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Petromodernity, the environment and historical film culture

BELINDA SMAILL

For most people the concept of ‘oil cinema’ or ‘petrofilm’ might conjure images of crude oil, industrial processing or wells. Instead the oil industry has, over the course of a century, harnessed the potential of the moving image to orchestrate powerful narratives that visually evoke oil only occasionally as a material substance. The public relations agenda of oil companies has utilized moving image culture in sophisticated ways, going beyond predictable advertising forms to more comprehensively and ‘seamlessly equate the story of oil with the experience of modernity’, as Mona Damluji observes.¹ The preferred genre for petroleum companies has been documentary, and the development of petrofilm culture in the first half of the 20th century became enmeshed with the centres of documentary production. Highlighting the importance of this sphere of filmmaking, Patrick Russell and James Piers Taylor write that

no sector of society made more enthusiastic use of the sponsored film than the oil companies; no medium was more enthusiastically embraced by them than the documentary film, so nobody interested in the relationship of media to society can afford to leave the post-war oil documentary out of its history.²

Heeding Russell and Piers Taylor’s claim, this essay pursues the additional assertion that documentary film and media has played a pivotal role in the transforming relationships between people and the Australian environment. Focusing on the film work of Royal Dutch Shell in the post-war era, especially the operation of the Shell Film Unit Australia (SFUA), I explore how petrofilm connected petroleum culture,

1 Mona Damluji, ‘The image world of Middle Eastern oil’, in Hannah Appel, Arthur Mason and Michael Watts (eds), *Subterranean Estates: Life Worlds of Oil and Gas* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), p.147.

2 Patrick Russell and James Piers Taylor, *Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-War Britain* (London: British Film Institute, 2010), p. 88.

documentary film culture and ways of perceiving the non-human environment.

The effect of petroleum on the industrial, political and social developments of the 20th century is so wide ranging that it is difficult to quantify. ‘Petroleum culture’, in Brian Black’s words, is constituted by a ‘complex spider web-like system of relationships and interrelations [that] forms a portrait of our life with petroleum’.³ This network is intricately manifest across both human and non-human, including the effects of carbon emissions on the climate and the degradation caused by the extraction of fossil fuels. Indeed the material basis of film itself, celluloid, is derived from petrochemicals and forms part of the 20th century’s cultural life with petroleum. While there have certainly been important studies of the film practices of oil companies, Shell and British Petroleum in particular,⁴ almost none have undertaken detailed critical studies of the relationship between popular knowledge about the natural environment and what I refer to as petrofilm culture (or the institutions, films, personnel and distribution of film produced by oil companies). Brian Jacobson’s study of BP’s film *Shadow of Progress* (Derek Williams, 1970) is an important exception. Jacobson attends to the fact that we know little ‘about how corporations like BP – the agents of the Anthropocene – have used mass culture to orient and acclimate broad publics to their globe-changing work’, compared with our understanding of the visual culture of environmental activism.⁵

Moreover, while debates in film and screen studies over the last decade have begun to grapple with the environment, its politics and mediation,⁶ there are still only a few eco-critical readings of film-historical concerns. Such work is important because historical analysis addresses what Tom Griffiths describes as an urgent requirement for meaningful histories of the past and the unfolding present ‘that enable us to see our own fossil-fuel society in proper perspective, and to see ourselves not just as a civilisation but as a species’.⁷ Cinema is a significant component of cultural histories that assist us in denaturalizing the unquestioned assumptions about how we live in and affect the non-human world.

An eco-critical investigation into historical petrofilm culture offers the opportunity to test a synthesis of methods in film history with those in environmental history. Thomas Elsaesser’s work on industrial film has much to offer an analysis of the SFUA. He advocates a pragmatic approach that accounts for three contingencies: the commissioning body; the concrete occasion for which the film was produced; the target uses or audience.⁸ Elsaesser suggests that attention to these three concerns enables an understanding of ‘film as event’, recognizing that ‘the actual film is only one piece of the evidence and residue to be examined and analysed’. Accounting for the event can ‘determine the relation of one film to another, and to understand its place in wider histories’.⁹ While Elsaesser’s approach alone is not adequate to enable an analysis of the relationship between film and the non-human environment, the network

3 Brian C. Black, *Crude Reality: Petroleum in World History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), p. 7.

