting the narration in two seemed an intriguing solution. I wondered: why not include myself as an additional narrator?

I expected including my own first-person narration might add some fruitful new layers to the project, as it would potentially ground the film’s political arguments in my own lived experience – especially given my own involvement in political activism, and that too of previous generations in my family. This all seemed most apparent only at this stage of the process, as I looked back to
consider what had drawn me to the story in the first place. Politically I have an interest in exploring the history of racism in Australia, and in challenging what I believe are mistaken understandings of that history. I’m also particularly interested in racism and the labour movement. My great-grandfather was a shearer who participated in the 1890s Great Strikes, and who went on to become a founding member of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Everyone down that side of the family including my older siblings have been ALP members. I was the first to never join, and I made that decision quite deliberately. But I am an active trade unionist and a socialist. My great grandfather must have supported the White Australia policy to some degree, and oral accounts from my father seem to confirm this was the case. But today, my racist great grandfather has at least four Asian-Australian great-great-grandchildren, while all my siblings and many of my cousins have Asian Australian partners. My family then is a microcosm of the changes that have taken place in the Australian working class since the formal end of the White Australia policy, and provides a useful entry-point to exploring the history that is the concern of the film.

This approach isn’t new in itself. Enough film-makers have explored their own family’s history within a documentary format that it would be breathtakingly myopic to cast this as uncharted terrain. The unique element in this project though is my attempt to include an element of self-portrait alongside a fictional (though historically located) character and in the context of a propagandistic radical history film. Considered in that light, it seems a most useful perspective to consider the project not an exercise in documentary film-making per se, but rather an example of essay film-making – a category of film that in fact carries precedents for each of those elements and numerous combinations of them. In particular, we can consider the ways in which essay films tend towards the political, the contemplative or exploratory, and the inclusion of often quite playful representations of the self. The latter in particular finds unexpected resonances with my development of this film’s fictional narrator.

**Essay films and politics**

In her important attempt to survey some of the debates and the often contradictory definitions that circulate around the concept of the essay film, Rascaroli (2008) offers a useful entry point to considering how it relates to my own film. Noting both the long history of essay film-making practice, and the increasing usage of the term among film-makers, scholars and critics, she argues that “the category is under-theorized, even more so than other forms of nonfiction” (p.24). Since publishing that piece, this perceived gap has been addressed with contributions from Rascaroli herself (in Lebow, 2012), and a significant in-depth work from Corrigan (2011). Both these works are useful in considering the ways in which the essay film approach is apparent through some aspects of my film, though the label doesn’t fit entirely squarely on a work like mine.
Rascaroli notes some common ground among the various definitions. Essay films, she explains, are seen by most as a form that sits somewhere between fiction and documentary (2008, p.24). But the characteristics Rascaroli and others seek to array under the essay film banner are surely also characteristics displayed by many films simply labelled ‘documentary’ – self-reflexivity, ambiguity, subjectivity, transgressive forms and/or transgressive politics. So we are still lacking a solid definition.

Moreover, Rascaroli’s approach seems to let through a few old problems that we thought we’d already laid to rest. For example, putting the essay film in an alleged centre ground between “fact and fiction” is particularly problematic, since the debate around defining documentary in relation to fiction always runs aground when it draws a line that puts “fiction” on one side and “fact” on the other. This is most simply the case because no film is ever just a litany of facts, but is an interpretative and creative act. Even the cinema verite films that Herzog famously dismissed as just “an accountant’s truth” (see Ebert, 1999) have always relied on drama, plot, suspense, subtext and structure, along with all the other elements of storytelling. But returning to Rascaroli’s contribution, she is correct to highlight the problems in existing definitions of the essay film. What is the use, she asks, of a category separate to documentary if it can blindly lump together films as diverse as Marker’s SANS SOLEIL and Moore’s FARENHEIT 9/11?

For his part, Corrigan (2011) insists that essay films “must be distinguished from broad models of documentary or experimental cinema and must be located in a more refined historical place that does justice to its distinctive perceptions and interactions” (p.5). Nonetheless, he also emphasises that in cinema generally an essayistic current can be traced across a range of genres. He thus defines the essayistic as indicating “a kind of encounter between the self and the public domain, an encounter that measures the limits and possibilities of each as a conceptual activity” (p.6). Here Corrigan is pointing toward a consideration of the filmic self-portrait, particularly in its capacity to function as a means to explore some aspect of society (Corrigan’s “public domain”).

I will address this issue of the self-portrait in more detail shortly, but Corrigan raises another important point on relationships between representations of the self, and politics and history. He identifies a variant of the essayistic he labels the “editorial”, and explains that this mode “brashly or obliquely” fragments the authority and singularity of ‘Voice of God’ narration…

… as part of the continuous work to disrupt that current of events from various angles and positions within the past, present, and future. Reporting history as current events… [and] insisting that those events are or should be a product of an active critical intelligence that responds to history especially as a
series of crises. The essayistic works to create the unsettling state in which the subject recognizes him or herself, often uncomfortably, as a participant in the configuration that is the news and its history, in short as a shifting and changing face in the space between the dates of a calendar (pp.155-156).

This insight resonates with my own practice in developing a film with two first-person narrators, one fictional and dead, the other myself. The events of Australia today in relation to racism towards refugees in particular, and resistance to that racism, is presented as entwined with the historical racism of Australia a century or more ago. And my own lineage is embedded in that history, entangled in it – I’m a participant, and myself and my family are stand-ins for others who might see the film. We are an example of Corrigan’s “shifting and changing face in the space between dates of a calendar”. For an agit-prop film aiming at encouraging action on the part of viewers, this is a potentially powerful method.

Further to the matter of defining the essay film, Lopate (1992) makes a useful intervention fairly early in the debate – though from a declared background of literature studies rather than film studies. Like Rascaroli later, Lopate sees the broadness of the essay film category as problematic. His proposed solution is to introduce a rigid set of five criteria, which to my mind can only cause more problems. But the usefulness in Lopate’s argument is his emphasis that a single, and argumentative, point-of-view is central to the category, and that such a singular point-of-view need not be articulated through a single narrator. Clearly, Lopate sees the essay film as intrinsically political and stridently opinionated. However, he adds a further useful nuance – the essay film is about exploring a topic to reach a conclusion rather than simply laying down a didactic viewpoint. To this end, he emphasises that the essay film narrator must strike a fine balance between self-reflexivity, uncertainty and authority. Again, this bears on my own practice.

In early cuts of the film, my first-person narration was quite forceful, conveying perhaps too much of a sense of certainty. For political polemics of the sort I often deliver orally in a union meeting or at a protest, a strong dose of conviction is usually essential. But with this film, it became apparent that my delivery could benefit from carrying a touch more uncertainty. For example, in one scene I mention that I’m the great, great, great-nephew of the man who stole the land from the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and founded the city of Melbourne, John Batman. To me, this fact alone is a powerful illustration of the immediacy or proximity of that past, and the complex lineage any of us might trace through heroes and villains in our family history. So the first iteration of that line of narration was delivered in a stark fashion with a definite full-stop: “Like so many villains around the world, Batman is immortalised in bronze. Unfortunately, he was also my great-great-uncle.” If I ever do manage to record a new version of that narration (as I
suggested earlier), I will add a further line, designed to introduce a slight uncertainty and hopefully achieve some of that balance Lopate describes: “Unfortunately, he was also my great-great-uncle…. but what am I supposed to make of that?”

So returning to the question of the essay film and why this all has relevance for my practice, I’m inclined to see the essay film as best articulated in the poetic, lateral, and quite deeply philosophical films produced by film-makers like Marker, Herzog and Friedrich. If I take them as the examples in want of a precise definition, then I can see some similarities but primarily some key differences between their work and my own. In particular, consider the relationship between the narrator and the images. Look at Marker’s deliberate cleavage between the two, creating a gap purpose-built to be filled with contradiction and irony. The narrator says one thing but we see the opposite. Or look at Su Friedrich’s narration in SINK OR SWIM (1990), an uncomfortable autobiography in the third-person, cast over archival stock footage. What is the relationship here between a given image or sequence and the narrator? It’s certainly not literal, nor is it even thematic or illustrative. Indeed at times, the imagery is so disconnected from the literal content of the words we’re hearing that we find ourselves confronted by a gap we feel compelled to consciously fill with meaning. In Herzog’s LESSONS OF DARKNESS, we have a narrator who seems to be an ethnographic film-maker from an alien planet, arrived on Earth in a most unlikely place and time – the burning oilfields and tortured villages of Kuwait in the immediate aftermath of the first Gulf War. Taking the scenes there as indicative of the planet’s norm, the narrator explains what we are seeing, attributing strange meanings to the horror and generalising lessons about humanity itself. All three of these films use a fictional narrator in the process of telling more-or-less true stories. Where does mine differ? My fictional narrator is not poetic or mysterious. He is direct, straightforward. Where the others give us poetry, he gives us a polemic. The gap for open interpretation on the part of the viewer, the gap between narration and image, is closed down somewhat. In that sense, the narrator is functioning more like the voice-of-god narrator in an expository film – but with a self-reflexive and openly fictional identity serving to complicate how his words should be read.

Despite all the difficulties in defining the essay film category, perhaps one shared quality is the tendency towards being overtly political. Chanan (2007, p.152) explains this well. He takes issue with the standard account of the lineage of the essay film, which he sees typified in the treatment given by the important anthology Imagining Reality (Macdonald and Cousins, 1996). He notes this account correctly emphasises that the 1950s essayists in France and Britain were reacting against documentary convention in seeing their work as “a means to express strong personal opinions and points of view”. But for Chanan, if you stop there you miss the key points. For
example, such an account neglects developments outside Europe, particularly in the de-colonising and post-colonial world, and even in the US and Japan.

But Chanan also makes a particularly important factual observation that bears on the connection between essay films and politics. For while the early Griersonian ‘social betterment’ documentary film-makers generally had the financial and political support of their respective states, the 1950s essayists were all too often at odds or even in conflict with those states. In the post-WWII period, the European states were eager to crush any sense of solidarity or identification with the people fighting for (and often winning) independence from the empires. Hence they implemented a repressive system of censorship on documentary film-makers who dared to voice such sentiments. As Chanan reminds us, the “first to suffer was Joris Ivens, whom the Dutch deprived of his passport for making *Indonesia Calling!* in 1954”, and similar treatment was meted out to others, including René Vautier, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker, all of whom had films banned in this period – with the bans often in place for many years (p.152).

Chanan’s point is that the essay film as a self-identified category emerged as a means for political, and often radical, interventions into contemporary debates and contemporary struggles. Even the noted precursors to the 1950s essayists can be traced to the work of the Soviet film-makers of the 1920s, particularly Eisenstein and Vertov (as Corrigan notes, 2011 p.56). This is all too easy to overlook, and leads to a conception of the essay film as being introspective, indulgent, or just so much navel-gazing – especially when an essay film also includes a significant element of self-portrait, first-person material.

The process of making *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL* had brought me to the point where I was reconsidering my initial aversion to self-portrait film-making. It seemed the particular techniques associated with such films were not necessarily wedded to a subjective, post-modern take on history, but could rather be reworked as elements of new realisms and even as part of a stridently Marxist film.

**Essayistic self-portraits and first-person films**

In using my own family as vehicle for probing and problematising the history of the Australian labour movement, sometimes in an openly uncertain manner, my film sits within the particular mode of essay film often identified as the essayistic self-portrait. As Corrigan notes:

Even as a very loose and limited sampling, this group of films suggests the different strategies and subjects of this kind of essay film: Using documentary found footage or home movies, displaying intimate images of self or analytical perspectives on
public personas, creating fictional selves or revealing the many variations on a true self, portrait and self-portrait essays have become, arguably, the most prevalent of all essay films… (p.80).

In *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL* much of the self-portrait aspect rests in my spoken narration. I’m not embracing the *visual* self-portrait aspect to anywhere near the degree that Corrigan describes. Indeed, I only use a couple of personal photos, and some purpose-shot footage from my parents’ backyard shed. But my interest in a sort of skewed self-portraiture as a means to mount arguments around political issues is also evident in my previous work – again despite my prior hostility to such techniques. This is most apparent in the film I produced in 2005 as part of my Master of Arts, *REFUGEE: A RECIPE*, which had as its central conceit the inversion of my own identity with that of the anonymous Afghan refugee who was the subject of the film. But in that case I used several minutes of home-movie footage from my childhood, including scenes of my siblings. In both films, this injection of personal material functions to achieve similar ends, though it has only become apparent to me having now explored the technique twice. As Corrigan goes on to clarify:

What distinguishes essayistic portrait and self-portrait films is the simultaneous enactment of and representation of a destabilized self as a central focus, topic, and, sometimes, crisis, a self whose place in a public history is at best on its margins or in some cases in an excluded or inverted position (p.80).

In other words, far from being apolitical of ahistorical, there is a deeply political potential in the act of creating a film that inverts, blurs, or otherwise destabilises the concept of identity. And in the case of both my films, I was focusing partly on myself, partly on characters whose identities are excluded from public history – and I have blurred the lines between *my* self and *their* self.

It’s worth noting that Rascaroli explores a much broader scope of films under the self-portraiture label than does Corrigan. She does this quite deliberately, arguing that:

A broad and flexible approach to the genre would suggest considering all first person, autobiographical films which involve self-representation (diaries, travelogues, notebooks, letters, poems and autobiographical documentaries) as instances of self-portraiture (p.60).

Most importantly, Rascaroli articulates the problems inherent in trying to draw clear lines around a category as amorphous as self-portraiture:
While it is easy, and indeed unavoidable, to find elements of the representation of the self in all subjective, first person films, be they experimental or mainstream, fictional or documentary, one has to wonder when this approach ceases to be sound and viable. It is very difficult, indeed, to determine where self-portraiture ends and autobiography begins, or vice-versa. The above described critical practice poses the question of generic boundaries – how elastic is the self-portrait as a genre? When should we stop talking of self-portrait, given that most art is, to a certain extent, autobiographical? (p.61).

This last point, that “most art is... autobiographical”, would never have sat comfortably with me in the past. My knee-jerk reaction would have been to scoff at the bourgeois individualism it usually entails. But in considering the matter of historical context, namely the lack of mass radicalism in Australia today (as I discussed in Chapter 3), it has now occurred to me that autobiographical aspect of essay film-making can function as an alternative entrance into mounting political arguments in film, especially when making a film that attempts to chart some path through history to the present and to ground that history in the lives of real people – in this case, my own relatives.

My eventual conversion on this question might not surprise Renov, who perceives a similar hostility to autobiographical films as that highlighted by Lebow. He notes:

“When I have spoken about the ideas contained in my book, The Subject of Documentary, I have at times been challenged by those who see the films of which I write as self-absorbed, overly emotionalized, and brimming with the platitudes of 1990s identity politics” (2008, p.39).

But Renov draws a sharp conclusion, arguing that

“some documentary scholars have been slow to accept the autobiographical impulse within the tradition of non-fiction. I would put it this way: the very idea of autobiography challenges the VERY IDEA of documentary” (2008, p.40).

Renov’s point is that among documentary scholars there continues to be a more-or-less overt belief that documentary film must be evidence-based, lacking in opinion and emotion, and producing some kind of scientifically verifiable knowledge. Indeed, he points out that “some see
this as the epistemological glory of documentary discourse” (p.40). Nichols picks up a similar thread, describing society’s “discourses of sobriety” and its associated institutions, suggesting many of us have a tendency to view documentary as an example of such an institution (2010 pp.37–38).

The kernel of insight Renov offers for a film-maker like myself is his conviction that autobiographical film can be political, first and foremost, but that it can also be more than just a vehicle for identity politics. Rather, an autobiographical approach can be “principally devoted to historical and ideological analysis”, and can even put the politics of class at the centre of its arguments (p.48). As proof, Renov points to Michael Moore, whose films are inseparable from the film-maker himself, but which forcefully challenge “the claim that autobiography is, by definition, self-absorbed and solipsistic, outside of agency, incapable of encompassing or elucidating the social field” (p.47).

In the areas where my film least resembles the common definitions of self-portrait essay films, the distinction seems clearest in the shifts from my own narration to that of the fictional character. Of course, this is not without precedent in the essay film mode more generally (consider Herzog’s LESSONS OF DARKNESS for example), and I would argue that these moments launch the film in a different direction, at odds with the self-portraiture drive. Most importantly, this character’s face and body are never shown – indeed his historical non-existence is actually noted within the film. This runs in the face of Corrigan’s emphasis on the close-up as central to the self portrait (pp.85–89) and also to Rascaroli’s that:

…the emphasis on matter, form, body and the activities of fashioning and self-fashioning is overwhelming. One cannot stress enough the importance of the body in the self-portrait…

claim (2012, p.72).

But even here, one striking aspect which in hindsight takes on deeper significance is that this fictional character in my film is presented as dead. Given the character functions partly as an expression of my own political views and opinions, I can’t help but wonder if Corrigan and Rascaroli might not see this as simply a variation on the essayistic self-portrait’s obsession with the film-maker’s own mortality.

**Self-portraits, death, and history**

Corrigan places great emphasis on the self-portrait essay film’s intrinsic drive toward exploring the issue of mortality and death:
5. Making the Film: A first-person essay

If essay portraits confront one subject with another as an interview and interval that is quintessentially a mortal space, self-portraits find that interval in the face-to-face portrait of a subject divided from his or her own self in a moment of mortality. Essayistic self-portraiture is consequently more than a variation on portraiture and is better described as an investigation of the essence of subjectivity itself as multiplication and loss. It becomes an intensification of the thinking through of self as a public discourse, experience, and history—and in that intensity appears the essential bond between self-expression and death (p.96).

Rascaroli identifies the same phenomenon:

All-important themes of the genre are death and vanitas. Each self-portrait freezes a moment in time, hence capturing the work of death; and each is, potentially, the last one; and, therefore, a memento mori – the reminder of the transient nature of vanity, and the meaninglessness of earthly life (2012, p.63).

One interesting tangent that arises out of this and which my film addresses, is the overlap between a fascination with death and mortality on the one hand, and the practice of communicating history on the other. In a sense, by casting the narrator as a ghost who tells his history in first-person and past-tense, I have attempted to create a character whose very presence is in some ways an insistence that his story shall not be ignored any longer. The streets in which we live and work are ‘haunted’, though not by ghosts. They are haunted by histories that refuse to die, laying out-of-sight beneath the surface like a horde of the undead. This is so because history itself is a site of struggle. Consider the so-called History Wars that unfolded during the years of the conservative Howard Government (see Macintyre and Clark 2004). It’s also the case though that the city is a particularly concentrated locus of such ideological struggle over the content and the meaning of the past. Or as Guy Debord once remarked, the motto of the modern city might as well be “on this spot nothing will ever happen, and nothing ever has” (Debord, 1967).

The ghost narrator then is a figure whose presence is simultaneously an absence. His ‘dead but speaking’ status is itself an argument to viewers that the history must be kept alive, must not be allowed to be buried by those on the other side of the history wars – and that viewers have a role to play in that process (not least because in our memories society lives). In that sense, this particular device is an example of an approach to film-making where self-portrait and
historiography mesh with agit-prop to create a film which is quite experimental despite its superficial adherence to some common conventions. Hence we move now to look at question of experimentation in radical history documentary.
6. Making the Film: Experimentation and politics

As Catherine Russell notes, “autobiography becomes ethnographic at the point where the film- or videomaker understands his or her personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes” (1999, p.276). Russell also highlights that the act of depicting oneself in a film necessarily ruptures the usual norms of screen or cinematic subjectivity. In other words, the boundaries between the ‘looker’ and the ‘looked at’ are blurred. The self becomes explicitly staged, rather than transparently naturalised, and hence “autoethnography is a vehicle and a strategy for challenging imposed forms of identity and exploring the discursive possibilities of inauthentic subjectivities” (p.276). And when this is undertaken in the context of exploring ‘larger social formations and historical processes’, one conclusion to draw from such a position is that representing the self in film is both expressly political and implicitly experimental.

Moreover, she argues that the very concept of ‘experimental film’ needs to be rethought to take it beyond purely formalist orientation and to integrate a concept of “the social” (p.16). Her starting point for such a critical framework is

Marxist and feminist critiques… as they contest the presumed autonomy of the aesthetic realm” and thereby allow us to search out “the traces of ‘the social’… [and] to link aesthetic innovation to social observation (p.16).

In the case of DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL, I have included some autobiographical elements that certainly seek to locate my own self within such historical and social contexts, but this is only a fraction of what the film sets out to do. Nonetheless, in this and other fashions I did set out with this film to playfully experiment with documentary form. This aspect of the project, manifest in specific devices in the film, sheds some light and raises some questions for the practice of radical historical documentary film-making.

It’s also the case though that long-running debates around the ways in which ideology and politics might impact film form have had particular impact on radical documentary traditions. So before looking at my own film in more detail, I want to frame my general position on the matter.

On the politics of form

It might seem counter-intuitive to say this, but in some senses the idea of a sub-category of documentary that warrants the label ‘experimental’ is contradictory and problematic. If, picking up the discussion from Chapter 2, we agree that the complications in defining documentary can be
usefully dealt with by treating documentary as a genre, we are still left with the problem that the individual films which constitute that genre are incredibly diverse. They are certainly less uniformly ‘generic’ than, say, horror films, action films or romantic comedies. Indeed, we can readily identify documentaries that are simultaneously romantic, action-packed, dramatic, or comedic. These films also adopt all manner of formal devices or stylistic approaches. In that sense then the documentary genre is one that seems to be inherently prone to genre-bending and whose essence is decidedly hard to locate in simple lists of common formal or stylistic characteristics, or archetypal characters, plot, etcetera. Following a similar line-of-thought, Chanan (2007, p.5) draws on Wittgenstein in pointing to the benefits of treating genre as less a rigid set of characteristics, and more a ‘family’ in which the individuals each bear that slippery quality known as ‘family resemblance’. Nonetheless, as Chanan also reminds us, there clearly have been shifts in documentary form over time, and such shifts are often reflective of, or expressions of, broader shifts in society – particularly political and industrial changes. More specifically, as the rise of post-war television seemingly gave new life to documentary and spurred demand for factual programming, it simultaneously worked to constrict the formal palette and the political content: “On the one-hand, TV is a medium with a kleptomaniac nature which jumps at new opportunities, eager to feed the viewer with novelty; on the other, it is compelled to tame innovations and, where necessary, to evacuate the results of politically dissident critique” (Chanan, 2007, p.8). The point here is that documentary form is highly specific to historical and social location, and as a genre it displays a strikingly fluid set of conventions. What does this mean for the concept of an experimental documentary?

I’m putting aside the specific question of television and its consequences for documentary form, because the sort of radical documentaries I’m concerned with here are by-and-large not broadcast on television and nor is the film I’ve made through this project aimed at television. But taking television out of the equation only concentrates the issue – the impetus television places on filmmakers to meet certain formal conventions is then also out of the equation, ostensibly leaving a sort of stylistic free-for-all. There are, of course, other elements that impact form – particularly in relation to distribution and viewing systems. Traditionally, or at least since the radical wave of the late 1960s to mid 1970s, radical activist documentaries have been screened in campaign meetings, in union meetings and on picket lines (see for example Waugh, T. 1975). In such forums, the factors influencing style or form have been subsumed under the general aim of political agitation or education. Nonetheless, the era did produce some radical new approaches to film form – often precisely because the screening forum and the aims of the project demanded it. Consider Solanos and Getino’s HOUR OF THE FURNACES (1968), with its discussion-enabling intermissions and its ending which eschews closure and poses a direct challenge to the audience instead. In the film’s final moments, the narrator concludes:
The essential is to notice this state of war and to get on each path to test all hypotheses, with revolutionary energy and deeds. In short: invent our own revolution. The protagonists of this quest are all of us. But, even more, it’s you. You, who have the possibility to discuss these images are also, through your daily actions, the only way to develop this unsolved problem. The film and its content stay open for other comments, testimonies and letters on violence and liberation.

But as I explained earlier, the radical movements of the late 1960s to mid 1970s have well-and-truly receded, a generation past in fact, and today there are very few such opportunities and hence very small opportunities for a radical film to find that sort of audience, i.e. an audience of people actively involved in or at least actively sympathetic to some kind of struggle. You might conclude nonetheless that since today’s omnipresent networked communications offer an alternative distribution model, that we would therefore be witnessing a renaissance of experimentation in radical documentary form in which radical film-makers, free from the apparent constraints of television, make unusual and challenging stylistic choices. But it is arguably not the case. In fact, the internet is awash with low-budget, independent radical documentaries made on a shoestring and with no financial backers to answer to, yet which are resolutely conventional in their formal approach. Indeed, many of them simply replicate the style of television documentaries – and often, I’m sorry to say, in a fashion where the pressure of cutting to a non-negotiable duration might have actually improved the final product. Take for example, PLUTOCRACY (2016) Scott Noble’s epic five-part documentary about class struggle in U.S. history (online here: http://metanoia-films.org/plutocracy/). The two feature-length instalments released so far cover excellent material and offer sharp analysis. In many ways the film is an extremely worthy and important work, and I regularly encourage people to watch it. But it is not the most engaging of films, and certainly not a film that experiments in form. It typifies the conservative approach to form that dominates much of contemporary radical film-making.

Of course, television itself is not divorced from networked society, and some of the most innovative approaches to producing non-fiction video for online distribution have emerged from within established television broadcasters. Consider for example, the successful approach of Aljazeera spin-off AJ+ and their astute grasp of the implications social media platforms have for non-fiction video form. A dedicated team of AJ+ employees spent two years immersed in Facebook, incubating a new approach to video production that would best suit the platform (Roettgers 2015). Rather than seeing these innovations as somehow politically tainted or even inherently reactionary given their development by bourgeois mainstream media, I suggest radical
film-makers would potentially benefit from adapting these stylistic approaches to our own agitational aims. Indeed, in July 2016 I had the opportunity to attempt this myself when I produced a short video about a strike at the PolarFresh cold-goods distribution centre in Melbourne’s western suburbs (online here: https://www.facebook.com/socialist.alt/videos/10154462444117376/). I quite deliberately drew on the approach of AJ+, though my aims were to encourage solidarity with these strikers, particularly through visits to the picket-line, donations, and motions or messages of support. The key difference between this video and the AJ+ videos is that theirs are designed to work silently, because Facebook automatically mutes all videos in a feed. That’s always going to be a problem for the radical Left because we want to prioritise the voices of striking workers themselves - or whoever the given video might be about. Nonetheless, there are lessons in the AJ+ approach. The PolarFresh strike video was shot and cut within a single morning on the strike’s first day. In total the strike lasted four days (and resulted in a win for the workers), by which time the video had drawn several thousand views. Today, around four months later, the video has been viewed almost 42,000 times but has only been shared 477 times – suggesting that the video certainly found an audience, but was not quite as successful as I’d hoped in going viral and thereby drawing in more tangible support for the strikers. As an experiment though it does indicate a potential avenue for radical activist films tied to specific struggles or strikes to find audiences through social media, and to do so using formal techniques developed by mainstream media.

