The Effectiveness of Australian Film Propaganda for the War Effort 1914-1918

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Film propaganda is common in modern societies, especially in times of crisis such as wars and revolutions, as well as being a mainstay of totalitarian regimes. From commercial advertising to political propaganda during election campaigns, there is a general acceptance of the value of expending large sums of money and great energy on persuading the general public to a particular point of view.

However, these assumptions deserve to be challenged. A study of the success or failure of wartime cinematic propaganda in Australia during the Great War, suggests that it is more likely to follow public opinion than to lead it.

Among studies along a similar line, the first chapter of Nicholas Reeve’s book The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality? traces the history of Government-sponsored film propaganda in Britain during World War One, and draws several conclusions about the effectiveness of cinematic propaganda. He notes that “there is a clear relationship between the chronology of changing audience attitudes towards the official films and the chronology of changing wartime public opinion.” Furthermore, he states that “film propaganda was the servant, not the master of the audience it sought to control”, concluding that “the power of film propaganda does seem to have been more mythical than real.” [1] Reeves bases his argument exclusively on a study of the official war films, virtually all actuality films, produced under the authority of the British government.

Reeves’ study provides a backdrop to the study of film propaganda in Australia during World War One, for there are interesting similarities and differences in the Australian experience. As a British Dominion, Australian culture was heavily influenced by the imperial centre, so it is no surprise to find that its cinematic history has many parallels to that of Britain. However, there were also distinct differences, due to the unique circumstances of the Australian wartime environment.

By only considering the role of official war films, all of them of a documentary nature, Reeves limits his study to only a part of the total cinematic propaganda effort. However, many war dramas also were produced, and while they were made by private rather than Government filmmakers, they also played an important part in serving the Government’s propaganda needs. Many British war dramas were imported and screened in Australia, as were American war pictures from 1917. No study has been done regarding the role of these dramas in the propaganda war of their countries of origin, perhaps because of the large numbers of war films, especially from the USA, and the more complex relationships between the film industries and the governments. Yet in the smaller Australian context at least, a number of privately-initiated war dramas were made with considerable Government involvement, and were openly promoted as war propaganda.

The question is how effective was the entire cinematic effort, both private and public, dramatic and actuality, in persuading people to support the Government. In answering this, we can check whether Reeves’ conclusions hold true across several boundaries: that of Britain versus Australia; dramatic versus actuality; and private enterprise versus Government productions.

Official Propaganda and Wartime Public Opinion

Reeves notes the complexity of the issues surrounding British propaganda during the war, beginning with the “quite extraordinary level of patriotic unity” at the start of the war. [2] Unofficial propaganda poured willingly from Fleet Street to a receptive public, creating little apparent need for official propaganda. Yet within a relatively short space of time, popular consensus on the war broke down, revealing divisions over both the war itself and the way in which it was conducted. Conscription, introduced in 1916, as well as drastic changes in the economy helped provoke unrest, especially as the privileged classes appeared to be little affected by rationing and high taxes. By early 1917, support for the conduct of the war (rather than the war itself) was waning, and a series of strikes from May 1917 to February 1918 disrupted the war effort and exposed dangerous rifts in English society. The creation of the National War Aims Committee in August 1917 was prompted by the crisis of public confidence in the war effort, but, argues Reeves, was only marginally responsible for the turnaround in public opinion in 1918. More equitable rationing and the success of German offensives in March 1918 were the key factors in bringing a renewed unity of purpose and an increase in anti-German xenophobia. [3]

The Australian situation had superficial similarities. An outpouring of Imperial loyalist sentiment occurred at the outbreak of the war, with only a few dissenting voices from militant labour groups such as the International Workers of the World (IWW, nicknamed the “Wobblies”). Parliament passed the stringent War Precautions Act unopposed, which empowered Prime Minister Hughes later to develop a repressive and all-pervasive censorship that attempted to choke any kind of opposition to the Government, even if
What was unique to the Australian experience was the domination of a single deeply divisive issue, conscription, from 1916 to the end of the war, which destroyed what consensus there was and exacerbated pre-war rifts in Australian society. Two bitterly-fought referendums in October 1916 and December 1917 split the Labor Party, whose majority opposed completion of the working class on any matter. After the first referendum, Hughes took his loyalists into a fragile Nationalist coalition with the Anglo-Protestant middle-class conservative opposition. The labour unions, with their strong Irish-Catholic presence, disrupted the workplace with a series of severe strikes from 1916, provoked by Hughes' betrayal of Labor policy, a perception that the war was being fought by capitalist war-profiteers at the expense of the workers, and resentment over the harsh British crushing of the Irish Easter Rebellion in 1916. The rest of the nation was caught between the extreme rhetoric of the opposing factions, and numb by the shockingly long casualty lists and the apparently endless war. As in Britain, a majority probably supported the war effort, but were suffering from profound war-weariness.

