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# Convention and Contradiction:
# Representations of Women in Australian War Films, 1914-1918

Daniel Reynaud

*This paper examines the representation of women in Australian cinematic war dramas made between 1914 and 1918, showing how the representations were shaped by political, industrial and ideological influences, and identifying the range of representations present in the films. It observes that while there was considerable overlap with other media in the representation of women, there were images ignored by films, while others were unique to the cinema.*

In the 1915 war drama, *Will They Never Come?*, a young woman spurns her athletic boyfriend and favours his brother, a bookish, physically puny specimen whose charms lie in his status as a wounded war hero. The film's sequel, *The Hero of the Dardanelles* (1915), concludes with her marriage to the athlete after he has taken the hint, enlisted and has then been wounded in a heroic struggle at Gallipoli. In a 1916 war film, *The Joan of Arc of Loos*, a young French woman single-handedly turns the tide of battle, leading wavering Allied soldiers to victory. Other Australian war films, such as *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* (1916) and *Australia's Peril* (1917), feature British and Australian women under threat of rape and murder at the hands of the Germans. In the final year of the war, *The Enemy Within* portrays Australian women, corrupted by German agents, seducing Anzacs away from their duty.

The diversity of representations of women in these Australian Great War films raises a number of questions. What factors shaped the ways women were depicted during wartime in Australian films? How did these representations compare with other media representations? How did they correspond to women's actual involvement in the war

effort? The answers to these questions will contribute to our understanding of gender issues in Australia during the Great War, and particularly to the way contemporaries understood them.

The surviving evidence for reliable conclusions is however patchy, and any answers to the questions must be tentative. Most of the nineteen war dramas made during the war years have been lost, only one complete film and significant parts of four others surviving. Knowledge of the lost films depends on evidence such as press reports on their making, scenarios and copyright registration documentation, and on advertising, reviews and plot summaries published in trade journals and newspapers. The quantity and quality of evidence varies considerably from film to film: evidence such as scenarios only indicates the intention of the film makers, not how the final result looked, and, while film stills preserve a moment from the film, they only indicate the images the promoters felt best represented the film or would help to sell it. While secondary information such as reviews allows glimpses of the films through the eyes of contemporaries — useful for examining contemporary reactions — it is evidence that is both less than complete and doubly subjective.

The ways in which women were represented in war films were affected by a number of inter-related factors: the nature of the Australian film industry, the conventions of silent film, social constructs of gender, official censorship and the pressure it created for suitable propaganda, and the influences of other media representations.

By 1914, the Australian feature film industry was already in decline from the early heady days of 1911. The reasons were multiple but prominent among them was the uncertain financial base of local film production. While distributors and exhibitors joined forces to achieve economies of scale, the small part-time Australian producers mostly remained independent and fell behind the rising technical competence of international producers. Few local investors saw this kind of production as a good risk. Government indifference did not help either, so that, despite the crisis in supply when the war shut down European production, Australian films formed only a fraction of the offerings at cinemas. Early in the war, most war films were local or British productions

but, after mid-1916, virtually all war dramas were American or British. With imports setting the standard for reviewers and the public, it is not surprising that the few local productions imitated the more prestigious imports.

Silent film operated in the context of live theatre and music hall, where it was often screened and from which it drew substantially for its conventions and themes. Most Australian film-makers of the time were drawn from theatre and vaudeville — actors (Alfred Rolfe, John Gavin, Monte Luke, W.J. Lincoln, Frank Harvey), writers (Franklyn Barrett, Agnes Gavin), entrepreneurs (George Willoughby, J.C. Williamson), or publicity agents (Beaumont Smith). They relied primarily on their careers in theatre, as cinema rarely provided full-time employment. This dependence meant that representations of women in film were frequently consonant with those in theatre.

The Australian theatre most closely followed British dramatic models, influenced by the high proportion of British professionals in the industry and often using British scripts for vaudeville and theatre. The British stage used melodrama as its dominant form, and featured jingoistic military spectacle, couched in conservative Social Darwinist racial terms, and following a masculine personality cult that glorified a pantheon of Imperial heroes. This merely reflected the active promotion of empire, race and war by schools, churches, youth movements and the press. These peacetime institutions readily expanded their output in the interests of wartime propaganda and were so effective and pervasive that the government of Britain needed to do little itself.[1] Given the dominance of British culture in Australia in the years leading up to the war,[2] it is no surprise that Australian theatre and cinema followed suit. The consequence was that local war films followed British standards in both theme and plot. Advertisements for two early British war drama imports, *The German Spy Peril* and *Called to the Front*, featured German spies, atrocities, invasions of Britain, and racial and social class issues.[3] All of these themes became staples of the Australian war films, with German invasions of Australia substituted for that of Britain. The British documentary, *Britain Prepared* (1915), which set box office records in Australia, prompted an immediate imitation, *Australia Prepared* (1916).

