‘I probably should have done something else’.  
An interview with Mick Counihan

Noel King

This is one of a series of interviews, completed for an ARC-funded project (by Deane Williams and Constantine Verevis from Monash University, and Noel King from Macquarie University) which has investigated the emergence of tertiary education film studies in Australia 1975-1985. The research probed the hunch that the emergence and consolidation of film studies in Australian tertiary education—especially in the decade long period under consideration—differed from other Anglo-American academic institutional contexts by virtue of overlapping with a revived Australian film industry and an associated new prominence for film critics in many Australian newspapers and journals. This was a period which saw particular individuals departing from intellectual formations such as English, History, Sociology, Education, Linguistics and Modern Languages, to pursue a new area of teaching, research and writing: film and (later) television studies. Although the decision to concentrate on a new academic-curriculum area carried with it no guarantee of a secure tenure-track career, curricula in traditional university departments eventually shifted to accommodate film study, sometimes welcomed by a given department or combination of departments in an Arts Faculty, at other times accompanied by a bitter struggle. Counihan’s interview offers one ‘take’ on the Melbourne-context of our study. It overlaps with but also differs from other interviewees’ accounts (given by Ian Hunter¹, Albert Moran² and Brian Shoesmith³), and in this sense the various interviews generated by the research project can be thought of as in dialogue with one another. In the stages of his career which follow the period discussed here, Counihan went to Griffith university to teach in the ‘Society and the Media’ major, and then returned to Melbourne to take a position at RMIT where he remained until retirement. So this interview can be thought of as the ‘first act’ of Counihan’s three-act career as an Australian academic, and as such it covers crucial stages in the emergence and consolidation of tertiary level film studies in Melbourne and Australia.

**Keywords**: Australian tertiary film studies; film education; media studies; popular culture; Melbourne.

**Interview**

Noel King: Could you outline your initial educational formation—you majored in history—and then say how you came to be teaching in film and media studies?

Mick Counihan: Well, needless to say I had no training in Cinema Studies because such a thing was not possible in Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s. I fell into it because of people I knew, and because of a situation that occurred in what I think at that stage was the only cinema-teaching tertiary institution in Melbourne. That was
at RMIT where Jack Clancy, who was a pioneer in this regard, had started a couple of film subjects in the mid 1960s. These ran as electives under a scheme in which students at RMIT doing vocationally oriented degrees were required to take a couple of humanities or social science electives as part of the generalizing aspect of their education. In 1972 I found myself teaching in these subjects because Jack was away on leave.

Four part-time tutors taught the two subjects, which had quite considerable enrolments of budding chemists, engineers, artists and, my favourite—because I had a class entirely of them on Fridays—fashion design students. I had done some secondary school teaching by this stage but this was a very interesting introduction to tertiary level pedagogy because not one of the fashion design students spoke for the entire semester. Or, at least not to me, or to the class. They were all private school girls, they’d all gone to the same school, and they giggled and murmured asides to each other. But despite all provocation, none of them actually spoke to the class. So I’m not quite sure what they thought of the cinema of Howard Hawks, which featured rather prominently in their curriculum.

The two subjects were called Classic Hollywood Cinema, and, in second semester, Classic European Cinema. Jack’s replacement lecturer, Ken Mogg, had been the president of the Monash University Film Society, which, like its better known Melbourne University counterpart, was very much into the cinema according to Cahiers (as refracted through Movie and Film Comment). That is, Hollywood auteurism, B movie director cults, Jerry Lewis seasons and the like. Ken himself was a very knowledgeable Hitchcock fan and he turned Classic Hollywood Cinema into Hitchcock and Hawks, but not in that order. We had half a semester of Hawks and then half a semester of Hitchcock, all taught as if the oeuvres of these directors were emblematic of a universal popular art form called ‘Hollywood’, aka ‘the movies’.

This mission to rehabilitate the aesthetic status of popular cinema, however, ran into a problem; it quickly became apparent that there was a vast cultural gulf between the tastes of our clientele and the cinema of Howard Hawks. Whatever our smart young things of 1972 thought was cool, it didn’t include watching John Wayne, Dean Martin and Ricky Nelson in cowboy costumes. Numbers dwindled with each successive Hawks screening, an exponential decline. By the time we hit Red Line 7000, there were more staff in the cinema than students. At this point poor Ken was driven to berate the absent masses with one last Cahiers-ism: ‘If you can’t appreciate Red Line 7000, he said, ‘you can’t appreciate the cinema’. So, for me, this was a little lesson in not taking too much for granted when talking about the popular. Indeed, it led to the ‘Red Line 7000 theory of popular culture’ which posits that roughly 99% of all so-called ‘popular culture’ is either patently non-popular or deeply unpopular and that any analysis that doesn’t proceed from this axiom is going to be wrong.

Anyway, we did recover from this defection and managed to re-engage our audience. In those days film teachers were desperately dependent on 16mm prints from the National Film Collection, held by the National Library, plus some films from embassies and their cultural wings and the occasional bootleg. Ken got hold of
an illegal copy of *Vertigo*, we screened it four times that week, and the students came back in droves. So, redeemed by Hitchcock, we moved into second semester, which was a standard array of the classic European cinema, a bit of Bunuel, *La Règle du Jeu*, Italian neo-realism and so on.

NK: Who else was in the teaching team?

MC: Bob Sharples was a friend of mine who had a Melbourne University Film Society (MUFS) background and later became a Buddhist psychologist. Then there was another guy named Michael, an example of a not uncommon combination at that time; he worked in advertising and was also a Maoist. I knew a few people like that who were making up for their rather compromised employment by becoming incredibly politically pure after hours.