From mid-1916, the vast majority of domestic propaganda was generated to serve one side or the other of the conscription issue. This propaganda was characterised by the extreme vitriol of both sides, and the heavy-handedness of Hughes' attempts to control all the media, causing a powerful backlash of opposition, or at least thick-skinned apathy, to attempts to manipulate public opinion. Unlike the British, Australians did not feel the immediacy of the threat of the successful German spring offensives, and there was no evident change in Australian attitudes to the war in 1918. Similarly, the Australian government failed to match the moderation of the British Government in response to the crisis of faith in late 1917. On the contrary, Hughes took every opportunity to heighten division through the most intertemporal use of language and repressive force. Indeed, the extreme nature of the Government's official propaganda effort not merely did nothing to stem the tide of apathy and opposition to the war effort, it actively contributed to the hardening of opposition and resentment.

**Film Propaganda 1914 to mid-1916**

As in Britain, the Australian cinema was predominantly patronised by the working class and, having displaced the vulgar music-hall as the most popular form of entertainment, lacked the social prestige of the theatre. Reeves summarises the wartime attitude of the British ruling class towards it “as at best a trivial, at worst a pernicious, means of filling the leisure time of those who knew no better, and the idea that it might make some contribution to the serious business of winning the war was both incomprehensible and distasteful”. The situation in Australia was much the same. Cinema attendance was felt to be frivolous, and attendance during the war was considered downright disloyal by some church groups, service organisations and loyalist societies.

Like the British government, the Australian authorities had overlooked the potential of the cinema when they mobilised the resources of the nation from August 1914. However, the Government was willing to co-operate with private initiatives when it suited them, producing a quasi-official film propaganda campaign whose role cannot be overlooked when studying the role of official cinema in the war. Later in the war, the Government stepped up its activities to fill a perceived need as private sector found the field less and less profitable.

By contrast, the efforts of private enterprise followed an almost opposite course. Of the fifty-four fictional features produced in Australia during the war, eighteen were war films. Two thirds of these were produced within eighteen months of the declaration of war, but as demand for rousingly patriotic features dropped rapidly, so too did production. A number of documentary features were also made usually with Government support. The exhibition industry screened official war films and newsreels, happily at first, but under some protest as the war progressed.

The British and Australian scenes differed also in attitude to dramatic war films. Reeves argues that British audiences were wary of fictional dramas, having built up “considerable audience scepticism” during the Boer War to faked films. Hence, from the start, the British emphasised “real British war films, as distinct from faked war dramas. So, rather than hiding their official nature, advertising placed an extraordinary stress on the official status of the Government films, which appeared to lift them above the manipulative and false to the standing of factual and true. In Australia, no such legacy appears to have existed, and while films throughout the war proudly advertised the involvement of the Government, they also repeatedly attempted to link dramatic representations with reality, until very late in the war, when several films sought to distance themselves from claims to authenticity. At first Australian audiences responded to dramatic films as if they were as literal as documentaries, a matter not helped by the practice of the time of including lengthy actuality footage in dramatic films. But, like the British, they quickly developed discrimination between the two genres, and popular patronage of dramatic war films showed a sudden decline.

While Reeves marks the first official British foray into film making in December 1915, he does not consider any earlier Government involvement in the film industry. In Australia the interaction of Government and cinema can be dated from the first days of the war. The first official initiative concerned war censorship, which began with an almost comic over-reaction. Prompted by a paragraph in the Sydney Morning Herald of 11 August 1914, which stated that the British government had banned the screening of “war pictures in any shape or form”, the censors ordered over a million feet of imported film footage to be destroyed. Even two Napoleonic War films had battle scenes excised by authorities afraid that scenes of violence could deter support for the war. But on 3 September the New South Wales Under-Secretary informed the Inspector General of Police that “in the absence of any specific directions from the military authorities regarding the advisability of excluding battle scenes from cinematograph pictures, it does not appear necessary to exercise any special supervision over films in that direction”.

The Government was actively involved in producing some early documentary film, working with the huge combine, Australasian Films, to produce Australia’s response to the empire’s call in 1914. Bert Ives, the official cinematographer, was set tasks of filming convoy departures, German internee camps, and other scenes at the request of the Government, these largely being screened as newsreels.

But when it came to dramas, the Government initiated virtually none, although it willingly co-operated with private enterprise in many of the productions, approving all film scenarios before production, and lending troops and ships to commercial producers on condition that it cost the Government nothing. During the early part of the war, private industry more than met the Government’s needs for film propaganda. Hence the absence of official films should not be counted as official disinterest.
On the other hand, the cinema industry was naturally keen to cash in on enthusiasm for Australia’s first war as a nation. But filmmakers of this time were not merely cynical profiteers, making a quick pound on the back of a popular war sentiment. They themselves often held the same ideals and values as those of society at large. What is more, they tended to see themselves as having a public responsibility to support official policies because of their influence on public opinion. Australia’s film industry reacted in a similar way to that of America’s in 1917, calling the pro-war effort “a duty and privilege of every member of the motion picture industry”, and taking pride in assisting the Government. [12]

Film distribution companies began to import war features as soon as they became available, British imports being noted in the newspapers by November 1914. [13] But they did not stop at that. In the same month, two Australian-made features were released. A Long, Long Way to Tipperary and The Day (the latter directed by one of Australia’s most capable and innovative early directors, Alfred Rolfe), were both based on popular verse. Already, Australian film producers showed a marked tendency to copy British themes and plots, borrowing the same treacherous German spies, German fleets cruising off the coast, and atrocity-committing invading Huns from British war dramas.

From April 1915 filmmakers embarked on a year of making topical war dramas, most of which enjoyed outstanding success at the box-office. Australasian Films was the first to move, volunteering a public show of support for the Government by producing three war dramas (Will They Never Come?, The Hero of the Dardanelles, How We Beat The Emden) in nine months, all directed by Alfred Rolfe. Cynics argued that the company, recently created by an amalgamation of the leading film producers, was merely trying to deflect criticism of its near monopoly of Australian film distribution and exhibition, and conceal its opposition to domestic film production. Certainly, Australasian produced no more war dramas, despite its string of early successes.

Australasian’s first war drama was a recruiting film in the style of the British film Wake-up. The manager wrote to the Minister of Defence, Senator Pearce on 29 January 1915 with a proposal, and the Minister “at once saw its value for recruiting purposes”, and responded positively, directing military establishments to co-operate in the production, but at no expense to the Government. [14] The result was Will They never come?, a half-hour drama released in April 1915, and an instant and durable success. The story centred on a romance, with the girl attracted to the bookish, “nancy-pamby” volunteer, “devoid of real fibre” [15] who returned as a manly wounded war hero, over his athletic brother who stayed at home. It was unapologetic propaganda, with “realism for its keyword, and enlist for its watchword” [16].

The tone of Australasian’s letters to the Minister of Defence over the making of the film was deferential, if not downright grovelling, the manager insisting that “I need hardly assure you that anything we can do to forward your objects in a similar direction will be gladly undertaken. In fact, we shall be pleased to place the whole resources of our establishment at your service.” He concluded the letter by saying that despite the high cost of producing the film, “if the object aimed at be achieved, this is a matter of no consequence.” [17] Considering that Will They Never Come? turned a considerable profit, his patriotic bleating about costs was rather hollow.

Australasian followed this with the equally successful sequel The Hero of the Dardanelles, this time a feature length drama, in July 1915, set on the cliffs of Gallipoli on the day of the famous landings of 25 April 1915. Made “at the suggestion of the Federal authorities,” [18] it starred the stay-at-home athlete of the earlier film demonstrating his courage by wrestling a Red-Cross-sniping Turk over the cliffs and into the sea, and returning home wounded to win back the heart of his girl. The film was a huge success with both critics and the public, offering for a hungry audience the first cinematic representations of Australia’s first major contribution to an international conflict. Given that Gallipoli has entered Australian folklore as one of its key national myths, this film played a significant part in making the event more real for Australian audiences, despite the fact that its “reality” was based on the highly coloured account of English journalist Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, who had “witnessed” the pre-dawn landings from a ship a mile off the coast. Furthermore, the beach of Gallipoli in the film was actually that of Tamarama Beach in Sydney. Despite this, critics and audiences considered it to have a “graphic and realistic effect”, copying the real event “so faithfully that it is really difficult to believe that [it was] not the real thing.” [19]

Just two days after the release of The Hero of the Dardanelles, the rival J.C. Williamson theatre company released its own Gallipoli story, Titled Within our Gates or Deeds that Won Gallipoli, its story was more derivative, having a complex plot involving German spies, local traitors and a romance. Also made with Government co-operation, it won uncritical praise for both its realism and its patriotism. Both the Australasian and Williamson films were huge commercial successes, The Hero of the Dardanelles running for months in an age of weekly changes of features.