On realism and radicalism

At heart, my PolarFresh strike-video anecdote touches on debates that have a long history among leftwing artists, stretching back to Brecht and Lukacs (see Adorno et al 1980). For film in particular, the radical movements of the late 1960s to mid 1970s spurred many to insist that to be genuinely radical a film must actively counter the formal conventions of mainstream realist cinema. As Brenez notes, the zeitgeist was heralded with Solanos and Getino’s 1968 agit-prop masterpiece "THE HOUR OF THE FURNACES", “the film that established the paradigm of revolutionary activist cinema” (2012 pp.44-45). The era’s belief in the centrality of radical formalism was perhaps most sharply expressed at the time by Claire Johnston who claimed that revolutionary cinema was above-all-else a cinema of avant-garde form:

Any revolutionary must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film: the language of the cinema/depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is affected (1973 p.28).
There are fundamental political problems in this approach. Take Solanos and Getino for example, whose political views as the accepted founding figures of the category warrant serious critique. Despite their fine radical films and their scathing indictment of Western imperialism in Latin America, Solanos and Getino espouse a view of revolution based on Maoist conceptions of struggle that offers little for people seeking to forge a revolutionary politics in the 21st Century. In the end, theirs is a remarkably elitist politics, with limited space for mass involvement. Hence their ‘third cinema’ manifesto is replete with an all-consuming focus on guns, weapons, and military analogies, while oozing a condescending paternalism toward the mass of the population:

…the revolution begins… at the moment when the masses sense the need for change and their intellectual vanguards begin to carry out this change [my emphasis] through activities on different fronts (Getino and Solanos 1969, p.109).

In the context of national liberation struggles of the 1960s, when the Moscow-Beijing split and the Cultural Revolution in China lent a particularly radical veneer to what is essentially Stalinism with a Kalashnikov, the influence of Maoism unfortunately makes a certain sense. Sadly, this dynamic also shifted the priority of revolutionary activists from the struggle against class rule to the struggle against imperial domination – without serious attempt to articulate the genuine connection between the two. That such ideas went on to become the definition of revolutionary politics in the imperialist nations themselves was always problematic. In politics-at-large, it paved the way for the anti-working class “radicalism” of leftwing terrorist groups like the Red Brigades in Italy and the Rengo Sekigun (United Red Army) in Japan, neither of which made any positive contribution to the struggle against capitalism – indeed their actions arguably served only to divorce the radical Left in those countries from the mass of the population while providing cause to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the state (see Molyneaux 2004).

In the more specifically relevant arena of radical film-making, the legacy of late 1960s – early 1970s Maoist politics can be seen in the adulation of experimental form as the definition of radical film. This perspective implicitly paints the film itself as a spur to revolutionary action by viewers, regardless of either the material conditions of society at the time or what we might call the state of the class struggle. Such idealistic voluntarism reflects the Maoist belief that revolution is not a product of contradictions inherent to class society, but simply an act of will on the part of the revolutionaries themselves. After all, as Che Guevera – the world’s favourite Maoist - argued: “If you are a revolutionary, make a revolution.”

But the problems of prioritising radical form run deeper than just an ahistorical and voluntarist view of struggle. As I have noted in Chapter 2, cinema studies has often displayed a tendency to
‘lump together’ the concepts of realism and naturalism (see Wayne 2007). The styles, features, or devices often pointed to as constituents of a supposed Hollywood realism (eg. continuity editing, eyeline match, cause-and-effect narrative, etc) would be better characterised, in my opinion, as elements of Hollywood naturalism, in that their purpose is to naturalise the story-world represented on-screen, to shut down critical engagement or analysis. This clearly has little to do with the traditions of radical realism one might find exemplified in a Brechtian approach to art or communication, where the formal elements of a film might work to encourage critical engagement and reflection on the real world outside the film (Lovell, pp.76–78).

Notwithstanding my political views on the question of realism, and my interest in producing films that explore or play with documentary form, it is perhaps obvious from all the above that I am not a film-maker who believes formal experimentation is a necessity for radical realist films. As Sparks (1987) argues, the whole conception of experimentation as being somehow “radical” is based on theory that privileges form over content. Thus, Sparks adds (p.88), “it may be the case that Rambo is reactionary tosh which glorifies US imperialism, but a film in which a black female Leninist hunted down Stallone and defeated him would not be progressive if it used the same formal devices in its construction.” Sparks draws on Lukacs to argue that realism should not be “a claim that a particular form of textual organisation reproduces the appearance of the world but for the ability of texts to give us knowledge about the real world.” This understanding of realism bears on any discussion about documentary form, so it warrants some further consideration before I move to look more closely at some ‘experimental’ aspects of my own film.

In his important piece assessing the impact of the postmodern ‘death of objectivity’ on the essence of the documentary project, Ruby argues that

> The documentary's claim to an inside track to the truth and reality of other people was therefore undermined if not destroyed completely. Documentaries were recognized as an articulation of a point of view – not a window to reality (1992, pp.46–47).

Rabinow (1986, p.250) claims this understanding reflects a “crisis of representation”, drawing on Jameson’s notion of a post-modern history that can only be built on signifiers that have lost their signifieds. Rabinow argues works of history, be they books, films, or any other medium, are essentially representations of representations of representations, and so on.

Hence Rabinow’s assumption here is not merely that reality is impossible to represent but rather that there is no identifiable or meaningful reality nestling somewhere at the beginning of this chain of representations. This carries catastrophic implications for any form of communication.
that claims to be a truthful depiction of the real historical world – in Ruby’s words documentary film-makers’ claims were potentially “destroyed completely”.

While the 1980s “crisis of representation” prompted a wave of such scepticism in relation to the documentary endeavour, this wasn’t necessarily the opinion of the key writers in that moment. Take Frederic Jameson for example. In an important reappraisal of Jameson’s discussions on realism, McNeill (2008) points out that Jameson’s take on realism is more nuanced than is often believed. While Jameson maintains, rightly or wrongly, that the modern globalised world is impossible to represent, he also suggests that: (a) this wasn’t always the case, but is rather a specific function of the particular period of late capitalism we find ourselves in. Hence he implies that realist project is not fatally flawed in and of itself; and (b) that realism as an approach is still a vital aim. He even suggests, in a series of juicy asides over ten years, that the ground is ripe for “new” realisms to emerge (McNeill 2008, p.23). Jameson seems to hint that such realisms may take unusual forms, even fragmentary ones. Some elements of the oft-noted renaissance of documentary from the early 2000s on perhaps bear out such predictions, with the most striking case being the rise of animated documentary in the wake of 2008’s WALTZ WITH BASHIR (see Chapter 2).

In his classic work on Marxist realism, Lovell (1980, p.64) also reminds us that realisms are plural, that they arise in specific historical circumstances, and that each realism “takes its meaning as much from the practices to which it is opposed, as from practices common to all realisms”. To the extent the various realisms from the eighteenth century onwards share anything, it is not evident in the formal qualities of a finished artefact nor in the techniques and conventions under which that artefact was produced. Rather, as Raymond Williams explains, they are united by an aim – “to show things as they really are” (Lovell, p.65).

Of course, it is precisely this aim and the storm it entails, that is also the starting point for a century of debate. As Williams himself notes, “it does not end, but only begins a controversy in art and literature when it said that the purpose is ‘to show things as they really are’.” (Lovell, p.65). Nonetheless, Williams does identify a set of three baseline characteristics common to all realisms:

(a) Secularism: Cause-effect relationships should be presented in human and natural terms, without reference to supernatural forces.
(b) Contemporaneity: Action should be set in the present or recent past, not in the historical or mythical past.
(c) Social Inclusiveness: The action should be extended to include middle and lower classes.