British imperial war propaganda affected other media forms as well, particularly journalism, cartoons and posters, which proffered themes and images similar to those in cinema and theatre. Australian propaganda was often directly copied from British models. Stories and drawings dwelt on gallant British soldiers with fixed bayonets 'laying down their lives on fields of honour', and on innocent women raped and mutilated by bestial Huns.[4] This all-pervasive imagery created an intertextual environment where media forms shared common themes and images. But cinema had some unique characteristics. Its bias towards narrative, requiring conflict, action and resolution, made romance one of the most frequent devices for motivating action, while the needs of the often melodramatic plot dictated that screen women were sometimes represented in actions and situations quite removed from the conventions of everyday female behaviour. Both romance and action-adventure became dominant discourses through which women were represented. The resulting images of women generated some tensions. On the one hand, film genres required women characters to be active participants in situations of grave consequence, the plots dictating that at times they take decisive action. On the other, the male-dominated culture represented women as ideally taking a role limited only on the home front in time of war. Australia's war films demonstrated these tensions in practice.

There is no direct evidence that government pressure influenced the representation of women in war dramas. Indeed there is a striking paucity of evidence concerning official involvement in the making of dramatic war films at all. The federal government helped initiate one feature film, *The Hero of the Dardanelles*, and provided facilities such as military personnel and equipment on request for several other productions, at the production facility's expense. They also endorsed other dramatic films for recruiting purposes. Over the latter part of the war, the federal government was active in promoting documentary films, importing some and commissioning the making of others to facilitate fund-raising, recruiting and propaganda. But this activity represented only a fraction of what could have been done, had the government chosen to mobilise fully the potential of the cinema for the war effort, as it did with print journalism and was to do

with cinema in the next world war. The lack of involvement was partly the product of an official lack of experience with this relatively new medium, and partly because private enterprise largely met the needs of state and federal governments, especially early in the war.

Even interference by wartime censors in the cinema is poorly documented. The cinema rated barely a mention in official correspondence on areas of concern about the media. Local films routinely had to pass the censors before release. But issues such as banning execution scenes[5] grew out of prewar rulings against screen violence rather than from the special censorship provisions of the *War Precautions Act, 1914*.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that censorship pressures had little impact on shaping Australian war films. As the war progressed, Prime Minister Billy Hughes used increasingly pervasive and intrusive censorship to remove any material that he considered to be detrimental to the war effort, including banning suspect journals, placing censors in the offices of unreliable local newspapers, and the almost farcical confiscation of Queensland Premier Ryan's anti-conscription pamphlet by federal police, personally led by Hughes himself.[6] Historians have noted how this control reinforced the conservative agenda of those in power.[7] The impact on the cinema of this climate of control and conformity can be deduced from various sources. Influential middle-class critics sometimes characterised the cinema, most commonly patronised by working class men and women, as a frivolous waste of time and money when every resource should be devoted to the war effort.[8] The cinema industry made some effort to deflect such criticism by demonstrating its support for the war. Industry journals featured photos of actors who had enlisted, exhibitors such as Williamson-Waddington publicised their co-operation with official demands to screen 'patriotics', while industry figures argued that films provided 'a haven of romance' from 'the racking horrors of the bleeding fields of Europe'.[9]

Film reviews in journals also suggest the heavy hand of censorship. Reviews were generally full of praise for both the themes and the technical competence of the early war dramas. But, in early 1916, a string of reviews criticised the stereotyping of the

Germans as evil, noting that audiences were not prepared to put up with blatant propaganda.[10] Such blunt statements exhibited precisely the kind of attitude attacked by Hughes' censorship, and no more reviews of this nature were published during the war, although a number of later productions fully deserved them. Instead they were replaced by comments couched in terms of such hyperbolic praise as to arouse extreme suspicion, especially as most of the later films were abysmal box-office failures.[11]

As all local productions had scenarios cleared before production and films cleared before release, film-makers were under considerable pressure to create films that would conform to the patriotic agenda of the censors. Furthermore, the profits of the local industry were marginal enough without running the risk of having their capital-intensive films banned. Under such conditions, the lack of evidence for direct censorship is hardly surprising: film-makers were self-censors, producing the kind of material they knew was expected of them.[12] Such pressure helped ensure that film-makers did not stray too far from the Government's socially conservative opinions, including those on the place of women in wartime society.

Another more amorphous factor affecting the representation of women in Australian war films was the dominant social construct of womanhood, especially in relationship to war. Popular ideology drew on a long Western tradition of distinct gender roles in conflict. Scientific arguments were used to explain gender differences in purely biological terms, leading to a belief in clearly definable sex roles. Following the simple binary thinking evident in the stereotyped characters of theatre melodramas, women were the opposite of men.[13] This did not eliminate all of the contradictions and complexities in their characterization but it did produce typical male/female roles, particularly with regard to war. Men were usually imaged as natural warriors, strong and aggressive. Used well, these qualities emerged as a manly defence of the weak; when corrupted they became violent bestiality. Women on the other hand were considered to be the embodiment of quiescent qualities in the human spirit: passivity, compassion and nurture. Rightly applied, these qualities created the beautiful souls whose feminine

purity inspired heroism in men; when abused they generated seductive sexual sirens luring men away from their true role as warrior-heroes.[14]