At this stage, there appears to be a unanimity of response between film critics and audiences, and the films appear to have been received not so much as dramas loosely based on fact, but as reliable accounts of the Gallipoli landings. The fact that they were openly promoted as being produced in co-operation with the Government as official recruiting films does not seem to have deterred audiences. Indeed, The Hero of the Dardanelles later made its way to England, where press reports treated it as a true story. These newspapers eventually were read by Australian soldiers on Gallipoli, who were amused but unconvinced by the unlikely tale of an Australian drowning a Turk in hand-to-hand combat. [20]

Preceding both of these movies was a documentary titled The Fate of the Emden, or alternatively, How We Fought the Emden, made by a wealthy syndicate that had chartered a ship and film crew to photograph the wrecked Emden off Cocos Island. Released in June 1915, the film covered the formation of the Australian Navy, and finished with actuality footage of the Emden. Its reception is unknown, but it inspired at least one dramatic film, which lightly adapted its title and lifted footage of the Emden for its own tale.

How We Beat the Emden, released on 6 December 1915, was Australasian’s final foray into war dramas, again directed by Alfred Rolfe. Made with Ministerial sanction and boasting “the complete co-operation of the ships and men of the Australian Fleet” for “the Film the Government Helped us to make”, the publicity for the film claimed that “Everything in this great Naval spectacle is real, and it is a true insight into the lives of the guardians of the sea.” [21] The story was that of a young naval cadet telling his mates about the Sydney-Emden battle, Australia’s first naval victory, in which he participated, with the battle scenes shown in flashback.

However, despite some good reviews judging it to be a “realistic and convincing story” and its successful sale to international distributors [22] another review lumped it together with the melodramatic For Australia, released on the same day by J.C. Williamson, and also based on the Sydney-Emden battle. Reviewers had little positive to say about For Australia, condemning its excessive melodrama and “weirdly impossible” plot featuring German spies kidnapping an over-observant journalist, and taking him to a secret island, where he was saved by a native girl in a grass skirt. Later the chief spy was devoured by a crocodile and the journalist rescued by British sailors. Also attacked was the overacting of the “persecuted hero, the cursing, cigarette-smoking villain, and the shrinking heroine”, as well as the blurred photography and visibly fake props. [23] The criticism of How We beat the Emden was also for its evidently fake warship scenes.

These two films represent the first sign of a move away from the uncritical reception of war dramas, although at this early stage, the criticism was mostly technical, regarding the standard of Australian film making. Ongoing concerns with poor quality domestic film production was to become a recurring theme of local film critics, who harped on stagy melodramatic acting and amateur cinematography for years to come.

The high point of Australia’s dramatic propaganda films came with the release of John Gavin’s hastily-produced The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell on 31 January 1916. Playing on the popular outrage over the execution of the nurse who had helped British soldiers escape, the film was an enormous hit. It played loose with the facts, the middle-aged Cavell...
of history transforming into a romantically young and beautiful nurse, while the eighteen-stone Gavin, playing a German officer, was the very personification of the caricatured villainous Hun. With its theme of German atrocities against innocent women, it was the embodiment of the most extreme British propaganda.

The film won widespread praise, and was promoted as evidence of Australia’s devotion to the British Imperial cause. Reviewers noted that its “close adherence to actual facts and scenes” evoked a “deep patriotic interest” from “crowded audiences”. Indeed, queues of people had to be turned away from screenings, and it was given extended runs in the cinemas. Gavin earned a £25,000 return on his £450 investment. The Canadian military even booked the film for nine months as a recruiting aid.

However, there were signs that the bubble of public support was about to burst. The Bulletin took the opportunity to criticise the film’s themes, an unprecedented observation, but one that would grow in coming months. Its critic noted that the portrayal of the Hun and of Cavell’s calmness before the firing squad were extreme and untrue, labelling it as “a fine example of the value of the new method of teaching history as you may wish it taught.”

W. J. Lincoln was also inspired to produce a film on the subject. His film Nurse Cavell, was released in March 1916, but was withdrawn after legal action by Gavin. Modified into a sequel with new scenes and re-editing, it was released as La revanche in April. The new film tried to make a connection to Australia by suggesting that the Germans could carry out similar atrocities here, thus reflecting the kinds of arguments which were being promoted in the first Conscription Referendum campaign. The film received publicity similar in wording to previous efforts, full of language about the dastardly Hun, and how the film would encourage enlistment, but Lincoln had missed the high tide of public indignation, and it disappeared quickly from the cinemas. Arguably, audiences were merely tired of the Cavell story, but circumstances proved this not to be the case. Several more films in April and May 1916 confirmed the unpleasant truth that war dramas were no longer popular.

Murphy of Anzac, made by a small film company, was released on 24 April 1916, attempting to cash in on the first celebrations of Anzac Day. It was a dramatisation of the life of John Simpson, recently elevated to legendary status by some shrewd press propaganda, but the film failed to impress critics. While showing respect for the “glorious figure” of Simpson, one critic savaged the portrayal of the almost obligatory German spy as “the most ridiculous villain that ever smoked a cigarette”, scathingly adding, “the returned soldiers who ‘acted’ in this picture probably had a good time. I’m sorry I can’t say that I had the same in viewing it.”