(Lovell, p.66)
My film is set in the past and is co-narrated by a ghost, which would appear to break two of William’s three rules. My flexibility in defining realism as a broad aim rather than a set of formal qualities leads me to say “so what?”. However, in considering the intricacies of Williams’ rules as they relate to my own work some useful threads emerge.

On the matter of secularism, for example, it seems to me the point is that a realist text should emphasise human agency and social relations. The point in this regard is to push against or at least highlight the reification of, for example, the definite relations human beings enter into under capitalism but which are obscured and seen as akin to elemental forces. In other words, a realist account of the incidents portrayed in my film would be “secular” only insofar as it blames human beings not the gods for the real oppressions we face, and champions human being beings not the gods as the only force with the potential to overcome those oppressions. In such a context, it doesn’t matter if the narrator of the story happens to be a ghost. Indeed, this is in essence no different to any other fictional character who might function to play a similar role.

And on the matter of contemporaneity, I would take Williams’ point as being that “the present” does not bluntly limit me to the year 2016, or to this particular day of the year, but to the present era, namely, of late capitalism. Similarly, his “recent past” might include the early days of this era and the years leading up to it. In my case, that would be the 1830s and 1840s, with the founding of Melbourne on stolen Wurundjeri land, the depths of the Irish famine, and the European Opium Wars in China. Moreover though, the film quite explicitly uses those incidents in the past as a way of explaining the present. So in one sense, this historical film is in fact set in the present.

Experimenting in DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL

DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL displays a number of conventional film elements. It is linear, narrative-based, features a sense of closure, and incorporates an ‘expository’ voice-over narration. But the film also sets out to explore some of the ways documentary convention can be pushed or played with. Underlying all of this is my own interest in documentary form, which I’ve examined across a number of projects. For example, in both this film and the film I produced as part of my Master of Arts, I have attempted to explore ways in which my own identity as the film-maker can be inverted or distorted with the aim of prompting viewers to give further consideration to particular aspects of the issues-at-hand.

So in my MA film, REFUGEE: A RECIPE (2005), I narrated the subject’s story word-for-word as he told it to me. A number of viewers complained about my poor narrating skills, and my buffoonish Australian accent. But my aim was to make a point: the refugee whose story you’re hearing could be anyone, he could be me or you. This was a political act I took in response to the
apparent intention of government policy to *de-humanise* the people who’d come seeking asylum in Australia. Placing myself in the position of an Australian-accented refugee narrator was a reflexive device used as an attempt to sort of ‘de-Other’ the actual person whose story we were hearing, while complying with his own entirely appropriate desire to remain anonymous.

Likewise, in this film *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, I have played with the identity behind the first-person narration. But it goes much further in this case. Whereas previously I had interviewed a refugee, transcribed his words, and then re-voiced it myself, this time I dumped even that link to some historical real person. I have completely invented the central character and his words, then I have had it translated into Chinese and hired a Cantonese-speaking actor to record it. The artifice is admitted up-front early-on in the film, when the narrator talks of his own death and identifies himself as a ghost.

One aspect of film form sometimes neglected in discussion is the matter of music. Early on in development of the film, I realised that I was not just telling a little-known story of Chinese workers organising in Melbourne, but I was really attempting to paint a dissident portrait of the city itself. The Melbourne I was setting out to portray was one in flux, still being built, still the site of ongoing invasion and genocide. But it was also one of immense struggle and solidarity. Most importantly though, I was painting a picture of Cantonese-speaking Chinese rebels in Melbourne. This drew me towards what became a huge task: locating left-wing Cantonese-language punk, hardcore and hip-hop tracks (and admittedly, a few tracks in Mandarin too). Many months of intermittent searching whenever I had moments of down-time returned some great music, and has lent the film a curious quality of cultural and historical mingling. This deliberate attempt to de-anchor the film from a specific time and place is an unusual approach to historical archival documentary. Traditionally, in the Ken Burns style, music tracks are chosen precisely as a means to evoke the period and the place, which in the case of my film should have been music from the turn of the last century that displayed a distinctly ‘Australian colonial’ style or alternatively an archetypal ‘Chinese’ style. Consider the use of the beautiful lament *Ashokan Farewell* in Burns’ *CIVIL WAR* (1981) for example (see: https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/ashokan-farewell-how-a-20th-century-melody-became-an-anthem-for-the-19th/407263/). In my film, the music is neither Australian colonial nor distinctly Chinese, though at times it alludes to both. This useful duality is the product of the musicians and the composers themselves – since I had nobody compose a score specifically for the film. Overall I have compiled a soundtrack that aims to challenge the stereotype of passive Chinese workers I discussed in Chapter 2, by evoking a sense of Chinese rebels. In this way, the music itself aims to conjure an impression of punks and rappers giving the finger to Australia’s racist establishment and shouting “𨳒你”. 
Such playfulness with generic conventions is a useful approach for radical activist film-makers. In this case, not only can it serve to highlight the hidden diversity in the histories of a town like Melbourne, it also works as one of those bridges we can use to link the issues and struggles of the past with viewers today. We can lend an air of ‘nowness’ to events that took place generations ago, to help “know that long continuity, across the centuries” that Zinn refers to in his description of radical history (1970, pp.38–39). Moreover, for Australian audiences, sheltered as we tend to be, the very existence of an anarchist underground punk scene in China is no doubt a challenge to our preconceptions in the first place – which can only help in the film’s broader aim of puncturing the received wisdom regarding the role of Chinese workers in Australian history. In other words, the choice of music in this film is itself a deeply political act.
7. Conclusions: Towards new practices in radical activist historical documentary

When Getino and Solanos describe their work as guns and bullets (1969, pp.123–127), the metaphor seems perfect. The frenetic agit-prop encapsulated in their films, and in the films of groups like San Francisco newsreel is at once exhilarating and politically forceful. They ooze a supreme confidence that the revolution is moments away. Importantly, these films also manage to offer us examples of how that style can be used to represent history. After all, Emile De Antonio’s agit-prop masterpiece IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG (1968) is simultaneously: (a) an urgent cry for resistance to the war in Vietnam; (b) an archival film; and (c) a searing polemic on the history of western imperialism in Asia.

These are existing and well-known precedents. So it might seem odd that I have framed my project as one that responds to the observation (articulated in my abstract) that “radical activist documentaries are frequently agitational and ‘present tense’, reflecting their typical aim of shifting audiences into action around a specific contemporary cause or struggle” and that my project tackles the questions of “how radical activist documentary can function and how experimental approaches to documentary form can enrich historical documentary practice”. But as I have aimed to tease out in the preceding chapters, the films we make about history are themselves shaped primarily by the historical moment we find ourselves in. Or to horribly mangle Marx: ‘radical film-makers make their own films, but not in times of their own choosing’. The year 2017 is not 1968. The inspiring outpouring of protest that has marked the start of the Trump administration in the US, is not yet anywhere near the scale of rebellion that swept the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And while the war in Vietnam produced IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG, the war in Iraq produced FARENHEIT 9/11. Both great anti-war propaganda films, but poles apart in terms of their form and their essential argument. The former is an avant-garde film made on a shoestring that blames western imperialism and capitalism for the horror in Vietnam; the latter is a more conventional film (in terms of form) which blames the horror in Iraq on the particular group of awful people then occupying the US Administration. Or compare two radical histories of the United States, FINALLY GOT THE NEWS (1970) and PLUTOCRACY (2016). Again, both great films but starkly different from one another. The former is a challenging disjointed montage calling on Black workers to lead the immediate overthrow of the US capitalist state. The latter is a pensive piece explaining the centrality of race in the epic class struggles that shaped the country’s history. Different times bring different radicalisms, different contexts foster different films.