There was a great degree of unanimity in the rhetoric about the role of women, even women anti-war campaigners arguing against war on the basis of woman's natural maternal role. Admittedly this concealed different interpretations as to what was meant by 'motherhood, maternity and sacrifice'.[15] The energy and ability of women who refused to be constrained allowed many to participate more fully, making valuable contributions in areas earlier considered outside the domain of female competence. However, there is no doubt that the ideology of defined gender roles created a real barrier to the wider participation of women in the war effort.[16] Despite the success of women in carving out new roles for themselves in the war, the men who held the positions of power resisted their efforts and attempted to place constrictive boundaries on the nature of women's participation.[17]

The idealised gender roles held by the authorities in relation to war were frequently implicit in propaganda. Battle was to be an exclusively male preserve, while women were to participate in the war through nurturing. The concept was a broad one, covering the physical, material, emotional, spiritual, aesthetic and sexual needs of their menfolk. Such nurture would inspire the Australian man to volunteer for the army in order to defeat the Hun, who represented a threat to female sexual (and therefore racial) purity, and cultural and spiritual virtue. Propaganda appeals implied that women should also pressure civilian men into enlisting, vote for conscription and buy war bonds.[18] Attempts by women's groups to participate more fully in the war effort were often resisted, and sometimes crushed.[19]

The needs of wartime added pressures to the socially prescribed/proscribed roles of women, as femininity was mobilised for the war effort. British studies show that, under pressure from social norms, propaganda, and media conventions, the wartime representations of women bore even less relationship to their lives than had peacetime ones. Glamorous images of enthusiastic womanhood were mobilised to boost recruiting, fund raising, welfare and morale, contrasting strongly with the increased physical and

psychological strain that many women felt as they added the responsibilities of the absent menfolk to their already heavy duties.[20] Australian images of women in wartime were almost identical to those of the motherland; many arrived as imported British images in magazines, posters and films, while Australian versions were often copied from the British models.[21] Women were used in propaganda not so much to represent women as to embody ideas and values, and to reinforce ideological stances in pursuit of war aims.

In the light of these observations, Australian films from the Great War make an interesting study. Unsurprisingly, the dominant images of women conform to the major constructs of wartime femininity, but there are also some strongly dissonant portrayals.

**Women in war films, 1914-15**

Australia's first two war films, in November 1914, were highly derivative, drawing on British models to tell purely British stories. One was based on an English poem about atrocities in Belgium, the other an Irish love story called *It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary*,[22] built around the popular song. The latter's one-page plot summary preserved in the Australian Archives suggests a simple romance in which a soldier-hero reclaims his true love after surviving an attack by a rival. Both enjoyed modest popular success.

By 1915, the Australian film industry was beginning to exploit perceived popular interest in the war and, at the same time, to respond to official fears of a slump in recruitment. In January, industry giant Australasian Films offered the government a film to stimulate recruiting, called *Will They Never Come?*,[23] based on a cartoon of the same title. The inspiration came from a successful British recruiting film. The offer, couched in terms of groveling co-operation, may also have been designed to deflect official investigation of its near-monopolistic practices in film distribution and exhibition, which were threatening local production. The film was made with enthusiastic government support and screened to equally enthusiastic critical and popular response. While the film has been lost, the surviving scenario describes a 'namby-pamby'

intellectual, 'devoid of real fibre', who nevertheless volunteered, while his sports-loving brother stayed at home. The wounded and repatriated scholar found true manhood in war, and awakened the interest of his brother's girl.[24]

The sequel, again made with the endorsement of the federal government, followed a similar theme. *The Hero of the Dardanelles*[25] (July 1915) was based on the sensational report of the Gallipoli landings written by Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, and similarly emphasised conventional manliness. In this film, the athlete wins back his girl after being wounded in a heroic struggle on the cliffs of Gaba Tepe. The film, recently reconstructed by the author with the National Film and Sound Archive, and with a scenario preserved in the Australian Archives, portrays three kinds of women: the hero's mother, his lover and the nurses who tend to him. The nurses fill a characteristic nurturing role in their devotion to the wounded men. The mother is portrayed as proud of her soldier-son and, along with his girl, prays for his safety. The girl, played by Laura Rossmore, is the typical gentle, plump, large-eyed beauty of early silent cinema. Her actions are passive, or reactive; she only responds, never initiates. She adoringly accepts his ring, and gazes in admiration as he demonstrates in dumb show his prowess with a rifle. In the end, she is overtly labeled in an intertitle 'A Soldier's Reward', as she is married to the hero. The message to men was clear: to win female hearts, show your real manhood by signing up. Women functioned as ideological tools, inspiring desirable martial behaviour, tending to the soldier's needs and acting as legitimate sexual rewards for those who did their duty.