However, while it failed to impress cynical city critics, it apparently was good enough for simpler country audiences, as a writer noted that it was doing good business in Bathurst.

A week later, another war drama was released. The Joan of Arc of Loos was based on the widely-reported heroism of a young French woman during the otherwise disastrous Battle of Loos in 1915. Director George Willoughby went to considerable lengths to authenticate his film, even adding historical footnotes in the style of D. W. Griffith’s recent box-office hit The Birth of a Nation. While The Joan of Arc of Loos had its cinematic merits, it won mixed praise from critics. In particular, critics were reserved about its portrayal of the war in characteristic propaganda terms. One critic gently mocked its portrayal of “those ‘barbarous’ Huns”, describing them as merely “delightful humbugs”, and labelling the film as “just a fairy tale in Belgium”, and a “very ‘censored’ reproduction of the European conflagration.”

The film appears to have had little impact in the cities, but again seems to have done better in the less sophisticated rural cinemas.

The review was perceptive, reflecting the growing maturity of Australian audiences towards propaganda dramas. It was also the last review of its kind. Several more war dramas would emerge, some of them even more extreme portrayals of the war than any that had gone before, as the political scene in Australia became white-hot during the highly divisive Conscription Referendums of 1916 and 1917. However, the silent hand of censorship seems to have eliminated any critical reflections on these films. The final say was at the box office, where the films were uniformly ignored by cinema-goers.

The amateur If the Huns came to Melbourne came and went with barely a trace in May 1916, despite hyperbolic advertising, reminiscent of the extreme language that Prime Minister Billy Hughes was using to try to whip up support for conscription. With the failure of If the Huns came to Melbourne, Australian film propaganda had finally reached the point that the British had been in at the start of the war, where dramatic fictional films no longer persuaded. At this point, the Government switched its energies from supporting private industry to a more proactive role.

The Shift to Documentaries 1916-17

Australia was a little later than Britain in turning to Government-sponsored documentary propaganda. This was because of Australia’s initial love affair with dramatic films, but once this died, it was replaced with a keen interest in the documentary which, like its British counterpart, dominated the propaganda screens for over a year. However, the purposes to which these documentary films were put were more diverse in Australia. Hughes used some of them to promote his conscription referendum campaign, while later in the war they were used for a mix of fund-raising, recruiting and general propaganda.

In July 1916, Australasian released a documentary feature that had been commissioned by the Government. Titled Australia Prepared, the film imitated the moderately successful British film Britain Prepared that had been released the previous December. Unlike the dramas, this film, which showed scenes of soldiers training, munitions factories and the Navy on manoeuvres, was a critical and commercial success. At the same time, New South Wales Premier William Holman commissioned a series of short animated films on Anzac themes to support his successful campaign for re-election.

Propaganda was increasingly important to the Federal Government after the loss of the Conscription Referendum and the split in the Labor Party over the issue. Hughes and his new conservative allies needed to shore up their position as the advocates of a total war effort and, if anything, Hughes increased the virulence of his rabidly patriotic language and attacks on anything that he construed as opposition. With the private cinema sector effectively uninterested in war subjects after the flops of early 1916, Hughes began the systematic acquisition of war films from Britain, purchasing the documentaries that the British Government had produced. The Federal Government engaged Australasian Films as its distributor, understandable given its near monopoly of Australian cinemas, but it failed to gain active support from the giant. One exhibitor complained that the company failed to supply sufficient advertising for its official war films. More helpful was C. R. Herschell of the Australian branch of Pathé Frères, the ubiquitous French distribution company, who not only custom-made recruiting films at special prices, but went out of his way to facilitate screenings. Perhaps his eagerness was due to his fears over his German-sounding name, for one note to officials clarifies his Russian-Jewish origins.

Also despatched to Europe and Palestine were two official cinematographers, Captains George Wilkins and Frank Hurley, commissioned to take specific footage of Australians in action. Wilkins demonstrated the power of the people in determining the nature of Government propaganda, and reinforces the view that the public sways the propaganda, not vice versa. The two captains produced a string of documentaries about the Australian forces.

Soon the Australian Government had a series of war films, which were required screenings at cinemas. Exhibitors seemed happy to co-operate: one could note that they could not afford to do otherwise. A 1916 newspaper reported that “Mr Frank Waddington, managing director of the J. C. Williamson-Waddington picture theatres, has issued instructions that everything is to be done by the theatre staffs under his control to forward the recruiting movement. With this end in view pictures especially taken by the
In March 1918, the dramatic picture A Drama was released. Starring Snowy Baker, the legendary Australian athlete and stuntman, the film was a virtual realisation of the King Visits his Armies in the Great Advance in France, which Hughes deliberately fostered a divisive climate of crisis and conspiracy, it was made with the full co-operation of the Defence Department and the Commonwealth Recruiting Committee, and as such virtually functioned as an official war film. Even its pre-publicity was alarmist in the extreme, and no hyperbole was spared. Posters showed half-naked Australian women languishing supinely in the arms of leering Germans, while the headline screamed in bold type “Are our women safe from violation?” Everything from the set to the acting was proclaimed to be the best ever, equalling anything from Hollywood, and one film journal tellingly commented that “judging by the business [Australia’s Peril] failed to do ... it might appropriately be called ‘Australia’s Perish’”[37] it was as close as any journal could dare to come to the truth of the matter.

By contrast, another film maker had found the popular taste. Beaumont Smith began his series of Hayseeds films in March 1917. With their bush settings and outback characters, they spawned sequels and imitators in the Wayback and Dad’s-R-Dave series. In keeping with the old showman adage that “when times are tough, produce comedy”, audiences were demanding escapist fare, and a return to Australian bush comedies met the need.

MacKinnon, in the meantime, turned to any expediency that could help meet his recruitment needs. Having established that “the cinematograph films seem to be the best means that we have yet discovered to get audiences,”[38] he worked with state committees and the ever-co-operative Herschell to create suitable films. Some were cobbled together from local footage, others were modified versions of imports. The locally-derived films proved to be less than useful, audiences were demanding escapist fare, and a return to Australian bush comedies met the need.

MacKinnon was forced to accept them after they had been milked of all possible revenue by the Repatriation Fund.

Shortages of film stock affected film production at times in 1917. Despite this, two Australian war dramas were produced, but both confirmed the death of interest in the subject. The first, in February 1917, tried to repeat the success of The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell as Gavin reworked the atrocily formula around another true story, this time the execution of a merchant marine captain who rammed a German submarine. The Murder of Captain Fryatt won reviews noticeably different from its immediate predecessors in the genre. Gone was the hyperbole, and in its place was quiet praise for a film which was “restrained and good”, and lacking in the sensationalism of earlier efforts. Critics also appreciated its technical merits, and predicted a profitable season for the film. Unfortunately, they had misjudged the mood of the times and, without being a total flop, the film failed to draw the predicted crowds.

The plot was predictable, full of German spies, with German warships cruising off the coast. It tried to smooth over the class struggle currently evident in the bitter union disputes in Australia by having striking workers loyally join the fight against the invading Germans. After its release, the suspiciously uniform lavish praise continued for the “faultless” and “splendid” film.[36] However, despite the publicity – or perhaps in part because of it – audiences stayed away, and one film journal tellingly commented that “judging by the business [Australia’s Peril] failed to do ... it might appropriately be called ‘Australia’s Perish’”. It was as close as any journal could dare to come to the truth of the matter.

The Decline and Rebirth of War Film Propaganda, late 1917-1918

Public apathy towards unrestrained enthusiasm for the war continued to grow, partly in response to Government excesses during the second Conscription Referendum campaign of November 1917. Hughes controlled every possible avenue of propaganda, including specially commissioned films that he compelled cinemas to screen. Audiences reacted with hooting and cheering, bringing protests from exhibitors who wished to avoid such polarising issues for fear of losing patrons, especially the more respectable clients who had begun to patronise the cinema to see its official war films.[40] As the pro-conscription campaign grew in hysteria, so too it lost its credibility and the support of many Australians. In turn, the growing disinterest led the campaigning to increasingly strident propaganda in a desperate but self-defeating attempt to arouse support.

The box-office power of documentaries was to last a year longer than that of dramas. By mid-1917, two war documentaries, The Battle of the Acre and The AIF in France, had raised over £7,600 for the Repatriation Fund.[41] Encouraged, the Fund purchased Sons of the Empire in mid-1917 for total cost of £2,950, but by March 1918, it had returned the paltry sum of £676.1.0 after screening in the most lucrative locations in Melbourne and Sydney, forcing further screenings to be “held over”.[42] In November 1917, the Repatriation Fund learned that screenings of war films in suburban and rural centres were running up losses as expenses exceeded receipts. By 1918, only one copy of Hurley’s With the Light Horse in Palestine was ordered, due to lack of demand.[43]