My aim from the outset with DO NOTHING AND IT WELL was to find an unusual and engaging way to represent this history of Chinese workers in Melbourne, while understanding
that no amount of either radical exhortations or formal experimentation is going to shift an audience of Melbournians in 2017 into a pitched struggle against the system. Rather, I hoped to make a film that was aesthetically appealing, a bit different from standard documentary fare, and hopefully to use those aspects as a way to hold an audience long enough to endure the whole thing. If I achieved that, then I would have found myself an audience for the radical interpretation of history contained in the film. In other words, if radical film-makers today are to reach people, we need to focus on general rather than concrete propaganda (as I discussed in Chapter 3) and we should pay some attention to ways in which we can craft films that people find stimulating and pleasurable to watch. Making *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL* has convinced me that there is potential here for a strain of radical history films to emerge which don’t rely lazily on established formal conventions of documentary but which seek instead to push the boundaries of the form.

But why experiment at all? As I explained in Chapter 6, it’s not the case that radical form leads necessarily to radical politics, nor that radical politics demands radical form. But form and content are linked nonetheless. If as radical film-makers we seek to represent the world we live in, then we must continue to consider the shifting contours of the realist project. It is not simply an interesting debate consigned to the archives of the twentieth century. With *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, I demonstrate an approach to representing reality that places a fictional device right at its centre, and makes that fiction evident to viewers. The first narrator of this ‘true story’ is the ghost of a person who never actually lived. The fiction does not detract from the film, rather it adds new layers of meaning. He is an anonymous everyone, standing in for all the ghosts of history who refuse to die, who insist on having their stories heard. He is the faceless Cantonese-speaking immigrant, who stands in for all who quietly refuse to abandon their own identity and “just learn English”. He is the anonymous rabble rouser, like so many of us scattered in workplaces across the country beavering away at the endless task of keeping the remnants of our unions together. In short, his lack of definite persona lends him the ability to be the universal generaliser. These are the sorts of storytelling and persuasive possibilities that open for radical documentary film-makers who are prepared to play a bit at the edge of generic convention. But we have to start by understanding that realism is an aim not a checklist of techniques. We can perhaps take it anywhere.

Of course, the second narrator in the film is me, the film-maker. This device clearly has a long-established pedigree in documentary film. But it’s not often associated with the tradition of radical history, perhaps because we sometimes have a knee-jerk reaction to the slightest scent of any petite-bourgeois individualism. For us history is about class struggle, not about your grandparents’ political inclinations or their furniture-making hobbies. And yet… As I found myself searching for more effective ways to formulate the story, I realised that like the anonymous Chinese
Australian ghost, the story of my family can function as an example from which to generalise broader points about Australian history. On my mum’s side, one great-grandfather actually produced a couch in a commercial workshop during the period of the furniture stamping laws. I could visit my parents’ shed and touch that couch right now if I was so inclined. The history is tangible in my lived world. Meanwhile, on my father’s side, another great-grandfather (himself an Irish migrant) was one of the radical shearsers who took part in the Great Strikes, and who went on to become a founding member of the Australian Labor Party. Down that family line, everyone except me and my younger sister has at one point been in the Party. Today, I and most members of my generation of the family, that is, all my siblings and most of my cousins, have Asian partners. In the next generation, that is, my nieces, my nephews and my first-cousins once-removed, all but one are Asian Australian. My family is like a microcosm of the broader Australian working class, and the changes that have taken place particularly since the formal ending of the White Australia policy.

In light of all that, one conclusion I have drawn through this project is that self-portraiture or first-person film-making is not in fact incompatible with a commitment to radical history. The key is in remembering that the personal aspects of one’s own life or of one’s own family’s experiences are best used consciously as merely bases for drawing generalisations about society (even if those generalisations themselves are only hinted at). Where I think self-portraiture and radical history are incompatible, is when the personal history becomes a way to explain the individual film-maker’s life-problems, be it unemployment of broken relationships. A case in point would be the films of Ross McElwee (see SHERMAN’S MARCH (1986) for example), which are entertaining and often stimulating, but certainly not a means for mounting a serious systemic critique of the existing social order. That might sound a grandiose aim, but it is a thread that I believe must run through any work of history worthy of the label “radical”.

Finally I want to dwell a moment on the issues of appropriation and identity because it looms as an unresolved question in this project, and arises directly with the use of the fictional Chinese narrator.

In the last couple of decades, it has become particularly important for progressive or leftist film-makers (especially those of us who are white males) to be conscious of the politics circulating around representations of or by oppressed and marginalised groups. Controversy regularly flares for example around the latest instance of Hollywood ‘yellow-face’ (Child, 2016) or the now annual appearance of the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite in response to the chronic under-representation of People of Colour among film-makers honoured in the academy awards (Rottenberg, 2017).
In relation to *DO NOTHING AND DO IT WELL*, clearly there are questions of appropriation and potential concern over who is telling whose story. I’m a white film-maker telling the story of Chinese migrants. Many documentary film-makers tackling the issue of racism in Australia have encountered similar concerns. Frankham for example acknowledges this point in relation to her film *OUT OF FEAR* (2003) about refugees in Australia. She notes though that:

> Some of the objections being raised when white filmmakers made films about cultural groups of which they were not a part, seemed to be based in the kind of identity politics that advocates ‘white hands off’ (2004).

The question I grapple with is: “Should I have *not* made this film?” There are many Chinese Australian film-makers who could have made it. It’s a tough and uncomfortable question, but the key here in my view is that this is not actually a film about the experience of Chinese Australians. It is a radical history, it is an anti-racist film, it is a union-film, and it is a socialist polemic against the Australian capitalist establishment and its foundational racism. It is all these things well *before* it is a film about being Chinese Australian. In fact, the film quite deliberately doesn’t dwell on the personal experiences of the fictional Chinese Australian protagonist. In that sense, the film isn’t claiming to be a genuine expression by Chinese Australians of their own lived experiences. I think this deliberate distancing is crucial. The personal stories of being Asian in Australia are quite rightly being told by many Asian Australians (of particular note here is the fantastic strength of the Asian Australian Film Forum, first established in Melbourne in 2011, and now an important event on the city’s arts and culture calendar). It should go without saying that this is obviously a positive dynamic. But I also have something to say about racism, like I do about the union movement, and about Australian history more broadly. And as a radical historian and activist, I refuse to shy away from doing so. But while I search for unique forms through which to tell such stories, the present historical conjuncture rightly demands some standards on my part. Contemporary politics rightly insists I think through my decisions carefully and with an eye to avoiding making my own ignorant contribution to the marginalisation of genuine Asian Australian voices.