From the press reports of another hugely successful Gallipoli film also released in July, *Within Our Gates*,[26] we can deduce a British-style formula melodrama in which a girl exposes her stepfather as a German spy and marries the soldier-hero returned from Gallipoli. The needs of the narrative dictated that the girl play an active role in resolving the conflict but surviving reports seem to indicate that she was only a minor character in the film. While a comparatively large number of photographic stills survive, they concentrate on the battle scenes. None features the girl.

One of two films released in December 1915 about the *Sydney-Emden* battle, *For Australia*,[27] features a woman in league with German agents and an island girl who helps rescue the hero. The melodramatic plot uses the range of stereotypes from brutal German spies to the gentlemanly but ne'er-do-well Australian redeemed by exposing them. The film was pilloried in the press, which complained of excessive melodrama, visibly fake props and predictable characters — 'the persecuted hero, the cursing, cigarette-smoking villain, and the shrinking heroine are all there in full strength'. Poor box-office returns confirmed their judgement but the island girl drew positive comments from one reviewer, who noted with favour her bare arms and legs.[28] Surviving scenes show that the women characters are young and attractive, the island girl adding exotic sexuality to her part. Both women on separate occasions save the hero from death, though in ways that are consistent with a passive, nurturing role. While the hero exhibits physical bravery in rescuing the spy, she prevents his execution by the spy ring only with words, telling how he saved her from attack by two thieves in the park. The islander girl dies in the final sequence in an act of maternal protection — deliberately shielding the hero from a German bullet. The hero's valediction for her was that she gave her life 'For Australia'. In the context of White Australia, a nonwhite heroine could not be allowed to marry the hero. While both women were important to the plot, neither was a central character; again women were relegated to the margins of the war effort.

From the evidence we have of these early films, it would appear that the stories were simple, drew heavily on British cinema and propaganda models, and offered fairly one-dimensional images, mostly of women as nurturers and particularly as rewards for the hero. These films were made at a time when enthusiasm for the war, though far from unanimous, was at its height. Censored media representations ensured that many saw the conflict in the romantic terms of prewar imperial propaganda. The films reflected the official attitude of the time, as yet unaffected by the growing perception that the war was less glorious than anticipated. Most found a large and receptive audience. The noble feats of the Anzacs at the landings on Gallipoli and the naval victory over the

*Emden* seemed to confirm the belief that the Antipodean Briton was a superior version of the original racial stock. Surely the best reward such a man could have would be a pure Australian wife with whom he could propagate this virile new race.

**Women to the fore, 1916**

The euphoria did not last. Before long, massive casualty lists for negligible gains began to change the public mood, and people recognised that this would be a long and bloody conflict. While the media continued to saturate the nation with simplistic exhortations of support for the war, public responses to this propaganda became more varied and opposition more overt.

The next batch of Australian war films saw a diversification of the representations of women. Of the six war features released between January and May 1916, women were the leading characters in no fewer than three, and played some part in two others. Three of these films revolved around the real-life execution of Edith Cavell, and a fourth was based on another true story of a young French woman.

The Cavell films were spontaneous Australian contributions to the orchestrated propaganda campaign exploiting the execution of the stout, middle-aged British nurse who helped the Belgian resistance. There was nothing inherently shocking about this event; the French had executed two German nurses for similar activities, and the German authorities accepted without protest the application of recognised laws of war.[29] The British showed no such scruples. The killing of Cavell reinforced the widely believed and often exaggerated tales of German atrocities in Belgium, and was perfectly tailored to their propaganda needs. A nurse embodied many of the myths of the role of womanhood in images common to the art and literature of the time. Robed in pure white, she symbolised devoted motherly care to the wounded warrior, while retaining sufficient femininity to appeal as a sexual symbol as well. There was also tension in the image, for the nurse, in actively caring for helpless men, raised questions about their masculinity. Hence her sexuality could be both threat and promise to the wounded.[30]

Australian director John Gavin was quick to recognise the cinematic potential of Cavell's story. His wife, Agnes, wrote a scenario literally overnight, based on the exaggerated reports in the press, and the film was ready for screening within three weeks. *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* (January 1916)[31] was a huge popular success, equal to that of the two Gallipoli films of July 1915, and received widespread media coverage. It is through these reports and some surviving photographic stills that we know something of the film's representation of Cavell. The stills show her as young and beautiful, serene under interrogation, with an uplifted, spiritual gaze. Critics were impressed, one describing the 'delicacy, restraint and reverence' shown for the martyred nurse and praising the 'becoming dignity' of actress Vera Pearce, who played the part of Cavell.[32] The image of Cavell had been manipulated to suit the ideology of the hour, being shifted closer to two existing stereotypes of women in war propagated by press and poster: the nurse-nurturer (with its attendant and conflicting connotations), and the helpless female victim of German atrocity. Her beauty and spirituality were added markers of her stereotyped womanhood. Another device to render Cavell in conventional terms was the label, 'England's Joan of Arc', though the parallels were left unexplained.

But there were tensions in the portrayal. Having a woman at the centre of a war film shifted attention away from the men who were supposed to be the focus. The creation of a female hero-protagonist suggested that the constrained role permitted to women in the war effort severely underestimated what they were capable of contributing. On the other hand, her 'martyrdom' suggested that Cavell needed greater protection from men, rendering her conventional and nonthreatening. The film enjoyed massive popular patronage, with long queues at cinemas, the accolades of leading political figures, who valued its propaganda impact, successful overseas sales, and widespread critical praise, with many predicting that it would boost enlistment.[33] The logic behind the last claim was that men would be shamed into enlisting, to protect other vulnerable women. On this score, the predictions were to some degree proved right, for the execution scenes, when incorporated in a 1917 government-produced recruiting film, provoked such

indignation in some audiences that men attacked the on-screen Germans, while young men enlisted during the interval in numbers unusual for that late stage of the war.[34]

The tensions also ran in another direction. Not every viewer was equally impressed with the film's message. A perceptive critic in the *Bulletin* commented that the vilification of the Huns and the heroic posturings of Cavell were extremely unlikely, noting that this was 'a fine example of the value of the new method of teaching history as you may wish it taught'.[35] The remark reveals that propaganda was being perceived as such, and that some people were recognizing the characters in the films as ideological constructs, not facts.

The two other Cavell films were produced by W. J. Lincoln; the first, *Nurse Cavell*, was withdrawn shortly after release in March 1916 to avoid legal action from Gavin, and reworked as a sequel, *La Revanche*. Released in April, it featured melodramatic scenes of German atrocities against Belgian women, children and old men. Little is known of these two productions but press reports and a few photographic stills seem to indicate a fairly conventional atrocity story, with the women featuring as typically helpless and angelic victims of Hunnish sexual brutality and murder. Neither had much impact at the box office, probably due to a combination of the overexposure of the Cavell story and increasing apathy towards the intensified war rhetoric that Prime Minister Hughes was employing.[36]

The most disruptive and disconcerting portrayal of women at war was *The Joan of Arc of Loos*.[37] Released in April 1916, it emerged a couple of weeks after *Murphy of Anzac*,[38] a film about the first particularised hero of the embryonic Anzac legend, Simpson of donkey fame. *Murphy of Anzac* was not a great film, and received some adverse press notices, but the legend of Simpson grew to become a cornerstone of the exclusively masculine Anzac legend. His initial fame rested on his usefulness to the cause of recruiting, which was beginning its decline.[39] The leading character of *The Joan of Arc of Loos* was based on a young French woman who also received widespread contemporary publicity for her heroism during the Battle of Loos in September 1915 but, unlike Simpson, she quickly disappeared from popular imagination. Her Amazon

qualities offered no equivalent help to the cause of recruiting. Women who could hold their own against the enemy undermined a key recruiting appeal, in which men were asked to enlist to defend the weaker, gentler sex.

The surviving half of the film in the National Film and Sound Archive portrays Jeanne Moreau succouring the wounded, shooting and bombing several German snipers, then rallying retreating Allied troops, waving the Tricouleur and singing 'La Marseillaise'. After the victory she is decorated and marries the handsome French nobleman-soldier she has earlier rescued.

The film differs from all others of its kind by reversing dominant gender roles in war. The Allied men are portrayed as vacillating and weak, sometimes fearful, and even Moreau's fiancé has to be saved from captivity by a girl. Moreau, on the other hand, exhibits all the qualities of the ideal man, showing more prowess in battle than the men and ultimately gaining two rewards usually reserved for male war heroes: a medal and a spouse. Such a role reversal was unprecedented in Australian war films. But her representation was not exclusively that of heroic warrior. The film also showed her in more conventional terms for women in wartime Australia, as resigned and patient under fire, nurturing the wounded and threatened with rape by the German officer. Furthermore, her unusual military skill was hedged by the association with Joan of Arc, whose iconography has repeatedly emphasised her spirituality and feminine delicacy, highlighted by the incongruity of her armour and manly haircut. However, despite the religious and historical framework designed to render this female paragon of male virtue accessible to wartime sensibilities, the fact remained that Moreau was portrayed as successful in roles that were consistently denied to Australian women not only in practice, but also in the rhetoric of official propaganda.

The film was not a great success at the box-office but one could not attribute this to any great lack of cinematic skill. While the acting was still characterised by melodramatic turns that were beginning to irritate local critics, surviving footage shows that the film was competently directed and eminently watchable. However, war weariness was making deep inroads into the enthusiasm once shown for cinema

battles.[40] The immense popularity of *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell* in January was followed quickly by an irreversible slump in the popularity of war dramas, which, by the end of the war, even extended to war documentaries.[41]

The critical response to the film was ambivalent, some considering it realistic and accurate, while one critic was prepared to enjoy it as 'just a fairy tale in Belgium' [*sic* —Loos is in France]. This critic was particularly severe on the simple enthusiasm for the war, the anti-German sentiment and the melodramatic acting, humorously deflating its pretensions to truthfulness, and labeling the result as good cinema but poor history.[42] The mediocre box-office returns indicate poor audience response to the film too. The realities of the war had swept away the credibility of the simplistic platitudes of the first year of the conflict. *The Joan of Arc of Loos* contained some complexities but not in areas that audiences could relate to. It still presented simple dichotomies between noble Allies and villainous Huns. While the film lasted at least six months in New South Wales, probably touring rural areas, the profit was so small as to drive Willoughby out of film production.[43] The poor result was probably largely due to war weariness but the conflict between its martial heroine and official images of the place of women in war also may have contributed to its failure.

