

Southern Cross University
ePublications@SCU

School of Arts and Social Sciences

2013

Roll out the red carpet: Australian nurses on screen

Cathy Bridgen

Lisa Milner
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Postprint of: Bridgen, C & Milner, L 2013, 'Roll out the red carpet: Australian nurses on screen', *Working USA*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 505-523.

Published version available from:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12077>

ePublications@SCU is an electronic repository administered by Southern Cross University Library. Its goal is to capture and preserve the intellectual output of Southern Cross University authors and researchers, and to increase visibility and impact through open access to researchers around the world. For further information please contact epubs@scu.edu.au.

ROLL OUT THE READ CARPET: AUSTRALIAN NURSES ON SCREEN

Cathy Brigden and Lisa Milner

Cultural connections with caring and femininity have long been associated with the nursing profession, with mainstream media representations often reinforcing stereotypical depictions of nurses. Although more recent mainstream media portrayals increasingly depict nurses as strong, assertive professionals, little research has been conducted into films made by nurses. When nurses take on the filmmaking task, different outcomes are produced, and when their trade union is involved, unionist filmmaking becomes an organizing strategy. This qualitative study, using content and document analysis and interviews, analyses a selection of films made by, for and about Australian unionized nurses. We examine a generation of nurse-made films, from the mid-1980s to the New South Wales Nurses Association's recent innovative efforts. We argue that these films' production and reception not only shifts our understanding about how these (primarily women) workers are represented and re-presented as organized workers, but also offer new organizing opportunities for their union. We explore the relationships between film, history, gender and trade unionism, and consider how unions can use film as a mobilizing tool.

Key words: Labor; nurses; Australia; strikes; film; unions.

Introduction

Images of workers on film often create lasting impressions about the type of work done, the people doing that work and the collective relationships they form. *Norma Rae* (1979) for instance, depicts work in a textile mill surrounded by almost impenetrable noise, conducted at a pace that can kill, with personal relationships that then develop a collective form as the workers unionize. Dock work and mining historically have been shown as backbreaking labor that made men old before their time and where collectivity offered one of few protections against managerial control. In Hollywood, trade unions have overwhelmingly been portrayed as corrupt or open to nefarious influence (for example, *On the Waterfront*, 1954), and the domain of male blue collar workers.

While union-sympathetic films still struggle at the box office, recently there has been a significant increase in the use of film by unions and the left, as has been pointed out in these pages (Le Blanc 2010). Labor film festivals are being held around the world: on May Day in 2013, the first Global Labor Film Festival was held with 26 associated film festivals/events across ten countries (Garlock 2013). New websites of labor films appear with increasing regularity. A small but growing number of these films are made by trade union members themselves. When trade unions make their own films, counter images and messages are conveyed. This was expressly the purpose of the film unit set up in Sydney, Australia, by the Waterside Workers' Federation in the 1950s (Milner 2003). The film unit's best-known film, *The Hungry Miles* (1955), blends contemporary images of work on the waterfront with a historical analysis, and was screened in Warsaw at the 1955 International Film Festival where it won first prize. Since then, unions around the world have made films to commemorate, educate and mobilize: see, for example, *With These Hands* (1950), made by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union about its first 50 years (nominated for Best Documentary at the 1951 Academy Awards), and *No Looking Back* and *Fighting Back Makes a Difference*, videos made in the mid-1980s by the newly formed Canadian Auto Workers, which sought to create a new union identity after the split with the United Auto Workers.

Documentary filmmaking has offered an avenue for alternative depictions of labor and worker. In the 1970s, feminist filmmakers turned their attention to countering stereotypes about working women with documentaries such as *With Babies and Banners* (1978) and *Union Maids* (1976) (Borda 2005). Here, women were shown on picket lines, as participating in and leading collective action, as active union stewards. Attention, however, focused on women engaged in blue collar work. Where other women workers were the focus of a labor film, it was frequently through their association to men: as wives and other family members.

While professionally, nurses have traditionally been seen as amongst the most trusted of workers in Australia and the United States over a number of years (Gallup 2012; Roy Morgan 2013), and cultural connections with caring and femininity have long been associated with their profession, media representations have been more diverse. Mainstream media has veered between offering images of noble sacrifice and sexual coquettishness: nursing either as a vocation or as a route to marriage and both redolent with gender stereotypes (Stanley 2008).¹ Traditionally nurses have not been depicted as union members or taking industrial action to improve their working conditions, with trade unionism seen to be inconsistent with

professionalism. Part of the tension has been ascribed to the historical idealizing and normalizing of self-sacrifice as an integral part of nursing work, which in turn conveyed professional status. In distinguishing nursing work from that of a trade, in which regulation of wages and hours were pursued by unions, nursing organizations argued against this as inappropriate for the self-sacrificing professional nurse and at odds with the founder of the modern nursing profession, Florence Nightingale's, invocation that a "good" nurse must be a "good" woman (Bessant 1992, 157). Much has been written about the (still) vexed relationship between militancy and professionalism that faces nurses and their trade unions and professional associations, but what is evident about contemporary nursing is the militancy of nurses, a pattern seen internationally (Briskin 2011).

In this article, we look at how some nurses and their unions in Australia have taken control over media creation, to produce alternate filmed visions of their profession and their trade unionism, exploring where and how that militancy was fostered, encouraged and expressed. The research arose out of a shared interest in how films represent organized labor and how organized labor has used film (Milner 2003; Brigden 2008). From a common fondness for the 1986 Australian documentary, *Running Out of Patience*, our discussions led to further investigation into films about nurses. We then discovered a number of films made by nurses themselves, which became the focus of our research project.

We draw on the concept of frames - interpretive structures that influence how we see an issue - to shape our understanding of these films, and how viewers understand the changing nature of nurses as workers. The concept of media framing as a theoretical and analytical tool explains how media representation of specific issues, events or situations influences wider society in respect to opinion, behavior and understanding. Schudson's (2003) model of media framing considers media coverage as both a causal agent and amplifier of legitimacy for the information and opinions conveyed: this is how we understand framing in the context of this study. Frames are vital to the acceptance or rejection of these films by their audiences. They signify the active construction and selection — as well as exclusion — of information to meaningfully organize a particular interpretation of events (Entman 1993), rendering them 'more readily discernible, comprehensible, and memorable than others' (Entman 1991). Our understanding of Australian nurses' industrial action is shaped by the way that stories of nursing strikes are framed (both in academic literature and in the media), the values they

advance and suppress, and the viewers' recognition of their reasons for striking. Our decision to employ framing is shared by Norrie et al, whose study on nurses working in Spain and England notes how contemporary discourses 're-framed nurses as more flexible, autonomous, knowledgeable, patient-centred and well-regulated workers' (Norrie et al 2009, 84).

This qualitative study analyses existing literature, uses content and document analysis of union documents, publications, websites and interviews and analyses a selection of films. Our criteria were that the films were made by, for and about Australian unionized nurses². We begin by briefly considering the literature on nurses and industrial action, including media representations. Five Australian films made by nurses and their unions (henceforth nurse-made films) are then outlined followed by analysis of the key issues of presentation and representation. We then turn to a discussion of the distribution and exhibition of such films.

Nurses and industrial action

There is a considerable literature on nurses and industrial action, with studies spanning different countries in Europe, North America and Australasia, and across time periods (see Briskin 2012). Strike action has received particular attention, most notably the 50-day long 1986 Victorian nurses' strike (Bessant 1992; Curlewis, 1988, 1989; Fox 1991; McManamy 1986). Redolent through the literature are three themes, professionalism, proletarianization and patriarchy, most recently discussed by Briskin (2012). These all shape the issue of self-identity and have been explored both in specific dispute analyses as well as broader canvassing of patterns of industrial action (Kealey 2008).

Media framing of nurses and their industrial campaigns including strikes have been examined in a number of studies (Farrow and O'Brien 2005; Henttonen et al 2013; Clarke and O'Neill 2001), while some authors include such representations as a lens through which to examine public responses (Kealey 2008; Briskin 2012). Henttonen et al (2013, 2) identify the media as "a powerful storyteller that uses and reproduces cultural understandings, social institutions and social identities ... represent[ing] a key site for collective sense-making". Through opinion texts (letters to the editor both print and digital) from the 'leading' Finnish newspaper in the context of industrial action (in this case, a mass resignation), they identify how the profession was discursively constructed around industrial rights and responsibilities and how

these were framed by four competing and contested discourses: caring, the labor market, professionalism and new public management. Clarke and O'Neill (2001) examine the 1999 strike by Irish nurses and midwives through the coverage of the *Irish Times*. Care in a variety of forms - images of care and caring, types of care (such as provision of emergency care) and a 'hierarchy of caring values' - emerged as a dominant theme, as did the interplay of patriarchy and power.

Curlewis raises the importance of counter-voices, adopting oral history to explore dimensions of the 1986 Victorian nurses' strike in Australia, in which "[a]ll the frustration, anger and even humour ... and a true record of what really happened (in contrast to the media stories) are evident" (Curlewis 1988, 50). Like Clarke and O'Neill, Brown et al analyze the 1999 Irish nurses strike. However Brown et al focus their attention on the nurses rather than the strike itself; they feel that there was a lack of attention on "the impact of striking on nurses", despite "[d]iscussion in the literature of the moral uncertainty of nurses' strikes" (Brown et al 2006, 201). In the context of the 1986 strike, Bessant (1992, 156-157) examined the conflicting identities of nurses, encapsulated by the Nightingalean image of "good" nurses being "good" women.

Whether these good women/nurses could also be 'good unionists' lies at the heart of many analyses. This is exemplified by Henttonen et al's evocative title "Staining the White Uniform" and the quote by a Canadian union official that "There was this perception that if you were union, you had somehow given up your professionalism. You had dumped the lamp, so to speak" (Kealey 2008, 16). In the Israeli nation-wide strike in 1996 'the nurses' conflict – either fulfilling their nursing duties vis-à-vis the patients or maintaining the strike – resulted in most of them choosing to violate the strike rather than cause suffering to patients' (Tabak and Wagner 1997, 288). In contrast, a 2001 strike in Nova Scotia, Canada, the resolve that enabled, in this case, nurses to resign en masse led to "nurses climb[ing] up on [the back of flat bed truck] to use black markers to sign their names on their resignations for all the world to see. Many with trembling hands and eyes full of tears. But all ready to do what needed to be done" (Hambling 2002, cited in Briskin 2012, 3). For another nurse, attending a New South Wales (NSW) Nurses' Association (NSWNA) rally at the Sydney town hall "was an exciting occasion" (Bickley 1997, 304-305). For nurses, the experience of solidarity, a vital part of forging an identity as a unionist who is part of a collective, has another expression and that is through "a basis for solidarity *among* nurses, a nursing *identity*"

fostered by professionalism (Briskin 2012, 4, italics in original), drawing on McPherson's notion of "occupational solidarity" (McPherson 1996, cited in Briskin 2012, 4). Conflicting and contradictory emotions thus feature in these expressions of solidarity.