On this front, every decision I make can potentially backfire. For example, in avoiding the specificities that would otherwise make this story personal, and thereby hopefully not falling into the trap of appropriating the stories of Asian Australians for my own edification, I also ran the risk of creating such a shallow portrayal that it might have become a racist stereotype in itself – especially in the situation where one of my express aims is to create a sense of ‘nowness’ and continuity with the past events I’m depicting. To grasp my point here, consider Hall’s explanation that one key aspect of stereotyping is the portrayal of those “markers of otherness” as fixed and
unchanging (1997, p.270). That is, stereotyping as a process naturalises those alleged features. A racist representation, in other words, doesn’t merely portray the subjects as ‘dumb’ or ‘cute’ or ‘dangerous’ (or indeed as heroic rebellious fighters) but implies that such traits are inherent and therefore eternal. Paradoxically, my solution can only be to further de-personalise the portrayal, to deny my narrator any personality. He now shows no ‘markers of otherness’ apart from the not insignificant fact he speaks Cantonese. But at the same time, he also shows no markers of having any real character at all. He has arguably become nothing but a mouthpiece for my own views on Australian history.

For a Chinese Australian film-maker, other paths might be available. For example, as Hall points out (p.270), the fight against racist stereotypes has involved “a number of different transcoding strategies… (eg. ‘Black is Beautiful’).” Two great films from Macau-born Chinese Australian director Tony Ayres strike me as a parallel example here, SADNESS (1999) and CHINA DOLLS (1997). The former details the experiences of Chinese Australian photographer William Yang, particularly through the 1980s AIDS crisis and his search for the racist murderer of a distant relative in Northern Queensland. The latter, CHINA DOLLS, includes extended moving personal accounts Ayres’ own path to embracing and celebrating his Chinese identity.

But even a Chinese Australian film-maker needs to be attuned to the implications of identity politics. Consider, for example, Hall’s description of an “aggressive affirmation of Black cultural identity” as the solution to racist representations of Black people. It seems fine, and is generally something I like to see. But as Harman reminds us, it is at the same time simply not true to claim that there is some universal and uniform “culture” that links all people of a certain oppressed group (1992, pp.35-38). As I note in the film, Chinatown is divided between exploiter and exploiter, between oppressor and oppressed, just like everywhere else. Harman further argues that “when people talk of ‘traditional culture’ of any sort, they are harking back to something which no longer fits the reality of their lives anywhere” (p.37). This is clearly true of right-wing figures who argue for a defence of fictional rubbish like “old-fashioned values” or “Australian culture.” But the uncomfortable truth is that this is also true of some on the left who for example glorify the supposed purity of Aboriginal cultures (in a modern version of the noble savage stereotype) and complain about “cultural imperialism”.

The destruction of a peoples’ culture is rightly recognised as one of the defining constituent elements of genocide. But how does “cultural imperialism” relate to say, Asian Australian ‘culture’? Again, Harman explains it well (p.40):

Cultural imperialism occurred when dominating powers forced conquered peoples to adopt their language and their view of
world history—as the British and French did in various parts of their empires, or as the Russians did first under the Tsar and then under Stalin. It was a by-product of imperialism proper—the bloody and barbaric process by which empires were carved out and whole peoples exterminated.

But the fusion of cultures today cannot be dismissed as simply a product of enforced subjection. Rather, it flows from the irreversible changes wrought by the spread of capitalism.

Consequently, the ‘cultural identity’ of a modern oppressed minority should be seen not as something necessarily inherent to that group of people forever, but as a consequence of many factors including not least of all their concrete oppression—both historically and today. In other words, what it means to be Asian in Melbourne in 2017, has nothing to with ‘being Asian’ in some traditional, eternal, unchanging sense. When Hall points out that racist stereotypes depict the culture of the target group as fixed and unchanging, so too in a strange way does his proposed solution of aggressively affirming cultural identity. In short, there is a complex contradiction at the heart of the identity politics of Hall, and the variants of those politics that are prevalent across the Western left today. None of this should be interpreted as an argument against diversity on screen. We do need to see more minorities represented, those representations need to be as complex and nuanced as possible, and in particular we need to see minorities having control over their own representations of themselves. I’m simply raising these as lessons that have emerged for me through the process of making this film and attempting to grapple with the political challenges it posed for me.

In an interesting aside from someone who is a keen advocate of identity politics, Ruby (1992) acknowledges that there are problems with the model of minority groups ‘self-representing’ themselves through documentary. He seems unable though to convincingly explain why. In trying to account for this, he suggests finally that

audiences need to understand that documentarians always speak about and never speak for a subject and that films never allow us to see the world through the eyes of the native, unless the native is behind the camera (p.60)

Finally, he asks:

Where does this pessimism lead us? Should documentarians confine themselves to autobiography? Or will they return to the
documentary that speaks for other people, to films that
purported to show us the reality of another culture? (p.60)

There are other ways forward, and I think my film points toward some of them. Autobiography can indeed be one aspect of a broader film strategy that may well include fictional elements, and it can even mount a radical critique of society. More controversially, film-makers can also at times and with due care speak about ‘other’ people, even perhaps “as” other people, in a way that openly acknowledges we’re not claiming to be those people. In other words, it is possible for a white film-maker to make an anti-racist film, including fictionalised characters from the group in question, without pretending to have ever personally experienced racism or to understand it on that personal level. In short, as radical activist film-makers telling stories from the past to argue for action in the present, the goal is to shift people into action in some way, and in the service of this goal we have to be prepared to strive for sensitive and politically principled ways to tell stories from cultural, ethnic, language or religious group to which we personally don’t belong. It’s not about muscling-out or silencing the voices of People of Colour (after all, I made this film with no funding and no distribution deal - so it hasn’t displaced any other film maker in that sense). It’s simply because otherwise my choices are limited to either making films about being a straight, white male in Australia or not making films at all. In a world where the pressing need to tackle racism is most manifest by the sheer presence of Trump in the Whitehouse, not to mention the continued existence of Australia’s offshore gulag for Brown refugees, neither of those options should be acceptable.
**Filmography**

*BLIGHT*, Director: John Smith, 1996.


*CHINA DOLLS*, Director: Tony Ayres, 1997


*IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG*, Director: Emile De Antonio, 1968


*JAZZ*, Director: Ken Burns, 2001


*MEN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA*, Director: Dziga Vertov, 1927.


*OUT OF FEAR*, Director: Bettina Frankham 2003


SADNESS, Director: Tony Ayres, 1999

SANS SOLEIL, Director: Chris Marker, 1983.

SCHINDLER’S LIST, Director: Steven Spielberg, 1993.

SHERMAN’S MARCH, Director: Ross McElwee, 1986

SINK OR SWIM, Director: Su Friedrich, 1990.

STRIDE, SOVIET?, Director: Dziga Vertov, 1926.

THE ARCHIVE PROJECT, Director: John Hughes, 2006.

THE CIVIL WAR, Director: Ken Burns, 1990

THE FALL OF THE ROMANOV DYNASTY, Director: Esfir Shub, 1927.


WALTZ WITH BASHIR, Director: Ari Folman, 2008.

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