This situation closely mirrored the trend in England, although the Australian trend lagged about six months behind that of Britain. There, The Battle of the Somme, released in August 1916, had been a huge success, apparently showing for virtually the first time soldiers in actual combat. The irony was that most, or even perhaps all, of the key battle scenes were actually taken at a training camp, and were the very takes that the British so detested. Two other films, The King Visits his Armies in the Great Advance (October 1916) and The Battle of the Acre and the Advance of the Tanks (January 1917) also enjoyed outstanding success. Yet by July 1917, Metropolitan public interest in war documentary had also peaked, and successive films returned paltry returns. Lord Beaverbrook, in charge of British propaganda film making, commented that “the present style of films is played out. The public is jaded and we have to tickle its palate with something a little more dramatic in the future if we are to maintain our sales.”[44] Ironically, the British turned to the idea of making a drama film, complete with big budget stars and high production values, built around a story of a German invasion and the occupation of Chester. Various delays meant that it was only finished after the war, so we shall never know how it might have fared, although a couple of late-war Australian films may give us a clue.
the Australia of Hughes' fevered imagination. The plot involved a German spy ring, in close collaboration with a radical union group that strongly resembled the IWW, coordinating the activities of a German fleet off the Australian coast. However, it was not strictly a war film, although its themes were topical. Indeed, while its plot would have pleased the Government, it was specifically advertised as "not a war picture" in an attempt to circumvent popular distaste for more propaganda.

Given the context, one might imagine that it was a box-office disaster, but in fact it turned a reasonable profit, although why audiences flocked to it is less clear. It made no attempt to be purely realistic; as one critic noted, "that the whole bears the color [sic] of truth. Only, of course, it is far more sensational. We don't go to a picture show for a history lesson." [45] The review nicely balances an awareness of both the realism and the fantasy required for successful entertainment, showing a much more sophisticated judgement than the uncritical praises of the earliest war dramas. Probably a major drawcard was its star, who performed all of his own "bewildering", and "amazing" stunts. [46]

The other great success was Beaumont Smith's Satan in Sydney, released in July 1918. Smith's outrageous melodrama depicted the inevitable nest of German spies corrupting Australian women, who then encouraged Anzacs to desert by luring them into Asian dens of vice. Smith was a rough-and-ready producer, but an exceedingly shrewd marketer, and his film appealed to already established racist associations of Huns and Asians. He daringly released the film without censorship clearance, and the film was briefly banned while censors checked its content against the provocatively racist advertising, which potentially offended the Allied Chinese Government, although it appealed to the almost universally-held White Australia attitudes of the time. The censors considered the film a salutary warning for all Australian soldiers, and allowed it to be screened. With the invaluable free publicity it had gained, it was advertised as the uncut version the police had initially banned. [47] Like most Smith films, it suffered critically for its sloppy technique and low production values, but audiences flocked to see an entertaining melodrama, filled with enough vice for upright citizens to deplore and racism for them to applaud, while barely avoiding the censor's scissors.

While these two movies reversed the trend of unprofitable war films, their popularity was probably due to other factors and not their war themes. However, it does suggest that the British attempt to create an appealing feature film for propaganda purposes may have been successful if handled correctly. Audiences would watch films with propaganda potential if they were offered a large-enough bait in terms of entertainment.

Conclusion

The Australian experience in cinema propaganda reflects the basic trends evident in Britain, although the Dominion experience was more varied than the Metropolitan one. Australian audience attitudes in 1914 were similar to those of pre-Boer War Britain, but rapidly developed to join the British in their disillusionment over war dramas and their brief interest in documentaries. Finally, the Australian situation anticipated the British desire to use dramas for propaganda purposes at the end of the war.

However, local influences also affected the use of official propaganda films. In Australia, the private sector worked very closely with the Government, and many dramatic films were quasi-official, having had their scenarios approved before production, then having used Department of Defence personnel and settings, then finally passing censorship scrutiny that was aggressive in ensuring a pro-Government media. The small domestic film industry made this kind of informal co-operation easier, thus removing the need for more proactive Government action for as long as film producers found profit in making war dramas.

For this reason, the Federal Government was slower to become involved in war documentary production than the British government, whose needs surfaced earlier in the war. When the need arose, the Australian government was mostly content to buy British films, and commission local producers to make others tailored to its needs, with only a handful of films being made by the official Australian war cinematographers, which incidentally came so late as to have little impact. The diversity of use to which documentaries were put also makes the Australian situation more complex. Hughes was primarily interested in the funds the films could raise, seeing their value as propaganda and as recruiting aids as a worthy side effect, although in a post war comment Hughes made it clear that films were "very useful and cheap propaganda". [48]

The inclusion of war dramas from the private sector also improves our understanding of the use of propaganda films in the Great War. Given that audience perceptions of the difference between drama and documentary were still evolving, and that dramatic films routinely borrowed actuality footage, it can be a slightly false dichotomy to separate entirely the dramatic and documentary genres of the period. [49] The dramatic films more clearly indicate the co-operation of Government and the film industry, and also chart more finely the shifting popular attitudes to the propaganda of the Great War. Given the larger output in Britain of dramatic war films, Reeves' general thesis on official documentaries should be tested on the private dramatic ones as well. What should also be tested in the light of the Australian experience is to what extent commercial war dramas were made with the Government's interests in mind, and with Government involvement and interference. Was in fact the British Government's apparent slowness to make war propaganda films due to the effective presence of private sector films?