**Later war representations, 1917-18**

The dramatic decline in box-office returns for war dramas meant that local producers largely avoided the genre between mid-1916 and the end of the war. The few films that emerged were screened to a nation fractured and polarised by Hughes' vitriolic, paranoid and hysterical policies. Heightened intervention and compulsion marked his attitude to the media as he attempted to promote support for the war with increasingly rabid language and behaviour.[44] In such a climate of official interference in the media, it was inevitable that war films would reflect the hyperbolic views of the proconscriptionists.

As scare-mongering of the most extreme kind became the norm, propaganda turned to imagining German invasions of Australia in an attempt to bring a distant war closer. Film portrayals therefore tended to transfer images of Belgium to Australia, again

imitating British films that had, for similar reasons but with greater probability, postulated a German conquest of England. In these films, the predominant representations of women were as the victims of German tyranny familiar from posters, stories and cartoons, with images of firing squads, German agents menacing and violating women, and the murder of civilians.[45]

In May 1917, *Australia's Peril*,[46] produced with the endorsement of defence and recruiting authorities during an election campaign in the wake of the political turmoil of 1916, showed an Australia ravaged by German invaders, with images parroting the excesses of Hughes' rhetoric. Surviving reviews and some posters give an idea of its portrayal of women as helpless victims of the Huns, betrayed by all the fit Australian men who had failed to volunteer. The appeal to women was to pressure men to enlist, and to men to shame them into enlisting. The advertising posters were more sexually explicit than the film could dare to be but were in keeping with the conventions of similar art work in Australia and other Allied nations, which routinely portrayed bare-breasted women as victims of enemy violation. One poster for *Australia's Peril* featured a woman, stripped to the waist, lying supinely in the arms of a leering German soldier. The headline screamed, 'Are our women safe from violation?', then the poster went on to elaborate a woman's nature: 'The supreme revelation of the three noblest passions of a woman's life — the love of a maid for a man; the love of a mother for her child; the love of a woman for her country'.[47] The message was in perfect harmony with the government's campaign, which had conscripted the image of womanhood for its own political purposes.

The film's notices were uniformly positive and suspiciously hyperbolic, boasting endless perfection in every conceivable department.[48] In view of the criticisms leveled at films in early 1916 and the tight control of conscription rhetoric by Hughes, such a chorus of praise smacks of orchestrated, government-supervised propaganda. The gap between the film's claims and its performance at the box-office was exposed by a single sardonic line in a film journal, which suggested it might better have been called *Australia's Perish*, given the lack of business that it generated.[49] Its failure must be

measured against the failure of another atrocity film by John Gavin, trying to revive his huge success with the Cavell story. *The Murder of Captain Fryatt*, released in February 1917, was relatively moderate and restrained in its representations but it raised no interest in the overheated atmosphere of conscription-torn Australia. If the moderation of Gavin's film failed, then the extremism of *Australia's Peril* had little hope of drawing a wide audience.

But two film productions in 1918 returned war themes to the top of the box-office. *The Enemy Within*,[50] released in March, was set in the Australia of Hughes' febrile imagination, a place where trade unionists and sinister industrialists co-operated with German warships cruising off the coast. In an apparent attempt to please censorship officials, pre-release publicity to exhibitors openly flaunted its attacks on the prime minister's favourite bogey-men, the Industrial Workers of the World.[51] But to popular audiences, it was marketed as 'not a war picture', to avoid deterring interest.[52] What made the film a success was neither its concessions to official expectations nor its astute marketing. It was the casting of Australia's most popular and versatile sportsman, Snowy Baker, as the secret agent who rescued the country and his girl from the clutches of the plotters. Spectacular stunts and fast action gave this film appeal where other war dramas failed. This, the only wartime war film to survive in its entirety, portrayed Baker's love interest in conventional terms. She was mostly passive, being abducted by the plotters, then rescued by Baker in action excessively melodramatic even by the standards of the day. The critics panned the plot, although many enjoyed the action in the film despite its improbabilities and the appalling standard of Baker's acting.[53] The emphasis on his manliness, which was of course built on his established popularity as an athlete of distinction in over twenty sports, reinforced traditional notions of manhood, which his love interest supported through her passive conformity to social norms for womanly behaviour.

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 director but a shrewd marketer, appealing to the already established racist association of Huns with Asiatics.[54] He was also the only producer bold enough to release a film without censorship clearance, probably hoping that an official reaction would provide him with free publicity while being sure enough of its eventual clearance. The film was briefly banned, while the censors checked the apparent slurs on the loyal Chinese community implied by the provocative advertising, but then allowed to continue uncut on its now profitable way, having gained invaluable notoriety through the episode. The censors were reported as considering the film a salutary lesson for Anzacs,[55] apparently not objecting at all to the idea that Australian women were susceptible to such complete corruption. The image of debauched Australian women was not novel. While they were usually upheld as models of purity, whose honour the Australian man must defend, the rhetoric of the day also emphasised the frailty of women who, once fallen, could use their sexual allures to tempt loyal soldiers away from their duty and possibly infect them with venereal diseases.[56]

One last war film emerged before the war's end but vanished almost without trace. *Scars of Love*, probably produced by patriotic amateurs,[57] was released in October but little record of it survives, apart from the outline of a romance between an Anzac and a nurse, both of whom were killed on the battlefield. One photographic still was published in a journal, picturing the nurse, wounded in the heart, with a spiritual, uplifted gaze, reminiscent of the images of Cavell and other martyr figures of earlier films and graphic art.

**Conclusions**

It is evident that Australian films drew on a range of images current in the portrayal of women, as well as offering some that did not fit the dominant images of the time. The overwhelming majority, however, were highly conventional. There were periods when particular images of women were more common than others. The early films concentrated more on the idea of woman as the hero's reward, frequently marrying the

returned, and usually wounded, hero to the love interest. This suited the simple popularised attitudes of the first year of the war but virtually disappeared once the majority of Australians recognised the reality of a long, hard war.

A brief flurry of films with women as hero-protagonists marked the start of 1916. These provided the most startling departures from the wartime ideology concerning the roles of women. By placing them firmly in the centre of attention, their makers offered women significant if surrogate wartime roles that officials largely denied to the Australian women who viewed the films. In the case of the Cavell films, the representation of women was sufficiently conventional to harmonise with other propaganda images, and reached audiences still prepared to be outraged at German atrocities. But *The Joan of Arc of Loos* portrayed a woman successful in combat, despite its efforts to render her conventional. The later films, heavily affected by the conscription controversies, often portrayed women as victims in need of rescue by virile Australian men, a message that underpinned much government propaganda.

Women in war films were portrayed in other ways as well, sometimes taking the initiative in support of the hero, at other times as allies of the villains. The dominant images of 'motherhood, maternity and sacrifice' were qualified and undercut by other complementary and contradictory images. But, while many representations were held in common with those in other media, cinematic representations of women focused on certain areas, and overlooked alternative contemporary images such as those of women engaged in fund raising and soldier welfare. The participation of women in the war was nevertheless given heightened significance in films. Women were the brides of heroes, caught up in spy dramas, victims of German aggression or even participants in front-line action. All of these bore little relationship to the often mundane activities of women on the Australian home-front, images conspicuously absent from the dramas but often present in journalism and posters. Portrayals of women as Red Cross workers, buying war bonds, or producing comfort parcels were ignored by the cinema because of its dependence on melodrama-driven plots. The relative absence of ordinary women from war films — mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends — created an image of a conflict

that was disconnected from the reality of the war experience of many Australian women, despite the increasing attempts of propaganda, film included, to localise and render relevant the conflict.

Avondale College

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[1]John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire. The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, pp. 2, 45-55, 68, 76; Gary S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992, pp. 1-2.

[2] Joan Beaumont, 'Australia's War', pp. 3-4, and Pam McLean, 'War and Australian Society', in Joan Beaumont (ed.), *Australia's War, 1914-1918*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995, p. 64.

[3]*Sun* 15 November 1914.

[4]Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda 1914-18 and After*, B.T. Batsford, London, 1989, pp. xvi-xvii, 8-12; Messinger, *op. cit*., pp. 18-19, and Philip M. Taylor, *What Did You Do in the War?*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983, pp. 8-10, 20-1, 23, 35-6.

[5] For example, as a precondition of approval for making *The Murder of Captain Fryatt* (1917). See Film Censor Board minute book, 20 December 1916-1925, 7/3715, Archives Office of New South Wales.

[6] L.C. Jauncey, *The Story of Conscription in Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1968, pp. 162, 181, 196, and Joan Beaumont, 'The politics of a divided society', in Beaumont (ed.), *op. cit*. pp. 48, 53-4

[7]Kevin J. Fewster, Expression and Suppression: Aspects of Military Censorship in Australia during the Great War, PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, 1980, p. 330, and Joan Beaumont, 'The politics of a divided society', in Beaumont (ed.), *op. cit*., pp. 38-9.

[8]Ina Bertrand, *Film Censorship in Australia*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1978, pp. 42-3.

[9] *Sun*, 11 June 1916; *Lone Hand*, 1 May 1918.

[10] *Bulletin*, 24 February 1916; *Theatre*, 1 May 1916, 1 June 1916, 1 July 1916.

[11] *Australian Variety*, 7 February 1917, 21 February 1917, 11 April 1917; *Sun*, 18 March 1917, 1 April 1917, 29 April 1917, and *Footlighters*, 23 March 1917, 24 May 1917.

[12] Several scholars argue that the same self-censorship occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, under considerably less pressure than Hughes' government used during the war. AFC funding for 'quality'

projects led to the development of a so-called 'AFC genre'. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia, Vol 2: Anatomy of a National Cinema*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1988, p. 32, and Brian McFarlane, *Australian Cinema 1970-1985*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1987, pp. 25-6.

[13] Marilyn Lake and Joy Damousi, 'Introduction: Warfare, History and Gender', in Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 3.

[14]R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 21-7; Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War*, Basic Books, New York, 1987, pp. xii-xiii, 4;, and 'Introduction', in Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel and Margaret Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987, p. 1.

[15]Carmel Shute, 'Heroines and Heroes: Sexual mythology in Australia 1914-18', in Damousi and Lake (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 23-5, 29-30; Maclean, in Beaumont (ed.), *op. cit*., p. 69, and Joy Damousi, 'Marching to Different Drums', in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney, 1992, pp. 356, 351.

[16]See, for example, Marilyn Lake, 'The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 86, April, 1986, pp. 116-31; various chapters in Damousi and Lake (eds), *op. cit.*; Jan Bassett, 'Ready to Serve: Australian Women and the Great War', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, vol. 2, April, 1983, pp. 8-16, and Annabel Cooper, 'Textual Territories: Gendered Cultural Politics and Australian Representations of the War of 1914-1918', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 100, April, 1993, pp. 403-21.

[17]See, for example, Katie Holmes, 'Day Mothers and Night Sisters: World War I Nurses and Sexuality', in Damousi and Lake (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 43-6, to note how the army policed the leisure hours of Australian nurses.

[18] Taylor, *op. cit.* pp. 28, 35, 52, and Maclean, in Beaumont (ed.), *op. cit*., p. 78.

[19] Maclean, in Beaumont (ed.), *op. cit*. p. 83 and Shute, in Damousi and Lake (eds), *op. cit*. pp. 32-33

[20]Antonia Laut, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991, pp. 10-11.

[21] Taylor, *op. cit*. p. 8.

[22]Producer: Higgins Brothers, director: George Dean.

[23]Producer: Australasian Films, director: Alfred Rolfe.

[24]Re: recruiting film, B539, AIF 144/1/274A, Australian Archives (AA) (ACT), and Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980, p. 64.

[25]Producer: Australasian Films, director: Alfred Rolfe.

[26]Producer: J. C. Williamson, director: Frank Harvey.

[27]Producer: J. C. Williamson, director: Monte Luke.

[28]*Theatre*, 1 January 1916, p. 43.

[29]Messinger, *op. cit*., pp. 18-19.

[30]Holmes, *op. cit*., pp. 43-6.

[31]Producer: John Gavin, directors: John Gavin, C. Post Mason.

[32]*Argus*, 21 February 1916.

[33]See, for example, the *Age*, 7 February 1916, 14 February 1916; *Sunday Times*, 30 January 1916; *Argus*, 7 February 1916, and *Theatre*, 1 March 1916.

[34]Correspondence re films from Director-General of Recruiting, MP367, 560/2/27, AA (VIC).

[35]*Bulletin*, 24 February 1916.

[36]Pike and Cooper, *op. cit*., p. 80.

[37]Producer-director: George Willoughby.

[38]Producer: Fraser Film company, director: J.E. Mathews.

[39] Peter Cochrane, *Simpson and the Donkey: The Making of a Legend*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 4-9.

[40] Pike and Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 212.

[41]A2483, B18/5425, AA (ACT); A2, 18/2829, AA(ACT).

[42]*Sun*, 9 April 1916; *Sunday Times*, 16 April 1916, and *Theatre*, 1 May 1916, 1 July 1916.

[43]*Australian Variety*, 4 October 1916; Pike and Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[44]Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, p. 47, and Beaumont, 'The Politics of a Divided Society', pp. 39, 43-59.

[45]See the Norman Lindsay posters reproduced in Taylor, *op. cit*., pp. 20, 39.

[46]Producer-director: Franklyn Barrett.

[47]From a poster reproduced in Pike and Cooper, *op. cit*., p. 90.

[48]*Australian Variety*, 7 February 1917, 11 April 1917, and *Footlighters*, 24 May 1917.

[49]*Theatre*, 2 July 1917.

[50]Producer-director: Roland Stavely.

[51]*Australian Variety*, 8 January 1918.

[52]Pike and Cooper, *op. cit*., p. 102.

[53]*Sunday Times*, 10 March 1918, and *Sun*, 10 March 1918.

[54]Maclean, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-6.

[55]*Australian Variety*, 26 July 1918.

[56] Judith Smart, 'Feminists, Labour Women and Venereal Disease in Early Twentieth-Century Melbourne', *Australian Feminist Studies*, No. 15, Autumn, 1992, pp. 30-1

[57]Pike and Cooper, *op. cit.*, p. 110.