Lost City of the Senses

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Introduction.

The following text was written during an intense period of visual research for a documentary script about two Sydney filmmakers - Rupert Kathner and Alma Brooks - who made their films during the 1930’s and 1940’s. Most likely you will never have heard of their names. Few have. Kathner’s contribution to Australian film is usually dismissed by film historians in a few lines, like this: ‘Rupe Kathner is a strangely appealing figure at the margin of Australian film history who made several cheap features…’ (1). And his collaborator Alma Brooks’ name is rarely mentioned, if at all. But, as a filmmaker, it is often footnotes and asides like these, that I find most compelling.

I viewed my first Rupert Kathner film purely by accident while searching for something else. It wasn’t a film exactly, just a few scenes of a pilot he had made to try and raise finances for a feature film. It was called ‘FALLING FOR FAME’ and it made me laugh. It was crude, over-acted and the set was minimal, but what captivated and astonished me was its concept. It was the story of a struggling independent filmmaker and a group of unemployed actors trying to make a low-budget movie and their battle with big-money overseas interests (read Hollywood) who had seized control of the local film industry. It sounds like a scenario that might have been developed today. But, this pilot was made in 1935 and I had never seen anything like it before.

As a screenwriter, producer and director, I have viewed hundreds, if not thousands, of hours of archival footage and have searched numerous photographic collections held around the country. It is rare to find an Australian film, or a fragment of an intended film, from the 1930’s that used as its topic a contentious issue of the day. Unlike many local filmmakers of that period, Kathner was not trying to imitate the Hollywood model: he was satirising it. To me, his talent is like that of the legendary Ed Wood, who was once voted ‘the world’s worst film director’. Like Ed Wood, Kathner’s work has a compelling freshness. Alma Brooks turned out to be equally as mysterious and alluring. Ex-barmaid, she had up to five aliases at various times. She co-produced, operated the camera, edited, co-scripted and acted in their films. They were partners in moviemaking, love, and (as it turned out) crime.

I began the research for my script by looking for documentary images that would illuminate the world they inhabited. Their films had captured a Sydney of shadows: poverty, slum life, gambling, drugs, crime and unsolved murders. But, after many months of searching, I had arrived at a point of frustration. The images that were most accessible about Sydney during that era – deriving mainly from newspapers of the period, newsreels, photographic books – mostly showed a world very different from that of theirs. The images pictured a bright, sunlit and carefree place. I was looking for a darker, broken city and could not find it. I sensed that the images must exist, but had exhausted myself trying to find them.

Then, I took my research on-line and discovered a whole new world of images. Digitalisation has allowed libraries and archives around the world to place selections of images they hold in their collections onto the Internet. I could now scan photographs that are held under titles that I would never even think of investigating if I had to physically do so at the various archives.

Every day, the volume of images on the net is increasing by unimaginable leaps and bounds. For example, only recently, British Independent Television News, the owners of the archival collection of British Pathe newsreel, announced that they would be publishing 12 million images from that collection on the Internet. This collection can be accessed at http://www.
britishpathe.com. And in Sydney, the State Library of NSW now has approximately 250,000 plus images digitised on the net. (http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/picman) And it was in here that I found the missing city I had been searching for: Kathner’s Sydney of the 1930’s and 1940’s.

Often the most striking photographs were taken by obscure, un-credited photographers purely for commercial reasons: the arrival of cigar-chomping Hollywood sales-men and distributors onboard a ship; or the lavish street floats used to advertise the latest Hollywood movie opening at a Hollywood-owned picture palace in the heart of the city. And their contrast: the tacky, home-made displays of the locally owned cinemas often referred to as ‘the flea-pits’. This was the world Kathner was satirising in his pilot for ‘FALLING FOR FAME’. I could now image his and Alma Brooks’ city.

For my presentation at the Imaging The City symposium at the Museum of Contemporary Art, titled ‘Lost City Of The Senses’, I wanted to construct a visual narrative, using as a centre-piece the images I had discovered on the Internet, to revisit Sydney’s past from different and unexpected angles. To break through ‘the glassy armour of familiarity’ that Victor Shklovsky wrote about. ‘If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic…and art exists that one may recover the sensation of life.’ (2) My intention was to recover some of the sensations of a city lost to our memory. And to lampoon a few of Sydney’s most familiar icons, such as the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge, the subjects of countless millions of photographs.

I realised that the images which fascinated me the most were those that were usually recorded by accident. Or taken for a reason other than that which was compelling me to study them. Like a decaying toilet photographed to show the advances the sanitation department was making in its fight against the plague that swept inner Sydney in 1900; or the shadowy figure of a workman whose job was to clean up the horse-droppings from the streets of the business district before the arrival of motor cars, his image captured accidentally in the background of a posed photograph of a horse and cart. These discards of the past, history’s trash, seem to hold unspoken stories and whispers from a yet to be discovered world buried deep beneath the constructed cityscape. Sensual mysteries worthy of further investigation and probing, that bring out from within ‘the curious excavator...(who) scratches away, discovering bits and pieces of a cultural design that seems to elude coherent reconstitution but which leads him deeper into the past.’ (3)

The following piece, therefore, is a visual-narrative work-in-progress which aims to explore our perception of a city by placing unfamiliar images in a new context and in unaccustomed narrative patterns. And, along the way, it investigates that which we choose to hold as culturally significant and that which we discard.

References:

(1) “Cinema In Australia ; A Documentary History “ Edited by Ina Bertrand. 1989.

MORE >>>> Part II : Lost City of the Senses [Presentation]

Alec Morgan is a filmmaker, writer, researcher and film archivist, whose film credits include Lousy Little Sixpence. His current projects include the Mornington Island Film Project.

Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney