

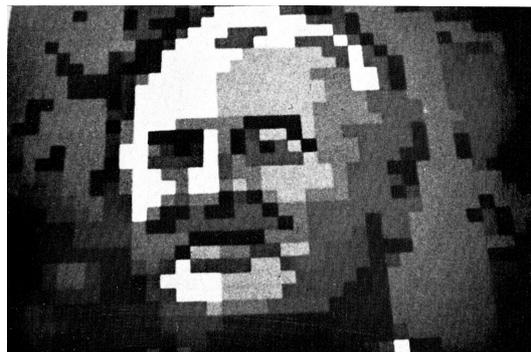
# MAKING THE FICTUMENTARY

**Paul Davies**

**Cantrills Filmnotes #35/36 (April 1980)**



*EXITS* was written by Paul Davies who produced and co-directed it with Pat Laughren and Carolyn Howard. The film includes poems by Eric Beach (*No No No* and *Mr. Fraser's Car*) plus music by Ken Schroeder. It was a no-budget short feature made for a song with a little bit of funding for post-production from the Australian Film Commission. *EXITS* was a finalist in the Greater Union Awards at the 1980 Sydney Film Festival and was also invited to the Melbourne Film Festival the same year. It premiered as one of the last events to go on at Melbourne's iconic Pram Factory theatre on 11/11/1980; screening alongside John Hughes' experimental video *NOVEMBER 11* and an exhibition of paintings relating to "The Dismissal" by Antonio Muratore. The abstract painting of Gough Whitlam used in the film was painted by Wayne Larsen:



Camera: Paul Cavell,  
Sound: Lynton McFadzean  
Music: Ken Schroeder

47 minutes, Colour and B&W (Melbourne 1980)

# CAST



Caz Howard (Anna)



Paul Davies (George)



Mary Anne Grey  
(Rose)



Charlie Dale (The Digger)



Robert Antoniades  
(The Manager)



Entrances and Exits in *Exits*

What is the relationship between the media and politics? To what extent does one control the other, and how can we assess that control? The most obvious point is that people who own or work in the media exert enormous influence on society. Conversely, most people - the vast majority - have no influence on public events; on events which for better or worse shape their lives. *Exits* is a look at that world from their position, an historical narrative dealing with the events of November 11 1975, the day on which the Labour government of Gough Whitlam was removed from office. The film examines the effect of this dramatic change of power on a handful of characters wandering around Melbourne: ordinary people trapped by extraordinary circumstances.

And yet contained within Malcolm Fraser's grab for power is a stark revelation of the flimsy constitutional base on which all parliamentary authority rests. Australia has always been, and still is essentially, a monarchy. The most powerful figure in the land is someone called the Governor General who also just happens to be the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. The irony is that it all happened on Remembrance Day: the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. The moment at which people commemorate the terrible slaughter of the First World War. As the official propaganda of the day would have it, this was the "war to end all wars."

Irony became a key factor in organizing the historical material for the film. A reflection on the actual course of events provided a simple "documentary" structure on which we could hang the growing bewilderment and outrage of the "fictional" characters whose viewpoint the film takes.

## November 11, 1975 – A CHRONOLOGY

- Pre-9 am. Newspaper headlines promise a “way out” of the 10 week old constitutional crisis brought on by the Senate’s refusal to pass the Budget. Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, we were told, are at last going to sit down and talk.
- 9.00 am The meeting lasts three-quarters of an hour and solves nothing.
- 10.30 am Whitlam tells Caucus there are enough funds for a half senate election.
- 11.45 am The house of Representatives sits and a no-confidence motion in the government is turned into a no confidence motion in Malcolm Fraser.
- 12.40 am Whitlam leaves Parliament House for “Yarralumla”, the Governor General’s residence, to advise a Half-Senate election. He has spoken to Kerr about this earlier and receives the impression that the Governor General has no objection.
- 12.45 am Malcolm Fraser arrives at Yarralumla ahead of Whitlam and is ushered into a side room while his driver is told to park the car around the back.
- 1.00 pm Whitlam arrives and is immediately sacked by Kerr.
- 1.30 pm Fraser is sworn in as the caretaker Prime Minister and returns to the Liberal Party meeting in Parliament House to announce that he is the only legal Federal Minister.
- 2.25 pm The Senate passes the budget.
- 2.28 pm The House of Representatives passes a motion of no confidence in Fraser.
- 2.42 pm Fraser tries unsuccessfully to adjourn the House.
- 3.00 pm The House of Representatives orders the Speaker, Gordon Scholes, to see the Governor General and advise him to recommission Mr. Whitlam.
- 4.30 pm Scholes arrives and is told an appointment has been made for 4.45pm.
- 4.45 pm The Governor General’s secretary David Smith reads the proclamation dissolving parliament to an angry crowd of students and public servants.