Michael gave the lectures on *Ivan the Terrible* part 1 and *Ivan the Terrible* part 2. I have to say he was a rather doctrinaire Maoist. He made it very clear that *Ivan the Terrible* part 1 was an incredibly important film in the history of world cinema and an incredibly progressive film because it had been fully endorsed by Comrade Stalin. *Ivan the Terrible* part 2, which of course had a very different fate in the former Soviet Union, was given an emphatic thumbs down, and was denounced in very vigorous terms as being neither a landmark in world cinema, nor in any conceivable sense a progressive or valuable film. Indeed the fact that the ban on it wasn’t permanent was a matter of some distress. I’m not sure that the students fully grasped this distinction. So there was room for a bit of eccentricity in this era of film teaching. That was my first film teaching stint.

NK: What did you watch during your university years?

MC: I’d gone through university without being attracted by the film societies, they seemed a bit too precious, and spent a lot of time lauding movies that seemed pretty bloody crappy to me. During my latter university years I was a regular at Friday night late-show screenings at the Regent Cinema in South Yarra. This was an attempt at a cult, art-house cinema, it was close to where I lived and there was also a pub that was a bit of a bohemian hangout, Her Majesty’s, just up the road. So you could get tanked, and go along afterwards to see a bit of European art cinema. Screenings started very late, and so I have never seen the end of *Rocco and his Brothers*. I would always nod off halfway through. I’ve seen a couple of the brothers but not the whole crew.

I suppose I favoured European movies because I thought, without much empirical proof, that dropping enigmatic comments about Antonioni would make me attractive to young women. But I also saw more standard Hollywood fare such as the new youth-market oriented, slightly alternative films like *Easy Rider*. In the late 1960s—early 1970s I started going to the National Film Theatre of Australia (NFTA) repertory screenings. The NFTA was also programmed under the influence of a MUFS-type ideology but it meant that I got to see Sam Fuller seasons and Don Siegel seasons and the like, which was great.

Earlier on, I’d been an inveterate attender of Saturday matinees; first, during primary school years in the 1950s, at the Belgrave Cameo in the Dandenong ranges outside Melbourne, then, in the early 1960s at the Maling in Canterbury and other
cinemas in Camberwell and the city. The Cameo is still going. It’s now a little multiplex and quite a successful cinema. I went back there recently and spoke to their film society about my time as a lolly boy at the Cameo when I got to see Friday night double bills. I also told them about missing the Queen.

When the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II visited her dominion in 1954, vast numbers of union jacks were distributed and vast numbers of schoolchildren conscripted to wave them. Our little school was summoned to attend one event, but on a Saturday. This clashed with our weekly appointment at the Cameo. Consequently four of us missed the Queen and instead saw Audie Murphy in a western called *Tumbleweed*. In autobiographical retrospect, a forking path moment: the monarch or the movie; the raj or Hollywood. The choice was made and we paid for it. On Monday, at school we were taken to the headmaster’s office and given the strap. The empire strikes back.

In high school, I developed a taste for really junk movies, the ‘Sam Katzman presents’-type B features like *The Zombies of Mora Tau* that turned up at the Lyceum in Bourke Street. I’d also grown up reading historical novels so I was a big fan of wide-screen historical epics like *El Cid*, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *The Sand Pebbles* and saw almost all of those made during the 1950s-1960s; I think we went into town after school half a dozen times to see *Spartacus* at the Chelsea in Flinders St. And then there was Cinerama!

NK: Mentioning *Spartacus*, I recently saw a documentary film on TV, *Trumbo*, about Dalton Trumbo, HUAC, and the blacklist. And of course Trumbo wrote the screenplay for *Spartacus*. Could you say a bit more about how being raised by Communist parents played out in terms of your film viewing? What things your parents would and would not let you watch or read?

MC: My parents wouldn’t let me read American comics, because they were too violent and would give me nightmares. They did take me as a child to the New Theatre to see *Battleship Potemkin* and *Alexander Nevsky*. As a result, instead of US imperialist nightmares I had dialectical materialist nightmares about the Odessa steps or the Teutonic knights slaughtering the good burghers of Minsk and Pinsk. Actually the film that I saw when very young that did really upset me was *Odd Man Out*. I couldn’t follow the plot and found some of the sequences quite disturbing. Come to think of it, I did also see a lot of British films especially at the Odeon also in Bourke St: the J Arthur Rank gong, Kenneth More, Jack Hawkins, scripts by Eric Ambler (though I was not aware of that then). I suspect my parents thought these were less ideologically suspect than American films but I was still allowed to see *The Naked Spur*, or Robert Wagner in *Prince Valiant* (which I loved), or *Oklahoma* (which I loathed), and all the bits of (mainly) Hollywood cinema which screened on Saturday afternoons in Australian cinemas. If there were weaknesses in my informal film education, this was due less to censorious parents than to the situation that confronted everyone; so few films were actually available. After they’d done their stint in the first-run cinemas in the centre of town, and then out in the suburbs, they vanished. Occasionally older films were re-screened, and my father once took me into the city for a school holidays double bill of Abbott and Costello in *Jack and the Beanstalk* and Errol Flynn in the Michael Curtiz *Robin Hood*. If a
Marx Brothers film was on anywhere in town, he’d take me to see it because he was a complete Marx Brothers fanatic. But for all its supposed pervasiveness you couldn’t actually see very much Hollywood cinema. It wasn’t really until well into the television era, in fact the period of VCRs and video libraries, that you could really get access a significant array of films. To sum up, by the time I started teaching I had seen a reasonably broad range of films; I just hadn’t studied any of them! (Though, like Italo Calvino, I remember many of those relatively scarce films of my childhood and adolescence with greater clarity than I do more recent films.)

NK: Even before we met, you were legendary for being a bibliophile, having all kinds of arcane, hard-to-find journals from the outset, cutting edge stuff. How did that situation come about?

NC: ‘Legendary’? I doubt it. But I was an avid collector (and occasional reader) of political journals. It was a way of endlessly deferring writing anything myself. When I was involved in student politics in the 1960s there was an outpouring of new, quasi-Marxist, critical/revisionist work in the academic disciplines as well as an explosion of more directly polemical literature, the tracts of groupuscules and cultural collectives. Because I had wide-ranging but very underdeveloped and unfocused interests, I just started collecting it all. But probably New Left Review was the most important. That’s how I encountered material both on the contemporary Marxism of that era, and on the history of Marxism. And NLR also ran very long, detailed analytical articles on the politics of particular national situations, what was going on in the Congo or Algeria, for example, which were particularly informative. They also translated a lot of European material, because they were running a line that British Marxism was very provincial and deficient and endlessly culpable for ignoring the very sophisticated thinking that was going on everywhere else in the world, except perhaps Australia.

So you got a lot of translations in NLR, and that’s how we encountered people like Althusser, for instance. It was of some significance, although much less so than other people say, in terms of informing a journal that I was involved with, Intervention.

NK: How did that journal begin?

MC: Basically, what happened with Intervention was that a number of us hung out together because we were all hostile to the Maoists, couldn’t stand Trotskyites, didn’t much like the Communist Party and the ALP didn’t even appear on our horizon. So we had nowhere else to go and because there weren’t enough of us to set up anything really political, like a party, we of course started a journal. And that was called Intervention. While it’s often been talked of as an Althusserian journal, in fact it wasn’t. But it did take seriously the sorts of debates that were going on at that point about how to refurbish Marxism (and which a bit later segued into how to destroy Marxism).

I was the only one of the initial editorial group who had a particularly strong interest in media/cinema/popular culture. So I was trying to educate myself in areas in which I had no disciplinary training and no one much to talk to, which partly explains why I was so on the lookout for overseas work that might give me some
guidelines. In England, Sam Rhodie had taken over *Screen* and turned it from a magazine that was like *Movie* into one that wasn’t, and Stuart Hall had set up the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). They started putting out material that seemed more interesting than the only alternatives, namely old-style Marxist denunciations of monopoly media corporations on the one hand, and the Frankfurt School on the other. And because I don’t understand philosophy of any sort—never have and obviously never will—that latter option wasn’t very appealing to me. Also the exiled Frankfurters didn’t like things I did like.

NK: Such as?

MC: Well, refrigerators, Hollywood movies and American popular music for starters. I know Adorno’s critique of radio music was of swing-band jazz, not of rock and roll but clearly Adorno both as philosophical Marxist and as musicological avant-gardist found it difficult to find much of value in commercial entertainments. I don’t think he liked *The Sand Pebbles* at all.

NK: But I remember a lecture from you at Griffith University in a course called ‘Media Content Analysis’ in which the set text was Adorno’s ‘The Stars Down to Earth’ article on astrology columns.

MC: I’ve always used bits and pieces of Frankfurt School writing in teaching (and positively, rather than as stock negative examples) and always admired Adorno in particular. There was, perhaps still is, a nasty current of cold war American sociology that routinely crapped on the Frankfurt School, from which it should be defended. But admiration is one thing, emulation another, and I simply have had no temperamental or intellectual affinity for that style of enquiry. In terms of what I was interested in, there wasn’t much that gave you a toolkit for prizing things open and having a look at what was going on inside. I thought Umberto Eco was more useful for that.

I wrote a long review article for *Intervention*, a review of a book about mass communications by David Chaney, an English sociologist. I basically used that book review as a way of setting up a short reading course for myself. I started reading the history of American mass communication research, which I knew nothing about previously, really, nothing at all. So I worked my way quite diligently through a lot of the history of the studies of media effects studies, propaganda and public opinion research and so on.

And then I just put that up against some of the ideas that were appearing in the early Working Papers collections from the CCCS. They had started translating Umberto Eco and so that’s how I picked up on Eco, and then started looking around for more. Eco wrote those very readable but also rather daunting analyses of things like *Superman* and other comic strips and James Bond novels and what have you. All of which had appeared in one book in Italy, but which turned up in English translation in scattered fragments. One essay would appear in some American literary journal, and another would appear in a Birmingham Centre translation and so on. Hence, another reason for the collecting. I was so isolated from informed commentary at that point that I actually sent the *Intervention* article to Stuart Hall
for some feedback and received a very friendly and encouraging letter in response. The Birmingham folk must have reproduced the article because it crops up in the occasional footnote as a CCCS publication.

NK: Had you by now given up your writing of a folk column for *Go Set*?

MC: Yes, that was long gone. During my university years I mainly wrote about music in various magazines and student papers: I reviewed the Dylan 1966 concerts for *Lot's Wife*, the Monash paper, wrote the folk music column in *Go Set*, which was a very successful pop music weekly set up by friends of mine, and did lots of reviews and interviews. But after university, in the early 1970s, I was mainly involved in contributing to various other ‘alternative’ cultural practices. I did actually write quite a bit in this period but ephemera, mainly written under pseudonyms (we were into ‘collectives’ in those days, even inventing collective authors when they didn’t exist). For example, I did the words for various radical comics that were distributed at rock festivals and wrote pieces in little magazines produced by art galleries and micro publishers. There was also *Lumiere* which was mainly a trade journal for technicians in the film and TV industry but which also gave over some space to film criticism and film history. A friend of mine, Howard Lindley, edited a little section of the journal, which was devoted to avant-garde and experimental film, cinema marginal to mainstream professional activity (which at that time was basically television). I wrote a bit for that. When *Woodstock* came out we interviewed the director, Michael Wadleigh. I had quite an argument with him, but he was an interesting character and very determined to present himself as alternative filmmaker taking on the establishment.