Representations of this new nursing identity can be found on our screens: some of the most potent sites of creating and remembering culture are to be found in visual media. Cinema, television, and online sources are immensely strong in creating, sanctioning and naturalizing their own versions of society, their own sites of memory. Media productions that bring counter-voices to the fore reframe nurses' identity. They also visualize the non-visual; that is, to describe - and perhaps redefine - in terms of vision that which is not in itself visual, such things as political and social agency, concepts of identity embodied in the nurse, the collective, the union.

Five nurse-made films

In this section, we outline our five focus films. They span over a generation from 1986 to 2010. Central to each is the involvement of nurses as film-makers or of their union in the film's production. Key themes are the shifting frames of professionalization and militancy through which nurse unionists are portrayed. Each film has a different genesis: *Running Out of Patience: the 1986 Victorian Nurses Strike* was made in the wake of a strike, which in turn forms the backdrop for *Handmaidens and Battleaxes*, and is commemorated in *The Rise and Rise of the Victorian Nurses Union*. The other two films, *How to Close Beds* and *Nurses Strike Train*, were made in the midst of an industrial campaign, one as a campaign tool and one for a film festival.

Running Out of Patience: the 1986 Victorian Nurses Strike (1986)



Running Out of Patience (ROOP) centers on the Victorian Branch of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), and its 1986 strike, which was a historic one for a number of reasons, although primarily because of the duration and the participants. Long strikes are not a common feature of the Australian industrial relations landscape, with one or two days being the historical pattern. Not only was this strike an unusually lengthy one at fifty days, but also the workers involved were atypical strikers, being primarily female professional employees who were industrially inexperienced. The strike is framed as the ‘industrial rite of passage’ of these workers. Chris Brown and Serena Everill, both nurses and ANF members, made this forty minute film to document “a time when the public was not allowed to ignore the remarkable endurance of nurses or their valuable and unsung work” (*The Age* 22 July 1988, 3). One of the film’s opening subtitles informs the viewer that the film has been “produced and directed by two nurses who took part in that dispute”. This fact, then, consciously frames the film from their viewpoint – as striking nurses.

Tasks of disputing and reframing the stereotyped images of nurses found in mainstream media lie at the heart of *ROOP*, which counters those images and presents the nurses’ story. After some brief introductory scenes on the contrast between past stereotypes of nurses and the reality of the profession, the film focuses on the 1986 strike. The industrial action is framed as a last resort, and justifiable action. One of the most important framing devices employed is the pitting of ‘one side’ of the dispute (government and management) versus ‘the

other side' (union and unionists). The bigger issue of the failing health care system is shown as vitally important to many people in the state, not just nurses, and for the future, not just for the present. For most nurses, this was their first experience of strike action and the emotions of the moments when nurses walk out of their hospitals shows the conflict many felt in leaving their patients. That the nurses walk out collectively and as they do so are supported by other members who greet them as they leave the hospital demonstrates how they were mobilized and politicized. Discussions at the picket line camps reinforce both the difficulties being experienced and the commitment to the strike.

A secondary enemy is included, that of the mainstream media (in so doing, further validating the making of this film). *ROOP* highlights the view of many nurses that the true picture of the state of the health system has been falsely represented, by both media and government. One striking nurse discusses “what the media have chosen not to highlight – the state of health care in Victoria”, with reference to huge nurse shortages and the number of people on waiting lists for elective surgery. As the film presents with one well-chosen mainstream media excerpt, dissatisfaction with pay and classification are what mainly what the TV news media report.

Handmaidens and Battleaxes (1990)



This film provides a historical overview of nurses' roles. Produced by Rosalind Gillespie, a nurse and filmmaker, this 55-minute documentary is marketed as 'the real story of nursing', and highlights the multiple misunderstandings of the profession. It was produced with the financial assistance of the ANF, NSWNA, the Australian Film Commission and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.³

The film surveys the professionalism, complex decision-making roles and hard work of Australian nurses, as well as changes in the industry. Using it as a bookending device, introducing and concluding the narrative, the film frames the 1986 Victorian industrial action not at the heart of its story, but as a necessary step in recent times to give nurses appropriate recognition, pay, and conditions. It also frames industrial action in broader terms of justice to nurses as a primary issue, and frames the debate around this by building up a picture of the historical and contemporary working conditions of nurses, constructing a favorable framework of values so that the viewer may be more inclined to agree that industrial action was a necessary step. The historical and contemporary images of nursing that comprise the bulk of the film frame the necessity of nurses' transition to industrial action as a strategy for improving wages and conditions. The voices of ordinary nurses as well as union leaders are represented, with footage showing striking nurses out on the streets of Australian cities. Those struggles are underlined by footage and interviews of nurses in the UK and USA, framing the argument that these struggles have international parallels.

The Rise and Rise of the Victorian Nurses Union (2006)



The Rise and Rise of the Victorian Nurses Union (Rise and Rise) was produced by Carrie Kennedy of the Melbourne production company Carben Copy for the ANF's Victorian branch, to commemorate the 20-year anniversary of the 50-day strike⁴. A more conventionally structured and chronologically told union history, the film foregrounds four female union secretaries at the narrative's center. The growing and changing industrial strategies of the union are traced after the 1984 removal of the no-strike clause, with the increasing focus on the health system/sector as a whole.

Including the post-1980 leaders, Barbara Carson, Irene Bolger, Belinda Morieson and Lisa Fitzpatrick, reinforces that this is a union led by women. The centrality of women's leadership reflects evident continuities as well as change. Issues canvassed include the impact of government (both state and federal), the increasing sophistication of industrial campaigns and rhetoric used, and how the union framed issues and demands, from classifications to care. Underpinning all is the capacity to care for patients - both in terms of individual industrial conditions for nurses but also collective aims regarding the health system - 'nursing it back to health' with industrial demands about workload in the form of nurse-patient ratios (NPRs) the mechanism for achieving this. Significant achievements were outlined, from 1985 which began acculturating nurses to taking strike action, to the 1986 strike through to 2000 and the campaign for NPRs.