David Smith reads the proclamation dissolving Parliament

Spontaneous demonstrations occurred throughout Australia. 10,000 people gathered in Melbourne's city Square and later marched on to Government House, the Liberal Party headquarters in South Melbourne, and to the Robert Menzies' Centre in Albert Road. The following day in Sydney a group of people smashed through a police line and charged into the Stock Exchange. Four and a half weeks later Malcolm Fraser was elected to power with the largest majority in Australian history.

Out of consideration for these events was born the desire to make a film about the influence of political changes on the fortunes of ordinary people. It seemed that people always got closest to the truth when caught in an exaggerated situation. *Exits* was inspired by the Whitlam sacking and written on scraps of paper in the streets, trams, and lane ways of Melbourne over a 12 month period in bits and pieces at nights and weekends. Most of the documentary material, the press conferences, the demonstration footage and the idea for the subtitles was incorporated into the film after the principal shooting of the basic story had been completed.

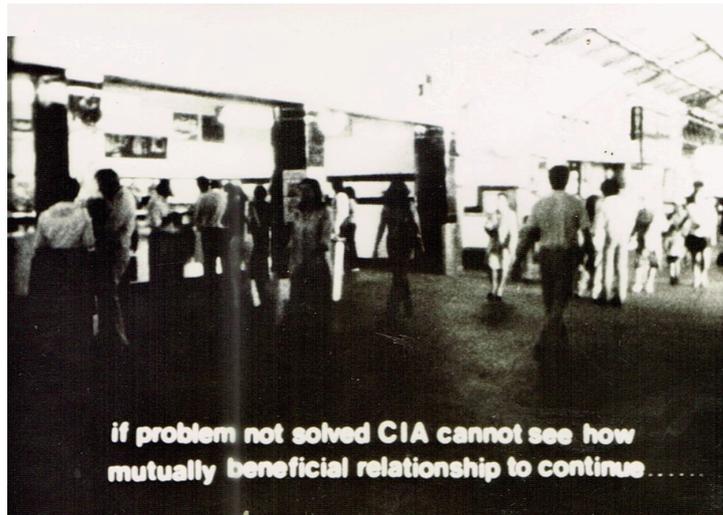
There was never any grand plan. It seemed to us, simply, that 16mm film-making was a more accessible form of expression than most people were prepared to admit. We had enough money to buy the film stock and rent a Nagra (tape recorder) and a crystal-sync camera (an Arriflex 16mm). The intention then was to "locate" the film back in the streets and the public transport on which it was conceived. The context (the background of the streets, the dump, the pub and the cinema) was vital in supplying a certain documentary validity to the "invented" story of the characters - particularly so if this was two intercut with actual press conferences and media reports of the time.

Above all we wanted to make a film about escape and to do so in such way that the boundaries between recorded fact and constructive fiction were always floating. In this way people might see that the emotional reaction of the characters, their assessment of the political events, is more valid than the dry language of the media. It follows that if Australia was still rooted in a political system devised in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England, then the whole place is still, as it then was, a kind of prison. The Whitlam years must now be seen as a failed attempt to break out of our colonial situation. That at least is the macro view. On the micro level people colonise each other.

Against the larger exits of Whitlam from power, Anna from Melbourne, and the "Digger" from life are set the minute by minute escapes that everybody makes when the room or the other people in it have become intolerable. Anna, the cinema usher quits her job, and a little later is again walking out on her former manager in the pub. The film opens with George coming out of the building where he works, at a loss as to what to do with the rest of the day. He wanders aimlessly around town, buying papers, and finally settles on the cinema, which is itself another exit from reality.