There was a fairly polemical aspect to a lot of this. I remember sticking up posters for a screening of British agitprop films organised by Mark Gregory and Maree Delofski, who had been working in England with Cinema Action. Mark and Maree were old pals of mine but I wasn’t so impressed by the didacticism of the movies and when Bert Deling wrote an enthusiastic review in *Lumiere* I did a rather sharply worded rejoinder which soured relations with a few of the comrades. A bit later, I did a favourable review of Solanas and Getino’s *Hour of the Furnaces* in *Tribune*, the Communist Party paper. This earned me a wonderful rebuke on the letters page from Alistair Davidson, biographer of Gramsci and historian of communism among other things, which accused me of being soft on Perónism, i.e. a sort of closet fascist. Give and take. Incidentally, I doubt that I could sit out the whole 4-5 hours of *Hour of the Furnaces* again but I have great affection for *Sur (South)*, the film Solanas made when he went back to Argentina, after the long night of the colonels and the years of exile. I think that it is a wonderful, very melancholy film, with a beautiful nuevo tango soundtrack by Astor Piazzolla.

I should mention another component of the mix of activities I was involved in when I began film teaching. Those were the years when various agitations for new forms of community-based media got underway. I remember going along with a bunch of anarchists from the Collingwood free store to see Bert Deling demonstrate the first portable video camera, the Sony portapak. Occasions like this led to the push for video access centres. If you get hold of Bob Weis’s first movie, *Children of the Moon* (if a print still exists), you’ll find a scene in which I go into Melbourne’s hip
bookshop of the era, the Whole Earth Bookstore, and ask for the latest issue of *Radical Software*, a sort of *Wired* predecessor and the bible of the alternative television movement. I was also in an outfit called the Alternative Radio Association: in truth, there were only three of us in the ARA, David Griffiths, Brian Walsh and me but, mainly due to the indefatigable D. Griffiths, we sounded like a mass campaign—we pumped out letters, made radio programs, wrote policy submissions and so on—and certainly contributed to the climate in which the first community stations were licensed in 1975. That, incidentally, was my only relatively positive contribution to what we were later to call ‘the turn to cultural policy studies’, my various subsequent efforts in this field having all proved dismally unsuccessful.

NK: Was that why you began postgraduate research on radio rather than on a cinema topic?

MC: Not really. I'd already started an MA on the history of radio with my friend and mentor, Ian Turner. Ian had supervised my honours thesis, a labour history exercise, and initially we thought that I would get a postgrad thesis out of working with him on a history of Richmond. But I read a couple of local histories and thought, life’s too short…so I started looking for a media topic. There seemed to be several people already working on the history of Australian film so I turned to TV but the Monash history department then pointed out that television was too recent for me to get access to the archives (the 30 year access rule). So I turned to early radio broadcasting more or less by default.

NK: So far as I am aware you were the first person to use the phrase, ‘reading television’ as a title for one of your articles. Your use of the phrase pre-dated the John Fiske and John Hartley Methuen New Accents book, *Reading Television*, by a decade or so. How did that come about?

MC: Well, that was really a consequence of my getting a media teaching job at La Trobe University on 1974. A little background is needed here. Patricia Edgar had set up a Centre with the impressive name of the Centre for the Study of Educational Communication and Media, in the School of Education at La Trobe. The Media Centre, as it came to be called, taught some Diploma of Education subjects to trainee teachers but mainly ran Bachelor of Education units for practicing (and often quite senior) teachers upgrading their qualifications. What Patricia Edgar did, to her considerable credit, was, first, to treat ‘media’ in a broad sense—a film and media studies program with both analytical and production components—rather than in the narrow sense of a classroom ‘media/audio-visual aids in education’ approach. Second, she looked for staff who could contribute to a varied curriculum without worrying overmuch about their academic qualifications, which was how John Flaus and I ended up there. And third she started taking students with backgrounds in professions other than teaching (e.g. journalists) into the B.Ed., to give them a credential, which produced some very interesting and combative customers.

I started as a tutor, at the very bottom of the full-time academic salary scale but had much the same workload and responsibilities as everyone else and found the job a real challenge. The shift from fashion design students to headmistresses entailed a
significant increase in expectations and an exponential increase in volubility. I set up a full year program of television studies—probably the first such in an Australian university—which consisted of a semester of institutional history, networks, political economy, policy and regulation and a semester of program genres, scheduling audiences and effects; looks pretty conventional now but was an unusual combination 35 years ago. The preparation I did for that fed into the ‘Reading Television’ article. Edgar was editing a special Mass Communication themed issue of the ANZ Journal of Sociology and demanded I contribute. She’s a pretty forceful character. So the piece was a critique of how media ‘content’ was conceived, and its study under-valued, in the social science of mass communication tradition. A quite different focus from that of Fiske and Hartley.

NK: How would you characterise the way Cinema Studies was being taught at the time of which you are speaking?

MC: At that stage the film subjects were discrete units, options in a menu of teacher training electives. The idea of establishing Cinema Studies as an autonomous discipline, to be taught as a standard undergraduate major, had been around for a while, but had been blocked at La Trobe. It would be best to check with Edgar, Flaus and Ina Bertrand on this but my understanding is that the English Department and its head, Professor Derek Marsh, were particularly opposed. There was even an occasion, before I got there, in which Jack Clancy and John Flaus debated Derek Marsh and others. I think Vertigo was the film in question and the debate concerned whether this was the sort of work that could bear, as it were, the full seriousness of an academic discipline’s attention.

NK: That’s interesting to hear at this historical distance when Vertigo is the film that has crept up the Sight and Sound decadal lists of the ‘Ten Best Films Ever Made’, to be number 3, snapping at the heels of Citizen Kane and The Rules of the Game.

MC: Indeed, (and perhaps it was the same bootleg print that saved our bacon at RMIT). Anyway, Edgar and her supporters finally got the numbers up and Cinema Studies commenced life as an undergraduate discipline at La Trobe in 1976. Later on there were tensions between the Cinema Studies people and the Media Centre as the former tried to disengage institutionally from the latter but in the early days we all inhabited the same corridor and the first year of Cinema Studies was mainly taught by people from the Media Centre—Ina Bertrand, John Flaus, Ian Mills and me, plus the first Cinema Studies appointee, Lesley Stern. I can’t remember what was in it, quite frankly, but it was immediately very popular and further positions were advertised for an expanded program in the following year.

The new Cinema Studies appointees were Sam Rohdie, John Langer (who later moved to VUT) and a bloke called Jeff Peck who I didn’t have much to do with. The other new arrival was also a film person, Bill Routt, but he was appointed to the Media Centre. I always had great regard for Bill and I would have liked to work with him for longer than the year we overlapped. We seemed to come to some common interests from utterly different intellectual backgrounds and sometimes, after work, we would go to the drive-in near La Trobe and watch triple bills of exploitation movies. He would also break into old Slim Gaillard songs like ‘Flat
Foot Floogie’ without any provocation whatsoever. I should also put on the record how much I enjoyed working with John Flaus in those years—he was a treat. He knew movies so well that he could sleep through a screening and then run a tutorial as if he’d just processed every single shot. Also, having referred to refrigerators before, I should mention Flaus’s fridge which was like something from a John Carpenter movie: it contained ancient dead things embalmed in dirty ice which you knew would visit havoc upon the world if released.

One of the good things about the timing of the launch of Cinema Studies was that it more or less coincided with the establishment of a new Music Department, a quite radical one whose Foundation Professor was Keith Humble, an internationally well-known Australian avant-garde composer and pianist, (and coincidentally a friend of, and collaborator with, my father). Humble was a very impressive little powerhouse of a person, and he envisaged a Music Department very different from the Melbourne University conservatorium model. Consequently, he attracted a lot of students from academically unconventional backgrounds who saw Music and Cinema Studies as the perfect double major. So we got some terrific people turning up. It was a bit like the beginning of Griffith University, when there was a pool of people who didn’t like what was going on at the University of Queensland and Q.U.T., who were waiting for something a bit different, and Griffith provided it.

I taught a couple of the new second year electives, one on genre films using gangster/crime movies and one on narrative/anti-narrative cinema, using mainly Godard. I also tutored in the common first year intro subject in which Sam and Lesley did the lecturing. I recall Sam giving a series of lectures, an exercise in narratological analysis à la Gerard Genette applied to cinema, that was one of the best organised and most coherent sets of lectures I’d heard in my life. It missed the students by a thousand light years, but it was enormously instructive for me as a model of how to systematically set out an analytical program with very well worked out examples, and a really cumulative sense of complexity. It was impeccable, just misplaced at that level.

You don’t need WikiLeaks to know that Sam Rohdie is a difficult and abrasive person, one of those people who trump you with an acerbic comment before you’ve even shuffled the deck. He had some terrific fights with Tricia Edgar and once, in a Media Centre meeting, so provoked the deceptively mild mannered Ina Bertrand that she threw a milk carton at him. At first he also had this irksome habit of implying that his time in the cultural backwater known as Melbourne was merely a temporary hiatus before he returned to his proper milieu, the great metropolitan capitals of the world. For all that, he ended up sticking around for quite a while. He aroused a lot of negative emotions but I got on with him quite well (he’s a very good cook). He had very high standards and he gave you a sense of what it was really like to work at a certain intellectual pitch and I was very grateful for that. I last saw him in the nineties, in Hong Kong at a film event he organized; he had the crumpled elegance of a character out of Visconti.

NK: And you collected Lesley Stern from the airport when she first arrived in Melbourne. You were a bit late and found her either trying to telephone or sitting
down reading a copy of Raymond Williams’s book, *Television*, which was the giveaway.

MC: I think that Lesley has told Deane Williams how we met so I’ll only add that we became pals and I really regret that we didn’t work together for a lot longer and that I see her so rarely these days. But we did spend a lot of time together. We went to work and came home from work together, went to movies, watched *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. One of the most vivid visual images I have from over thirty years of teaching is Lesley Stern giving lectures in the La Trobe days: she would sit cross-legged on the desk at the front of the theatre, talking in her distinctive way, rolling her tobacco, constantly re-lighting the cigarettes as they went out after each passage of speech, the pile of dead matches growing ... it was all strangely mesmerising. Later she turned the smoking lecture into the *Smoking Book* and even more impressively she converted her phobia about blood on screen into a book on Scorsese! She’s a champ.

NK: Speaking of new arrivals, when did James Roy McBean come to Melbourne and how long did he stay?

MC: James Roy McBean, a prolific writer in the pages of *Film Quarterly* on the cinema of Godard and also a Marxist opera critic, turned up to teach at Monash, where David Hanan had got some film teaching going. McBean wasn’t around for that long but he too became involved with *Intervention*, as had Lesley, so there was more of a cultural profile in *Intervention* there for a while. This created some interestingly fractious moments with the more economically-minded of the editorial group.

NK: What can you say about the formation of the Tertiary Screen Education Association of Victoria (TSEA (V))? 