However, it is difficult to quibble with Reeves' basic conclusion, that "the domestic reception of the official films demonstrates above all else the inability of film propaganda to alter attitudes towards the war" and that "the power of film propaganda does seem to have been more mythical than real". [50] One psychological warfare specialist from the Second World War was marginally more generous when he said, "Except on the rarest occasions, psychological warfare can never start or reverse a trend – it can only accelerate or retard one." [51] The Australian experience shows that film production eventually followed audience patronage. Early in the war, propaganda films evoked a powerfully positive response from Australian audiences, before increasing cynicism and war-weariness blunted the impact of dramatic film. Actuality film survived a little longer as effective propaganda, before falling victim to the same factors. Even when films were backed by all the political and financial resources of a powerful Government, popular responses proved the more powerful, and Government was forced to tailor its propaganda film campaigns to the demands of the public.

Endnotes

[7] For example, Will They Never Come?!, The Hero of the Dardanelles, Within Our Gates and Australia's Peril were made with various levels of official support.
[8] For example, How We Fought the Emden (1915), and Australia Prepared (1916).
[10] Reeves, 23.
[14] Lone Hand, 1 October 1915; Australian Archives (hereafter referred to as AA) B539 AIF 144/1/274A.
During World War 1 the government used propaganda in various ways to keep the public on their side. Their main aims and examples of propaganda include: Their main aims and examples of propaganda include: Keeping support for the war up and maintaining moral. Getting people to join the armed forces. Causing hatred of the Germans. In 1916 the government sanctioned the release of the film 'the battle of the Somme', some of the footage was from the real battle and some shot in Britain, but the film was so realist it could be seen as anti-war, naturally the graphic nature of seeing men dying upset many viewers. This video looks at some of the propaganda of World War 1 from the British and French sides. Attitudes to the war. World war one beginning in 1914 and ending in 1918 brought around many changes in Britain. One change was that many women were invited into the workplace because men were fighting in war. I believe these faults to be made subconsciously by the artist, being propaganda to get women into the workplace I don't think the artist would have made small points like that deliberately. In 1917 the trade union came together and made the restoration of pre war practices act, allowing men to have their old jobs back after the war. This shows that women

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Feature films in Britain during World War II were well attended and did exactly … [1] Totalitarian governments are notorious for the use of black propaganda … on the part of the entertainment industry to win and keep the (short) attention span of … The ‘lost’ poetry of World War One – BBC News – BBC.com. www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-28705819. British propaganda during the world war, 1914-1918 … 1 H. D. Lasswell, Propaganda Technique – the World War, 9. Sir Campbell Stuart … curate survey of others, placed their hopes of winning the war on … World War One propaganda: A look at wartime ads from … www.thedrum.com/.../world-war-one-propaganda-look-wartime-ads-191…
Film propaganda is common in modern societies, especially in times of crisis such as wars and revolutions, as well as being a mainstay of totalitarian regimes. The Australian situation had superficial similarities. An outpouring of Imperial loyalist sentiment occurred at the outbreak of the war, with only a few dissenting voices from militant labour groups such as the International Workers of the World (IWW, nicknamed the “Wobblies”). The film received publicity similar in wording to previous efforts, full of language about the dastardly Hun, and how the film would encourage enlistment, but Lincoln had missed the high tide of public indignation, and it disappeared quickly from the cinemas. Arguably, audiences were merely tired of the Cavell story, but circumstances proved this not to be the case. In 1918 the Australians reached the peak of their fighting performance in the battle of Hamel on 4 July. From 8 August they then took part in a series of decisive advances until they were relieved in early October. Germany surrendered on 11 November. John McQuilton, “Enlistment for the First World War in rural Australia: the case of north-eastern Victoria, 1914–1918”, Journal of the Australian War Memorial 33 (2000). Dale Blair, “Diggers” and “Doughboys”: Australian and American troop interaction on the Western Front, 1918, Journal of the Australian War Memorial 35 (2001). Ruth Rae, “Reading between unwritten lines: Australian army nurses in India, 1916–19”, Journal of the Australian War Memorial 36 (2002). By 1914 cinema as an art form in its own right had established itself in Britain’s existing complex popular culture, rivalling the theatres and music halls in a way which was beginning to worry them. Nicholas Hiley, “The British Cinema Auditorium”, in Film and the First World War, eds. Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995, 160. The data in the remainder of this paragraph is taken from Hiley. Nicholas Reeves, “Official British Film Propaganda”, in The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present, ed. Michael Paris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 27–50. Gerard DeGroot, Back in Blighty: the British at Home in World War I (London: Vintage, 2014), 308.