Here he meets Anna and later, as the news of Whitlam's sacking comes through, Anna and George try to rationalize the significance of it all. In the absence of





*Exits* attempts to supply this missing aspect of the causes of the coup by presenting the case of the five characters: a cinema manager, the two ushers who work for him (including Anna), the Digger and George. In this way a fictional/emotional account is pitted against the so-called real account; personal history grapples with the media record and their relative validity is left in the hands of the audience.



Only Anna seems to take a strongly individualistic course. She is best able to come to terms with the personal consequences of political and social alienation in her story about the young man who bails up a family in her street with a bush knife. This is in fact a real story, based on an event that once occurred in my street. The pent up fury and random violence of that young man against all authority seemed symptomatic of the feelings many people shared towards the events of Remembrance Day 1975. Anna's position, broadly, is that the whole thing is personal: politicians, to her, act out only the charade of power. Without

parliament things would continue much as they always have done. George, on the other hand, is locked in a more class-oriented view of society. He can find no way out at all. At the end of the film he returns to his room to find it evacuated. Everything has been taken. No reasons are supplied. It's just all gone. The film opens in this room with Whitlam on the radio assuring us that the causes of the Labour Governments' problems are external. It ends with the voice and image of Fraser assuring us that "we'll all get used to the change".

The film starts out in the manner of a traditional narrative drama. We see the characters waking up on November 11 and going to work. Subtitles establish the date, and some quick inter-cuts of Whitlam and Fraser arriving at Parliament House establish the format. Thereafter the fortunes of the characters and the politicians parallel each other. Anna is sacked at the moment that Whitlam is, and from then on the cinema where she works "The National Theatre" (like the 29<sup>th</sup> Parliament) starts to fall apart.

But cutting through all this are the poems and the music. At certain key points the narrative is abandoned in favour of war imagery, a collage of press conference statements from Fraser, or a poem. The effect is cumulative rather than linear. The film, through the poems, attempts to supply a context that the media constantly censors. Eric Beach's poems also remind us that behind all the contortions of what actually happens is the issue of who rules and who loses, i.e. the issue of class:

### NO NO NO

Work all day got nothin t' show  
 They sweat my pay, just another Joe  
 Father Xmas, ho ho ho  
 No no no  
 No no no  
 This can't be the place where the Liber-als go

Some got pull  
 Some got shoelaces  
 Turn on the lights, how come I still can't see their faces?  
 Lots of dough  
 No no no  
 No no no  
 This can't be the place where the Liber-als go.  
 I brought you a tram ticket, oh  
 Some Jaffas to rattle at the show  
 Father Xmas ho ho ho  
 No no no  
 No no no  
 This can't be the place whether Liber-als go.

Eric Beach

The poems have this summing-up quality about them. They condense the focus of the film to the key issues: class, power, alienation, and behind all of them: war. The visual images amplify the poetic metaphor and enforce the rhythm. The last poem therefore becomes a summary of the whole day:

**MR. FRASER'S CAR IS JUST AROUND THE CORNER, RAG**

Gough was first, but he was last,  
 Shake it when the Queen goes past  
 Big black car, my big black past  
 Goes to show the Queen has class  
 All you loyal subjects take your hat off to me  
 Cause I'm so square  
 Cause I'm so rare  
 Get your Xmas message here.

I don't want no Melbourne club  
 Silverware now there's the rub  
 Turn your glass down at the pub  
 Guff is Gough has lost his job  
 All your little people take your hat off to me  
 Cause I'm rag  
 Cause I'm a rag  
 Cause I'm a rag-time millionaire