Unlike the other films, the production of this film neither immediately follows nor is made during an industrial campaign. Instead, it is framed as both a celebration of the growth and achievements of the union branch and a warning about the need for collectivism in a time of increasing anti-unionism and threats to workers' rights posed by the then conservative federal government (Muir 2008).

Overlaying the film is Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody's iconic song *From Little Things Big Things Grow* (one which is well-known in Australia). A literal interpretation is taken from the chorus (a simple yet powerful repetition of the title) and applied to union growth. Parallels can also be drawn between the unexpected shifting of power arising from commitment to and articulation of demands and the taking of collective action, in the song about land rights, in the film about labor rights – so cast in a broader 'rights' context.

The NSWNA's nurse-patient ratio (NPR) campaign of 2010, where patient safety and working conditions came together, is the focus of the next two films.

How to Close Beds (2010)



How to Close Beds (Beds) is a six-minute film, made in-house by the NSWNA to provide hypothetical situations to explain measures to implement and maintain their work bans as part of the 2010 industrial campaign. The film opens with that organization's leader, Brett

Holmes, speaking to camera to reassure his members that their industrial actions will be supported. Combining instructional and advocacy objectives, the film is framed as having been made explicitly for striking NSWNA members (not nurses generally, and not the general public).

Kate, a nurse in a surgical ward, works through various scenarios to provide information and support for those nurses who may have to close beds in their workplaces, including how to deal with management. She explains how “we’re not on our own” as nurses in other wards are doing the same thing, taking action “to provide safe patient care”. Kate explains how “unfortunately, nurses in NSW have no other choice” but to take this action, and suggests that “with nurses and the community working together, we can win ratios”. At the end of the film, NSWNA Assistant General Secretary Judith Kiejda speaks about the situation, with the state health system in a poor condition. She asks nurses to “maintain that steely reserve” to achieve NPRs.

This film frames the industrial action from the nurses’ point of view at the bedside. Practical advice is given about how to take this difficult action. As with the other films, it frames the action as historic and the last step. There is no framing of the strike in terms of pay or other conditions, only NPRs, and so the whole of the industrial action is framed as necessary for safe patient care. It is situated in the context of a collective response but addresses the demands placed on individual nurses or groups in the workplace. It is important to recognize that, unlike contemporary mainstream media depictions of nurses, this film consciously employs emotionality as a positive force, and highlights the conflicts and tensions between the roles of nurses as carers and nurses as strikers.

Nurses Strike Train (2010)



Nurses Strike Train (NST), a four-minute film, was made by nurse educator, NSWNA member and filmmaker Carolyn Guichard, and presents NSW nurses' actions on 24 November 2010, when, the opening title relates, "four thousand nurses and midwives met at Sydney Olympic Park in a historic strike protest at the Government's refusal to fund safer patient care". Edited to a contemporary rock song, the film is framed as a music video, and presents the day of the walk off – striking nurses collectively travelling by train to Olympic Park for the mass meeting, and collectively voicing their support for the strike to support the introduction of NPRs in NSW.

The choice of song for the soundtrack (*Stand Up*, by David Harper and Danika Golombek), rather than any voiceover, frames the strike as a contemporary and relevant action. The film's titles mirror some of the song's lyrics; lines such as "we're gonna stand up" and "never give up" frame the strike as one of action and collaboration. Other lines, like "this has been a long time coming", and "they'll only listen when they can't ignore us", frame the industrial action as inevitable and powerful.

This film centres on solidarity and celebration. The striking nurses appear like any other striking Australian unionist at a mass meeting; this is achieved through their physical placement outside their hospital wards – viewers do not see the nature of their work in hospitals across the state. The song's overarching power acts to unite the strikers, negating

any internal divisions or hesitations they may have. *NST* frames the industrial action as arising purely because of the issue of NPRs: pay and other conditions are not mentioned. The film, produced after the fight was won (as shown by the final title), is more consciously celebratory than earlier films discussed, reinforcing the impact of collective action. Over the closing credits, the collectivity is again reiterated with the well-known chant of “What do we want? Ratios! When do we want them? Now!”

In an energetically filmed and edited style, this documentary shows the actions and emotions of unionists and their leaders in the fight for better outcomes for their patients. Guichard, its director and a former freelance photographer, has continued her volunteer filmmaking for her union. She believes that films like hers “empower nurses” to become more active unionists, commenting that “whilst the mainstream media’s depiction of nurses is changing for the better, there needs to be more action for nurses to represent themselves” (Guichard interview 2012).

Analysis

In our focus films, it is clear that increasingly, the films more assertively represent Australian nurses and their growing industrial voice, and parallel their industrial and professional development, bringing counter-voices to earlier stereotypical representations of nurses. Films reach their audiences in a highly mediated form, always partial and selective representations of the world, and involve processes of selection of material, construction of patterns and employment of symbols. All filmmakers make decisions to select from newly shot film, archival footage, artwork, music, voice-over narration and interviews. These decisions are no less subjective than those made by other artists or producers of culture. The films that nurses’ unions produce operate as intertextual mosaics of referents, triggering residual memories from actual events and media representations of those events as an underlay for the new interpretation of ideas raised by those events (Dovey 2002, 15). The remembered histories of the nursing profession and the more recent nurses’ union movement are at stake here. The films play two important roles. Firstly, they act as a collective counter-memory, highlighting the stresses that nurses live through during industrial action. Secondly, they draw upon the emotional power of the cinema in bringing the emotional labor of nursing to the fore.

Hobsbawn (1997, 273) discussed the value of “what ordinary people remember of big events as distinct from what their betters think they should remember, or what historians can establish as having happened”: these films are evidence of ordinary people’s representations. One of the nurse-filmmakers says that “film has incredible power - it makes people feel emotional” (Guichard, interview 2012).

The focus films often use oral history methods linked to nurses’ ethical struggles with engaging in industrial action. The nurse-unionists who were there at the time stand before the camera, and, often quite emotionally, tell their story - of the dispute that kept them from their families and patients for weeks, of being threatened and spat at on the picket lines, of the times that police physically manhandled them. This is important to consider: in these films, the individual unionist’s story - not just their actions but their emotional responses to their actions and their repercussions - becomes valued and recognized as important. Muir writes that if organizers of industrial action “can frame an issue in a way that links it into existing mainstream discourses of fairness, democracy, and/or of widely accepted social values their chances of success are enhanced” (Muir 2006, 10).

We argue that nurse-filmmakers can similarly frame nurses’ industrial action to enhance the chances of audience recognition and sympathy. These nurse-made films present their witness accounts and histories in order to produce assent with their political stance, to produce collective remembering along politicized and emotional lines. They engender a mode of social subjectivity through their viewing. Within the growing body of analysis of the relationship between affect and politically-charged documentary (see for example, Kahana 2008; LaMarre and Landreville 2009), Smail’s work on the power of emotion has a direct resonance in these union films. Emotions, she reminds us, “delineate and give meaning to objects, including bodies, communities, social practices and political regimes, through discursive processes. In this manner they ... infuse perceptions of documentary subjects” (Smail 2010, 6). The authentic acts of these unionists telling and recording their stories add to their own self-worth, and influence their self-identity.

Because of the caring and altruistic dimension of their work, nurses constitute a special category of workers. All these films highlight this point, most eloquently articulated in *Handmaidens and Battleaxes*. As the literature shows, nurses have now, and have always been expected to produce calm emotions in patients whilst managing their own emotions. Industrial activism, especially strike action, produces a new set of emotions - anger, resentment, conflicts of loyalty - that disturb the expectations of management. The nurse-made films visualize, record, and therefore help to legitimize these new emotions. The modes of emotional existence that occur on the picket line of a nurses' strike are, of course, dissonant: they are impersonal in that they belong to collective situations and yet they can be felt intensely personal, and are, as Anderson (2009, 80) has called them, "affective atmospheres".

Events in our focus films include stressful meetings, emotionally charged picket lines, unionists' responses to aggressive police, and subsequent reflections on those actions. Framing in *ROOP*, for instance, captures the tension between the professional and industrial with emphasis placed on the protection of the profession by industrial means. Contrary to the traditional deference to authority, *ROOP* frames the industrial action as (necessary) resistance to authority (government, the industrial tribunal, police). A sense of inevitability of action is created along with the need to take a stand. Framed through the eyes of striking nurses, we see the cycle of anger and frustration, but also the picket line as becoming a way of life, as creating a community, the embodiment of commitment, solidarity, determination, and the emotionality of walking off the job and the withdrawal of one's labor as a highly emotion-laden act. The picket lines took on the character of any other picket line - in this sense the re-characterization of nurses as industrial workers - the daily life of picket duty, food, entertainment, protection against entry into the site (the hospital) by trucks etc. In all these films, the "affective atmospheres" surrounding the nurses' actions are retold in powerful, emotive ways.

Changing identity for these nurses included a growing willingness to see themselves as 'workers' and their professional association as a trade union and part of the broader labor movement. Whilst *Handmaidens and Battleaxes* places these developments in an international and historical context, *ROOP* keeps the focus solely on the particular dispute.

What is not mentioned is that, to that end, in 1978 the Victorian nurses union had affiliated with the state labor federation, the Victorian Trades Hall Council (THC), joining the wave of other female-dominated white collar and professional unions that affiliated between 1975-1978 (Brigden 2007). One of the key workplace leaders in the 1986 strike, Isabel Collins, both seen and heard from in *ROOP*, was a THC delegate from 1980. The removal of the 'no-strike' clause in 1984 was another key shift in this reconceptualization, with members of the Victorian branch undertaking a 5-day strike the following year, as told in *Rise and Rise*.

NST reinforces the image of nurses as workers on strike, or going to mass meetings - again in many ways indistinguishable from other union members except for those in uniform who are the reminder of the occupation group. Again we see images of commitment, solidarity, and determination, with a music track that provides an aural sense of togetherness supporting these images. In both *NST* and *ROOP*, mass meetings convey the same sense of solidarity, but there are striking differences in how the members approach industrial action. With nurses unaccustomed to taking industrial action, in the 1986 dispute the good nurse/good unionist dichotomy was at its most marked. In 2006, in *Rise and Rise*, this dichotomy was beginning to be framed as two sides to the one profession. By 2010, these competing identities had been further reconciled. Anger is a prevailing emotion but its expression in 2010 is not preceded by tears or if it is, that is not how it is framed by *NST* or *Beds*: these films frame nurses as expressing more positive emotional responses. Along with greater experience and familiarity with taking and justifying industrial action, the increasing sophistication of forms of industrial action is evident in the later films. *Beds*, for instance, takes out the emotion of walking off the job and creates a sense of the committed professional who calmly but resolutely upholds the bed closures. And *Rise and Rise* stands back from the whole of the organization to make a broader analysis of industrial action and its repercussions, while also including the views of the next generation of nurses, student nurses.

Through the development of framing in these focus films, the depiction of these events have produced affective atmospheres for nurses that are dramatically different from mainstream and traditional framing of nurses. We argue that, as nurse-made films, they reflect the new militancy of nurses in particular ways, and increase the possibilities of affective connection to these films by viewers. The films also counter the stereotypical media representations of

militant and (physically) aggressive and combative images of the Australian striking unionist. They are new representations of the ways in which women are increasingly performing as political actors, and provide compelling evidence of Yates' argument (2006, 582) regarding a necessary "rewriting of popular ideas about women and unions" that works to counteract the many decades of mainstream media stereotypes. In addition, they employ new collective action frames, and in so doing, "empower people by defining them as potential agents of their own history" (Gamson 1992, 7). We now turn to examining some of the ways in which these films have been screened.

Exhibition: Festivals and Screenings

In 2009 the NSWNA held its first short film festival, with 17 finalists, to celebrate International Nurses' Day. Now a biennial event, the 4th festival in 2013 featured 12 finalists.⁵ One of the aims of this focus on nurse-made films was about communication with the community. As Brett Holmes wrote to his members, "there is a strong case for a union re-engagement with the arts and a creative use of modern communications. We will not further the professional, industrial and political interests of nurses by being invisible to the wider community. I am confident our authentic stories will resonate with the public and engender their support for our issues" (Holmes 2009, 5).

At the heart of the films is the way nurses have been able to present nursing, exercising a degree of control missing in mainstream representations. Speaking at the opening of the inaugural film festival, Holmes said it "has been an exciting opportunity for members to portray nurses in a realistic, positive light. The festival has enabled nurses to tell their own stories. They have taken control of how nurses and nursing are portrayed". In so doing, it "shattered the mould of negative nurse stereotypes" (NSWNA 2009, 12). The filmmaking initiative has worked as a tool of advocacy: the union now uses the film to show new members that they "are a strong and active union of members who are prepared to stand up together to achieve their aims, whether it's the threat of losing conditions or to insist on decent pay rises" (Ridge, personal communication, 6 July 2012). In recognition of the skill development required, "being able to make that leap from putting it on film, to actually

making a film”, the union subsidizes special filmmaking training courses run by the National Institute for Dramatic Art: courses for beginning as well as experienced film makers have supported the film initiative in very practical ways (Holmes, interview 2013).

Further, these films have had broader community impact with international screenings. *NST* has been screened at union branches around Australia and internationally in North America, the UK and Ireland. For instance, it is regularly played at the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions’ provincial conferences. It was also shown at the Public Sector International meeting in Geneva in 2012. *RoboNurse* (2009), the 2009 winner, was screened at the 2010 Geneva Labour Film Shorts Festival. To reach a still broader audience, the films also go online: some of the winning films have been posted on the NSWNA YouTube channel, with an increasing audience, as the NSWNA and many other unions adopt Web 2.0 as another way to distribute counter-hegemonic information on current and past events affecting working people all over the world. Importantly, the competitions and general support of the NSWNA, like the creation and maintenance of YouTube channels, are organizing mechanisms, acts by the union to encourage, and enable, members to make films.

Conclusion

While it is too soon to gauge the impact of some of these films on promoting militancy among members, the power of these films has resonated with their audiences, and the widening variety of distribution and exhibition methods are getting these films to more people. As an activist tool, *ROOP* was being shown in the UK in 2013. In March, it was part of a campaign against health service cuts as “part of a series of research and events looking at struggles for healthcare throughout history and asking what we can learn from them” (Direct action for Lewisham hospital 2013). On 1 May 2013, as part of the New Cross and Deptford Free Film Festival (part of the neighborhood-based Free Film Festival), *ROOP* was on the bill: “to see what we can learn from that struggle (the conditions they where [sic] facing and the actions they took), and its relevance to the situation we face today” (Free Film Festivals 2013).

Targeting not only current members but also potential members and students was the distribution of *Rise and Rise*. Launched at the Victorian Branch's Annual Delegates Conference in 2006, the film was then distributed to job delegates and "sent to all Victorian universities and TAFEs to give the next generation of nurses a recent historical context of current nursing wages and conditions" as well as showing the ANF's transition from a polite professional association to a strong industrial and political organisation" (ANF 2006).

NST resonates with officials, ANF and other nurse unionists:

In terms of motivating, for members, *Strike Train* is an obvious example of power. You get standing ovations for playing the *Strike Train*. Here Australians will sit and say, 'Oh yeah'. The Canadians are on their feet, tears running out of their eyes, clapping and cheering. Every time I see it I remember the day, I remember the strike, and how it felt to stand on the stage. It brings it back to me. It is very emotional. To see five hundred people at a [Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union] conference ... Sometimes I have played it twice at the one conference. I asked the conference if they wanted to see it again and there was a resounding 'Yes'. To want to see the same film a second time that's just so uplifting, that is inspiring (Holmes, interview 2013).

A Victorian ANF member, Tara Nipe, singled out *NST* at the launch of the 2013 NSWNA public sector campaign:

I spoke about the importance of maintaining enthusiasm and motivation – and that, toward the end of the 2011-2012 Victorian nurses dispute campaign, I played [*NST*] ... every night. I was delighted to learn that Carolyn Guichard, who created this short film that so encouraged and lifted me in those last six weeks or so, is a nurse and [NSWNA] member (Nipe 2013).

Clearly, for some viewers at least, the power of film transcends national boundaries. As one international viewer of *NST* commented on the NSWNA YouTube website: "Just watched this today in Saskatchewan, Canada at our own Provincial Nurses' Union Bargaining

conference. Our main priority in negotiating a collective agreement is developing manageable workload/nurse-patient ratios. Was an amazing message of emotion and encouragement!” (‘Tricky835’ 2013).

The nurse-made films creatively and consciously use the particular emotions engendered in nurses’ industrial disputes to reach out to their audience. We argue that this use helps to transform nurses into active patient care advocates. This leads to the issue of management, in the form of union leadership, and the importance of transformational leaders as key to changing representations of unionists/workers.

The type of advocacy highlighted in these focus films resonates with a recent push for nurses worldwide to become more assertive as workers and unionists. Buresh and Gordon (2000) most accurately identify the challenges to “end the silence” by increasing the ways in which nurses can themselves change the frame, and help to form a more accurate and positive, and less stereotyped, image. They help to use the “voice of agency” to improve the status of nurses in the community. Until recently in Australia, as well as elsewhere, nurses’ lack of organizational power, and their lack of voice in producing media representations, have not advanced their agency.

The media are critical to our understanding of the world: as Delacour (1991, 413) argues, “Certainly it is important that we analyse the process through which dysfunctional images and discourses are maintained. Moreover, it is useful to regard reading media as a politically situated and critical activity for the nursing profession”. The media’s representation of nurses, as well as the industry’s own conceptions of the profession, has always had to contend with “multiple choices and tensions in their collective identity” (Bessant 1992, 156). Often highlighting the emotional labor inherent and often undervalued in their profession, nurse-made films frame these issues differently - they help to balance the portrayal of workers against the traditional media’s often stereotypical view of unionists. When union management allows its members to produce their own films, encourages and publicizes their efforts, and works to distribute and exhibit them, a more activist self-identity is an outcome. The conflicting identities of vocation and industrialized profession often come into a clearer light. The films discussed in this essay contribute to the growing body of evidence that sees

that necessary “rewriting of popular ideas about women and unions” counteracting the many decades of mainstream media stereotypes.

Dr Cathy Brigden is an associate professor in the School of Management and coordinator of the Women + Work research cluster in the Centre for Sustainable Organisations and Work at RMIT University, Melbourne Australia. Alongside her research exploring women in trade unions and separate organising, she has a longstanding interest in the use of film in the study of labour history and the representation of workers and work.

Dr Lisa Milner is a lecturer in the Media program at Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour Australia. Her published work includes *Fighting Films: a History of the Waterside Workers’ Federation Film Unit* (Pluto Press, 2003) and her current research interests are focused on representations of workers and trade unions in film and television, and the power of the documentary format to represent working communities.

Contact information:

Cathy Brigden

Building 80, Level 8; Room 31
School of Management
RMIT University
445 Swanston Street
Melbourne 3000
Victoria, Australia
Tel.: (+61 3) 9925 5915
cathy.brigden@rmit.edu.au

Lisa Milner

Room MG7
School of Arts and Social Sciences
Southern Cross University
Coffs Harbour, NSW 2450
Australia
Tel.: (+61 3) 6659 3916

Interviews

Caroline Guichard, 17 January 2012

Brett Holmes, 15 March 2013

References

- 'Nurses strike now a film.' *The Age*, 22 July 1988, 3.
- Australian Nurses Federation 2006. 'ANF launches new 'The rise and rise of the Victorian nurses union' documentary'. <http://www.anfvic.asn.au/news/3501.html> Accessed 7 April 2013.
- Anderson, B. 2009. Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, Space and Society* 2(2): 77–81.
- Bessant, J. 1992 'Good women and good nurses': conflicting identities in the Victorian nurses' strikes, 1985-86. *Labour History* 63: 155-173.
- Bickley J. 1997. The limits of language: ethical aspects of strike action from a New Zealand perspective. *Nursing Ethics*, 4(4): 303-312.
- Borda, J. 2005. Feminist critique and cinematic counterhistory in the documentary *With Babies and Banners*. *Women's Studies in Communication* 28(2): 157-182.
- Brigden, C. 2007. A women's place? Women in the Victorian Trades Hall Council from the 1880s to the 1990s. *Australian Feminist Studies* 22(54): 369-384.
- Brigden, C. 2008. 'Representations of labour: Images of work and workers in film'. In P. Stanton and S. Young (Eds) Proceedings of the 22nd Conference of the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand, Melbourne.
- Briskin, L. 2011. The militancy of nurses and union renewal. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 17(4): 485-499.
- Briskin, L. 2012. Resistance, mobilization and militancy: nurses on strike. *Nursing Inquiry* 19(4): 285-296.
- Brown, G., A. Greaney, M. Kelly-Fitzgibbon and J. McCarthy. 2006. The 1999 Irish nurses' strike: nursing versions of the strike and self-identity in a general hospital. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 56(2): 200-208.
- Buresh, B. and S. Gordon. 2000. *From Silence to Voice*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Clarke J. and C. O'Neill. 2001. An analysis of how the *Irish Times* portrayed Irish nursing during the 1999 strike. *Nursing Ethics* 8(4): 350–359.
- Curlewis, R. 1988. Voices from the nurses' strike, Melbourne 1986. *Oral History Association Journal* 10: 50-67.
- Curlewis, R. 1989. The Victorian nurses' strike 1986. *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* 11: 81-86.
- Delacour, S. 1991. The construction of nursing: Ideology, discourse and representation. In G. Gray. & R. Pratt (Eds.), *Towards a discipline of nursing*. Melbourne: Churchill Livingstone.
- Direct action for Lewisham hospital. 2013.

<https://directactionforlewishamhospital.wordpress.com/a/> Accessed 3 April 2013.