MC: I can’t quite remember how it got started, but by the mid-1970s screen education had some sort of presence in various institutions in Melbourne. In particular, there had been a program set up some years earlier, by John C Murray at Coburg Teachers College, which had gathered a bunch of people—Tom Ryan, Barbara Creed, Geoff Mayer, Annette Blonski. I think Freda Freiburg was there before going to Monash. There was a sufficient critical mass for an organisation to promote the sense that we were engaged in some sort of collective endeavour, to swap ideas about teaching and hopefully to create some sort of collegiality beyond one’s immediate work environment. I think that’s quite important, in an area that is institutionally fragile and under-resourced and doesn’t have a strong historical foundation. The TSEA (V) was just a little talkfest but it helped set up connections with people interstate, gave us a bit of experience in giving papers at conferences and so on.

NK: A number of our interviewees have commented on a session at a TSEA (V) conference at which you spoke and which caused some sort of controversy. Can you amplify?

MC: Sure. Con Verevis did send me some interview extracts and asked for a comment. So, here’s the short version (and, of course, the true one). At the first TSEA (V) conference in 1975, I was scheduled to run two workshop sessions called
'Introduction to Screen Semiotics'. In the first, I used a TV pantyhose advertisement to suggest, in a quite practical, text-focused way, how a sort of rudimentary semiotics-cum-rhetoric of the moving image might work. I suppose it was meant to be an exemplification of the Barthesian slogan that goes something like ‘no denunciation without appropriate terms of analysis; no analysis that isn’t ultimately a semioclasm’, but the main focus was on introducing concepts like specific/non-specific cinematic codes (à la Metz), metaphor/metonym and the like. The ad itself was very stylish, intercutting, in slow motion, a glamorous woman and a sleek black cat walking along a landing, down a curved staircase (shift from whole body to legs only) and into a party scene, attracting the gaze of the handsome male. I was making some concluding remarks about legs and cats and point of view and the conflation of the feminine and the feline and so on, until Basil Gilbert—who taught in fine Arts at Melbourne University—could restrain himself no longer. ‘What on earth are you going on about’, he said. ‘Everyone knows women are like cats’. I swear he added, ‘they’re both so strokable’ but I may be projecting. Anyway, others chimed in with denunciations of ‘French theory’, ‘structuralist jargon’ etc, which became a familiar feature of such conferences for a period. Meaghan Morris who had the twin advantages of actually knowing something about semiotics and being a bit of a brawler, started sorting out the interjectors and general verbal scuffling broke out.

NK: That’s already confusing since you have people saying women are feline and others saying they aren’t, and either way you don’t need semiotic analyses to tell you those two different ‘facts’! I should add here that Basil is something of a constant in these anecdotes about Melbourne conference exchanges. When I attended the Melbourne conference that centred on film and TV melodrama, with Casey Robinson coming down from the Film, TV, and Radio School in Sydney to talk about his days as a Hollywood screenwriter on films like *Now Voyager* and *Dark Victory*, Sam Rohdie gave a paper on ‘Semiotic Constraints in *Now Voyager*’. And Basil was his principal interlocutor, and kept demanding of Sam, not unreasonably, what he would say to someone who was crying after seeing *Now Voyager*, someone who wanted to talk about (as Steve Neale would later put it) ‘melodrama and tears’. After Basil came at Sam a few times on this tack, Sam ended the exchange by saying of this imagined conversationalist, ‘I wouldn’t talk to him’. But, back to your earlier historical moment of your encounter with Basil and his like.

MC: That’s a very Sam response. I’m not sure if the second of these workshops had originally been planned as a panel session but that’s what it became. After the previous fiasco, I stacked a panel with friends and fellow travellers and we basically filibustered the whole session without anyone else getting a word in (I wasn’t brought up in a Stalinist household for nothing). The panel consisted of me, Meaghan, Ian Hunter, Albert Moran, and Doug Ling who was teaching with Jack Clancy and Rob Jordan at RMIT and didn’t actually say anything but looked suitably inscrutable. Doug was an interesting character; he would hum entire John Ford soundtrack scores, which was distracting if you were watching a Ford film but quite disconcerting if you were watching something else. The others each gave a little spin about the importance of paying attention to new theoretical work, Hunter sniped at Leavis as he was wont to do back then, and that was that.
The event became a bit notorious because it was the first airing of so-called ‘screen theory’ in Australia and because it was so disputatious. It seems to have lodged in a few memory banks. I’m delighted to see Meaghan’s comment that ‘he (i.e. me) was actually explaining Barthes model very well…’, since the preponderance of contemporary opinion would suggest otherwise.

NK: Ian Hunter says he remembers you selling copies of the Metz Screen issue at this event.

MC: I can’t see why I would have been. I didn’t have any connection with SEFT or the BFI beyond a journal subscription. But I could well have had a copy there, and waved it in the air at some point. Or perhaps bopped someone on the head—they were pretty thick, those special issues, and some of the heads also. About this time I referred to Metz in a book review in Cinema Papers and they misprinted the name as Pretz—a more clever subversion than Basil’s.

But perhaps Ian’s memory registers one legacy of that conference. For a period, people did associate me with screen theory (and perhaps, momentarily, I did so myself). As a result, John Tulloch invited me on to the editorial board of the Australian Journal of Screen Theory and I did quite a bit of work on their next couple of issues. On the other hand, I only did those workshops because nobody else would. This was before people like Lesley and Sam had turned up and, while Meaghan had studied French literary theory and philosophy, she hadn’t encountered the screen studies variants at that stage. So I was the mug. Over the previous year or two I’d worked hard at teaching myself about structuralism, linguistics, semiotics, what have you, in the same way I’d tried to familiarise myself with American sociological theory and mass communication research a couple of years earlier, but now I was teaching full time and it was all done on the run. Which was partly why the denunciatory, panicky responses to the workshop were so off the mark. It wasn’t an excursion into the alps of theory at all; it was a sort of low-to-the-ground pedagogical exercise, introducing a few new terms and analytical moves and reference points. And perhaps a little provocation. But, remember, I was trained, if that’s the word, as a historian, so ‘theory’ was never really on the agenda.

NK: Could you say a bit more about your original formation as a historian. I gather you were taught by very good historians.

MC: I didn’t have a clue what to do when I left secondary school. I’d spent a lot more time playing (and watching) sport than studying but my Year 12 results were sufficient to get me a Commonwealth Scholarship to Melbourne University. Instead I went to the very new Monash University, only 2 or 3 years old, and the only real reasons for that were my rather popular cultural interests in history and the presence of Ian Turner. That interest in history derived from a childhood spent reading wonderfully vivid novelistic versions of class struggle through history such as the novels of Geoffrey Trease. I knew Robin Hood in Bows against the Barons before I saw the Errol Flynn rendition. Comrades for the Charter introduced me to the working class politics of the industrial revolution just as Cue for Treason drew me into the social world of Shakespearean theatre. I first went east in the sixteenth century in In the Land of the Mogul, and I encountered the worlds of manuscript culture and the renaissance print shop of Aldus Manutius in The Hills of Varna.
almost three decades before I discovered them again in Elizabeth Eisenstein’s
magisterial work. And I read all sorts of other books from Walter Scott to Rafael
Sabatini, and C. S. Forester to Conrad (which is why I am the perfect implied
reader for Patrick O’Brien and for the contemporary and very sophisticated
historical novels of Arturo Perez Reverte). Those books, and the sorts of movies
mentioned earlier, were my gateways into history.

As for Turner, he has as much claim to be the founder of, or key precursor to, the
study of popular culture in this country as anyone, although I’m not sure that some
of the field’s more recent genealogists recognise this. I knew him through my
parents. They’d stayed in the Communist Party after he left in 1956 but, as has so
often been the case in Melbourne life in my experience, political divergences did not
sever shared interests and old friendships. Turner loved jazz and the blues,
Australian Rules football, the Australian vernacular and the creative possibilities of
radical politics and wrote about all these and more from the 1940s on. I remember
getting a lift with him in my first year at Monash (1964) and feeling rather proud
that my newly acquired knowledge of the Raymond Chandler oeuvre exceeded
his—although he’d actually read all these books when they first came out.

Monash had a very strong history department from the beginning, especially the
Australian historians, A. G. L. Shaw, Geoffrey Bolton (before he went west), Noel
McLachlan, and others with serious cultural history interests like Turner, Geoffrey
Searle and John Rickard. Then I discovered the Asia historians such as J. D. Legge,
the Head of Department, Indonesiast and Sukarno biographer. In 1968, one of
our contributions to the year of revolution was to occupy the Monash Vice-
Chancellor’s office (capitalism quaked with fear). Legge took me aside after an
Honours seminar and more or less said that he sympathised with much of the
student protest but ‘do you really want to keep doing these stunts and neglecting
your studies or do you want to develop some knowledge and skills and make a
difference in the long term?’ Needless to say, I rejected his advice but, fortunately,
years later I ran into him visiting the Asian Studies people at Griffith and had the
opportunity to recall that moment and thank him for his generosity. Also in 1968,
in the middle of the Vietnam war, I did an Honours seminar on ‘Revolt and
Revolution in Southeast Asia’ with Milton Osborne who had been a diplomat in
Cambodia in the early 1960s, had written a thesis on early French colonial
Indochina and remains an expert on the countries of the Mekong. So these people
were there, that’s why I got into history and particularly why I did a lot of East
Asian and Southeast Asian history. Most of my undergraduate career was thus far
removed from Cinema Studies or Media Studies. It was spent studying the Meiji
Restoration in Japan and why the Huk Balahap guerrillas failed in the Philippines.
Little did I know, as they say in sentimental novels, that almost 45 years later I
would be returning to some of these topics.

I also did an English Literature major of which I remember little: I know I had
lectures by our friend Stephen Muecke’s dad, Douglas Muecke. And my
tutor Denis Douglas, who was pretty smart, once replied to my proud claim to have read
Raymond Williams’s Culture and Society, ‘What a pity you can’t really get away
from the Leavises’. Otherwise, I negotiated an Honours degree that was completely
devoid of sociology and social science research methods, politics, philosophy and linguistics, let alone semiotics, classical rhetoric or any version of economics, thus leaving me imperfectly equipped for the tasks ahead. As for ‘Theory’, we did encounter ‘Historiography and Method’ in the Honours program, but this really did seem an optional, even gratuitous, extra given that we’d spent the previous three years writing history essays without having had to concern ourselves with any ‘theoretical’ matters whatsoever.

NK: But you would describe yourself principally as a historian?

MC: I was and always have been an empirical historian with an interest in arguments over how and why histories are written. My association with screen theory in the 1970s was a parenthetical moment although some mischievous souls attempted to extend it. My farewell gift, when I left La Trobe at the end of 1977, was Lacan’s *Ecrits*, organised by Lesley Stern who had evidently identified yet another deficiency in my training in theory. Obviously, I knew of Lacan and his recruitment to screen studies but this was a step too far and I began moving away from screen theory to more congenial topics. I’m afraid I never read a word of *Ecrits* although several years later I donated the book to Cathy Greenfield who was doing a PhD on ‘theories of the subject’, so it turned out to be a productive gift after all (as no doubt Lesley foresaw).

NK: Can you take me through the period of your moving from Melbourne to Griffith University?

MC: I did four years at La Trobe, the second two of which, as previously described, were involved in teaching cinema studies, first as part of the Media Centre crew, secondly with the augmented cinema studies specific crew of Rohdie, Stern et al. Late in 1977, Patricia said, we’re trying to get a lectureship for you, draft out a position description. I found it a bit difficult to be so self-serving and got Lesley to do it for me. And for the next couple of years she and I swapped doing job descriptions and references for each other as a neat solution to the conundrum of how to ensure a flattering self-portrait without the embarrassment of writing it oneself. Lesley duly produced a position description that I happened to suit rather well but the federal budget of that year was cutting everything in sight and the job de-materialised.

So I went back to running around town doing lots of guest lectures and sessional teaching. I did a general television studies course at Melbourne State College. For something a bit different, I ran a unit in the new Media Studies program at RMIT which spent the semester on a single episode of *Callen* which put together my interests of the time—film genre, narrative analysis, broadcast scheduling, spies and the cold war—and which I recall enjoying considerably. And (with Lesley’s help) I applied for the few jobs being advertised in relevant areas. I was interviewed for a job at NSWIT but was pipped at the post by someone who at that point hadn’t done much cinema studies or media studies teaching at all, but who very reasonably was thought to be intellectually superior to me, and that was Liz Jacka, so it turned out to be a pretty judicious choice.
Through the year, I was involved in a group that had been convened by the Australian Film Institute to examine the sort of role the AFI might play in relation to screen education, how it might service film scholarship, how it could connect up tertiary and secondary screen studies, how it might develop links between its industry connections and scholarly activity and so on. An Education Working Party was formed, chaired by Tom Ryan and involving Ina Bertrand, Sam Rohdie and others with quite varied views on these issues. It met through much of 1978, and in the second half of the year I did a more formal report-type piece of research on what was happening around the country. It was basically an information-gathering, who’s doing what, exercise. I gathered quite a lot of material and at the beginning of 1979, when I arrived in Brisbane to teach at Griffith, I summarised the survey results and added a conclusion which basically said that the usual ways of thinking about theory and practice were hopelessly confused and added a number of recommendations re what the AFI could do to fulfill its obligation to promote film culture in Australia by assisting screen education. This became the final version though it was pretty scrappy. (I'm not really a believer in final versions, I believe in interim versions of everything). In any event, the document was sent to Melbourne, was tabled at an AFI board meeting and then it disappeared. I've found a letter that Tom Ryan sent me on behalf of the Working Party which includes the following: ‘... there was common agreement that you should be thanked and congratulated for your work. Surprisingly, there was no dissent from the position you so forcefully asserted in your conclusion. Mr Rohdie was heard to comment that you probably wrote it before you commenced your empirical research—though I'm sure such a view is entirely in error'.

Needless to say, none of the recommendations was acted on and I never heard from the AFI at all.

But strangely the report didn’t completely vanish without trace. Five or six years later, I was invited to speak on a panel at the Sydney Film Festival about Screen Education in Australia. This was really the result of a little campaign that had been running in Filmnews, where various people associated with both Screen Education activities and Sydney Filmmaker Co-op type activities were trying to put a bit of heat on the AFI for the fact that it serviced both of them very poorly. Felicity Collins had dug out my report and wrote a vigorous attack in Filmnews on the inadequacies of the AFI, citing the lack of action on the report’s recommendations, among other examples. At the Festival event, once the panelists had had their say, the critics, Meaghan Morris among them, let loose on Kathleen Norris the Chief Executive of the AFI. Norris made the mistake of ignoring the substantive criticisms in favour of trying to placate the mob by selectively bribing some of its more prominent voices. ‘Meaghan’, she said, ‘we’d just love to bring you down to Melbourne to give some lectures...’, and so forth. The response was predictable. So for the second time I felt like a carny on sideshow alley setting up targets for MM to pop off. Anyway, that was the report’s moment of afterlife, then it truly joined the great junkpile of history. This was my first experience of communication policy research failure. More were to follow.
But back to the late 1970s. In 1979 I took up a lectureship to teach film and media studies at Griffith University. The university was small, new, boldly interdisciplinary, a strange little outpost perched on a hill in a town run by the notorious Bjelke Peterson machine. The first person I met there, a well known sociologist, greeted me with, ‘I have to tell you that I was totally opposed to your appointment’, which cheered me up no end. But I thought, ‘I've survived the fridge of Jon Flaus and the driving of Lesley Stern, I can do this’. Then the Dean officially welcomed me by saying something like, ‘The program you’re joining is in complete disarray, the students are dissatisfied, the university is so concerned that it has set up a high level committee to monitor the situation. There will be a review at the end of first semester. You are an experienced teacher and if you haven't fixed things up by then the program will be discontinued’. That was my intro to Griffith. I was thinking, Give me a break. I’m still living off a dole cheque, you can pay me first.

NK: I was a Senior Tutor there during that brief time of ‘disarray’ in the Society and Media Main Study, as they were called. Another tutor, Brian Laver, had urged some students to take action against the Main Study, and they were refusing to do exams and so forth. A touch of ’68 was happening. There were large meetings in lecture rooms with the fired-up, anarchic students, and nothing was being resolved. Albert Moran was, I think, standing aside from his Convenor role at this time and he was wearing a T-shirt that said ‘Innocent Bystander’. The administration was really gunning for him. I had no idea it was so serious, though. Griffith now joins NSWIT as a place whose Communication Studies program was almost shut down! And if you add in the information that when Anthony Wilden came from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver to be interviewed for a job at Murdoch University in its early days, and was asked what suggestions he had, he suggested they close their program down! So we have the trifecta!

MC: Anyway, things worked out, everybody pitched in, and we sailed through the review. That began almost a decade at Griffith, which was the most exciting period of my career. But that’s another set of stories.

Notes

Author Note
Noel King has worked in many Australian universities, in a variety of media and cultural studies contexts: at Griffith University (1977-1980), the South Australian College of Advanced Education (now the University of SA, 1980-1886), Curtin University (1986-1989), UTS (1989-2001), and the University of Tasmania (2002-2003). He recently resigned from Macquarie University, where he taught film and cultural studies (2003-2012).