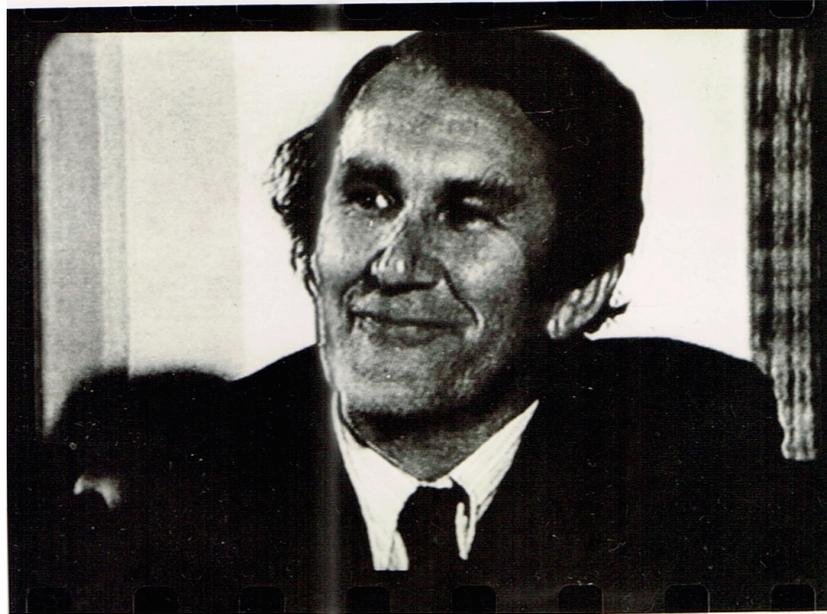
Discount store has got my pay  
 Discount I still work all day  
 Discount what the papers say  
 Discount when the cow make hay  
 All you little people take your head off to me  
 Cause I'm so hmmm...  
 Cause I'm so aaah...  
 Cause I'm so la de da de da.

Western District we're are all friends  
 VW loves Mercedes-Benz  
 Means have gone beyond our ends  
 Got the economic bends  
 All you little people take your head off to me  
 Cause I'm no fool  
 I pulled the wool  
 I'm a full time millionaire

Vote for me on coup d'etat  
 Genuinely needy – ta  
 If my diction seems contra  
 Tell the ABC it's war  
 All you little people take your head off to me  
 Cause I'll go far  
 Cause I'll go far

I'm round the corner in the car.

Eric Beach



“You’ll get used to the change” Malcolm Fraser  
Post-coup press conference, November 11, 1975

Contained within the events of November 11 1975 is a great deal of what can only be described as farcical. This is not to take away from the seriousness of what happened. But plainly much of it was absurd, ludicrous. There are sequences in *Exits* which match this, which don’t appear to make any sense: George walks past a yellow cab sitting empty in the street with one door open and the radio on. He reaches in through the passenger side and pulls out two Billy Graham pamphlets, stares at them and walks onto the pub. On the cab radio we hear the morning news bulletin assuring us that there is going to be a half-Senate election after all. Whitlam appears to have survived the crisis brought on by the denial of Supply.

But the Billy Graham pamphlets are the disturbing note. Whenever religion comes into it there’s bound to be deception. The morning news, like the headline “Hope For Way Out – Leaders Meet Today”, lulls us into a false sense of security.



Shortly afterwards George discovers an abandoned *Herald* in the pub announcing Whitlam's dismissal, and Kerr-ist ! The nightmare has begun. The film is immediately interrupted by a newsflash and quick series of handheld shots in the streets, nervous, jerky, point-of-view images with the newsreader's voice cut across two tracks to give an ominous "Big Brother-ish" effect. We hear George's voice raving to an unseen cab driver and laid over this, another media account of the sacking. But by now all accounts sound the same, because in effect they are reading off the same press release, the one put out by Fraser and Kerr. Sound and picture build to a climax with George yelling in the street, urging total strangers to fight back. But even in his lonely gestures there is the all pervading sense of failure, paranoia, doom. As Anna says to him later: "it's all too late. You're too late."

She is the only character with a direct solution. She goes home, packs her bag, and delineates her reasons for leaving (exiting), front-on to the camera: "the farce is over," - only to return to the pub again, and after that the cinema. Finally, she goes off on a tram outside Luna Park.

The Cinema Manager (who remains nameless) is given some money by Rose (Mary Anne Grey -the other usher). He puts some of it on a horse and gives the rest to Anna, who promptly gives it back to Rose, thus exposing the manager's deception. Favoring one employee above the other, ripping off Rose essentially.

But what looks like a plot becomes merely a series of circular gestures. Money, politics, power goes round and round. Meanwhile the characters in *Exits* are all trapped, all prisoners either consciously or unconsciously of factors outside their control. The Governor General sacks Whitlam as Prime Minister and appoints Malcolm Fraser as the new Prime Minister. When Fraser goes back to Parliament and immediately loses the confidence of the House, the Governor General dissolves in it, ignoring the call of the Speaker for him to reappoint Whitlam. Somehow, in all this there is something peculiarly Australian. The muddle and the hopelessness. No kind of a truly genuine social progress seems possible.