Dovey, J. 2002. Confession and the unbearable lightness of factual. *Media International Australia* 104: 10-18.

Entman, R. 1991. Framing U.S. coverage of international news: contrasts in narratives of the KAL and Iran Air incidents. *Journal of Communication* 41(4): 6-27.

Entman, R. 1993. Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. *Journal of Communication* 43(4): 51-58.

Farrow, T. and A. O'Brien. 2005. Discourse analysis of newspaper coverage of the 2001/2002 Canterbury, New Zealand mental health nurses' strike. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 14(3): 187-195.

Free Film Festivals. 2013. New Cross & Deptford Event, Free Film Festivals. <http://www.freefilmfestivals.org/whats-on/new-cross/details/168-new-cross-learning-cinema.html?pop=1&tmpl=component> Accessed 3 April 2013.

Fox, C. 1990. Antecedents of the 1986 Victorian Nurses' Strike. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 32(4): 465-487.

Gamson, W. 1992. *Talking Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gallup. 2012. Honesty/Ethics in Professions. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>. Accessed 21 August 2013.

Garlock, C. 2013. First Global Labor Film Festival Launches on May Day, AFL-CIO Unions. <http://www.aflcio.org/Blog/Your-Turn/First-Global-Labor-Film-Festival-Launches-on-May-Day> Accessed May 1, 2013.

Gordon, S., J. Buchanan and T. Bretherton. 2008. *Safety in Numbers: Nurse-To-Patient Ratios and the Future of Health Care*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hallam, J. 2002. Vocation to profession: changing images of nursing in Britain. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 15(1): 35 – 47.

Henttonen, E., K. LaPointe, S. Pesonen, and S. Vanhala. 2013. A Stain on the White Uniform—The Discursive Construction of Nurses' Industrial Action in the Media. *Gender, Work & Organization* 20(1): 56-70.

Hobsbawn, E. 1997. *On History*. London: Abacus.

Holmes, B. 2009. Nurses hit the big screen. *The Lamp*, June: 5.

Jennings, K. and G. Western. 1997. A right to strike? *Nursing Ethics* 4(4): 277-282.

Kahana, J. 2008. *Intelligence work: the politics of American documentary*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Kealey, L. 2008. No more 'yes girls': labour activism among New Brunswick nurses, 1964-1981. *Acadiensis* 37(2): 3-17.
- LaMarre, H. and K. Landreville. 2009. When is Fiction as Good as Fact? Comparing the Influence of Documentary and Historical Reenactment Films on Engagement, Affect, Issue Interest, and Learning. *Mass Communication and Society* 12(4): 537-555.
- Le Blanc, P. 2010. Radical labor subculture: key to past and future insurgencies. *WorkingUSA* 13(3): 367-385.
- McManamy, S. 1986. Nurses' work, nurses' worth. *Arena* 77: 119-128.
- Milner, L. 2003. *Fighting Films: A History of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit*, Pluto, Sydney.
- Muir, K. 2006. Sky Channel and the Battle for Australians' Hearts and Minds: The ACTU's use of Media in the 'Rights at Work' Campaign. Paper presented at the Australian & New Zealand Communication Association International Conference, 2006. *Empowerment, Creativity and Innovation: Challenging Media and Communication in the 21st Century*, Adelaide. Available online at http://www.adelaide.edu.au/anzca2006/conf_proceedings/muir_kathie_skychannel_battle_australian_hearts.pdf Accessed 1 October 2012.
- Muir, K. 2008. *Worth fighting for: inside the Your Rights at Work campaign*. Sydney, University of NSW Press.
- Norrie, C., J. Muller, I. Goodson and F. Hernandez. 2009. Restructuring nurses' worklives and knowledge: case studies from England and Spain. *International Nursing Review* 56: 81-87.
- New South Wales Nurses Association, 2009. Nurses tell their stories. *The Lamp* 66(5): 12.
- Nipe, T. 2013. 742 days, and counting – a post for NSW nurses and midwives. <http://tnipe.wordpress.com/2013/03/21/742-days-and-counting-a-post-for-nsw-nurses-and-midwives/> Accessed 10 June 2013.
- Roy Morgan Research Pty Ltd. 2013. Roy Morgan Image of Professions Survey 2013. <http://www.roymorgan.com/~media/Files/Morgan%20Poll/2013/May/4888-ImageofProfessions2013April2013.pdf> Accessed 9 May 2013.
- Schudson, M. 2003, *The Sociology of News*, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Smaill, B. 2010. *The documentary: politics, emotion, culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stanley, D. 2008. Celluloid angels: a research study of nurses in feature films 1900-2007. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 64(1): 84-95.
- Tabak, N. and N. Wagner. 1997. Professional solidarity versus responsibility for the health of the public: is a nurses' strike morally defensible? *Nursing Ethics* 4(4): 283-293.

'Tricky835', Comment, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7SkA4WM_ms Accessed 19 October 2012.

Yates, C. 2006. Challenging misconceptions about organizing women into unions. *Gender, Work and Organization* 13(6): 565-584.

Notes

¹ See Stanley (2008) for examples of films that reproduce stereotypes about nurses, such as *Carry On Nurse* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

² See also *Breaking Point* (1998, Waterbyrd Filmz), which analyses the 1986 Victorian strike but was not made by nurses or their union.

³ It won the Australian Film Institute's Best Documentary Award in 1990.

⁴ Carben Copy takes its name from those of its founders, Carrie Kennedy and Ben Morieson. It is a small production company that has produced films and television programs in Australia since 1994.

⁵ In 2010, there were 15 finalists and 8 in 2011.