A first assembly of the film was about two hours long. The key decision in cutting it to 50 minutes was the abandonment of anything that went against the idea that here we have five fairly ordinary characters, living out fairly ordinary,

unexciting lives, yet passing through the most traumatic political circumstances. We wanted to have the option of telling the truth (all the documents, references, telexes, and a lot of of the dialogue are based on fact) with the higher appropriateness of dramatic licence. That licence though, had to contain the core of the certain a emotional validity, otherwise we ourselves would be party to a general deception. Again, how successfully this works depends on the audience.

When friends heard about our work and the collective nature of it, documentary footage, music, poems, books, telexes, clues, began to flow in. as we assimilated this material into the body of the film it soon became obvious that there was no need to invent a plot. The “plot” was the events of the day itself.

To make the whole thing work with the limited resources available we had to complete the shoot in 10 days with the crew of four people. We chose the fast reversal stocks largely created for television news gathering and prepared a fairly detailed shooting script. Again the idea was to transfer the documentary technique to narrative drama. The theory worked a lot better as the shoot progressed. Towards the end we were doing scenes in one take, improvising dialogue and keeping the camera moving as much as possible. The fast stocks allowed us to do most of this without any additional lighting. This saved time and made the one-shot, one-take strategy possible: the Luna Park scene, the beach scene, the crossword scene in the pub, and the scene in the cab at night are all examples of this.

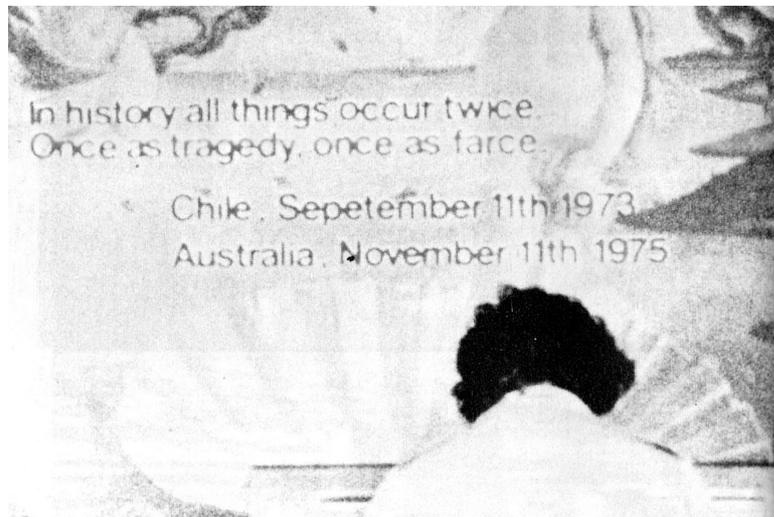
There was never anybody really in charge of the film. No “auteur” as such. . To a certain extent Pat Laughren and I worked out the angles and blocked scenes the night before each day’s shoot – this helped, and it gave us the feeling that we knew what we were doing, but it didn’t necessarily dictate how things had to be done. Likewise, the boundaries between cast and crew were pretty fluid. All the crew, at some stage, appear in film. Pat, Carolyn Howard, Rob Scott and I were responsible for the cutting. At various stages we’d screen the work in progress for others who had worked on the film and their reactions influenced any further cutting that followed.

After the broad structure of the film had been laid down, it’s bore little resemblance to the original script, especially as we developed the idea of cutting from the general (media account) to the particular (fictional narrative). Having set up a sequence in this way the key question then was “Does this work?” If there wasn’t an immediate consensus we’d fiddle with it until it seemed right. Only towards the end of the fine cut, when things had to be truly fixed, did this process of consensus-editing become difficult.

The attempt was above all to capture the shock people experience when they’ve been lulled into a full sense of security about the world and how they react when they discover (uncomfortably) something (life, politics, history) will never be the same again... or will it? ... or is it?

In History all things occur twice  
Once as tragedy, once as farce:

Chile September 11, 1973  
Australia November 11, 1975



(3606)