4 See Damluji, ‘The image world of Middle Eastern oil’, pp. 147–64; Mona Damluji, ‘Visualizing Iraq: oil, cinema and the modern city’, *Urban History*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2016), p. 641; Rachel Webb Jekanowski, ‘Fuelling the nation: imaginaries of western oil in Canadian nontheatrical film’, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2018), Special Issue, Communicating power: energy, Canada and the field(s) of communication, pp. 111–25; Rudmer Canjels, ‘Films from beyond the well: a historical overview of Shell films’, in Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (eds), *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), pp. 243–55; Brian R. Jacobson, ‘Big oil’s high-risk love affair with film’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 April 2007, <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/big-oils-high-risk-love-affair-with-film/#!>> accessed 14 December 2020; Colin Burgess, ‘Sixty years of Shell film sponsorship, 1934–94’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2010), pp. 213–31; Russell and Piers Taylor, *Shadows of Progress*; Lee Grieverson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital and the Liberal World System* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

5 Brian R. Jacobson, ‘The *Shadow of Progress* and the cultural markers of the Anthropocene’, *Environmental History*, no. 24 (2019), p. 161.

6 See, for example, Sean Cubitt, Salma Monani and Stephen Rust (eds), *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*

(New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); Adrian Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013); Alexa Weik Von Mossner (ed.), *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014); Anil Narine (ed.), *Eco-Trauma Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2014); Helen Hughes, *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014); Robin L. Murray and Joe K. Heumann, *Film and Everyday Eco-Disasters* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

- 7 Tom Griffiths, 'Environmental history, Australian style', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2015), p. 173.
- 8 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Archives and archaeologies: the place of non-fiction film in contemporary media', in Hediger and Vonderau (eds), *Films that Work*, p. 32.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Kristin Asdal, 'The problematic nature of nature: the post-constructivist challenge to environmental history', *History and Theory*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2003), p. 73.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.
- 12 Adrian Ivakhiv describes this in detail in his discussion of three approaches to the ecologies of cinema; most notable in this respect is what he terms the 'anthropomorphic' function of cinema. Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, p. 9.
- 13 See Damluji, 'The image world of Middle Eastern oil', for a discussion of how petroleum company film units were involved in the globalization of the British documentary film movement after World War II.
- 14 Colin Burgess, 'Sixty years of Shell film sponsorship, 1934–94', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2010), p. 214.

of relations it implies is generative. This is because environmental histories of politics and culture are best understood when we can account for knowledge that has emerged from specific human *and* natural histories, from the material *and* the cultural. Drawing on the post-constructivist work of Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour, Kristin Asdal argues for an understanding of how humans stand in relation to nature: 'politics, our bodies of law, our ideas and beliefs about nature, and our regulating mechanisms all exist in relation to various forms of nature as a real, active presence'.¹⁰ Asdal presents a further provocation: 'Human and nonhuman actors: How do they co-exist? This question must be asked, concretely, in every single case dealing with a web of human and nonhuman interactions'.¹¹

A rigorous approach to thinking of the natural environment, as an active presence and through film history, presents a challenge in that it must be attuned to bringing nature and society together and undoing the entrenched dichotomous thinking that has kept them apart. These dualisms persistently cast human life as separate from and above nature, rather than acknowledging our mutual co-existence. Such an approach must also recognize, however, as film scholars have shown, that cinema is adept at reinforcing and remaking dualistic categories, whether the polarities of nature/culture or within human typologies.¹² My essay grapples with this confluence of concerns to investigate the history of production, distribution and documentary representation within the sphere of the SFUA. It examines how the mobile film units deployed in the Australian outback offer a way of considering the conjunction of environment and film practice. It also attends to the SFUA's production schedule, with close analysis of both prestige documentary and explicitly promotional, utilitarian film.

In 1934 Shell established a film unit in the UK on the recommendation of John Grierson, widely acknowledged as the founder of British documentary. As Damluji writes, Grierson played a pivotal role in the developing status of petrofilms as a category of prestige company film, an endeavour that, in later decades, helped to globalize the British documentary movement.¹³ Edgar Anstey, another key figure within the movement, was appointed as its first producer. Not only did the unit demonstrate a provenance that tied it to the pioneers of the British documentary movement, as Colin Burgess notes it was 'one of the first industrial organisations to adopt the documentary film as a means of public relations, and the first to promote its distribution as part of a global network of communications'.¹⁴ Shell's adoption of documentary, and indeed the development of petrofilm culture more broadly, should be seen in context. From the 1920s cinema was deployed by corporate entities and governments (and partnerships between the two) in order to further global capitalism in a range of locations and modalities. Charting these uses of cinema, Lee Grieveson describes how Britain responded to globalizing Hollywood, and the ensuing consumption of American products, with the establishment of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB)

in 1926. Emphasizing that documentary was key to the EMB's plan for the projection of economic and state power, Grievson asserts a strong instrumental role for the genre, describing it as a 'filmic practice born directly of liberal imperialism and the imperative to maintain imperial order and economic primacy in the global capitalist system'.¹⁵ The rise of the sponsored documentary, and Grierson's role in advocating for its importance across government and industry, harmonizes with this imperial vision.

In this spirit of geopolitical expansion, Shell eventually set up film units in a select number of nations including Venezuela, Egypt, Nigeria, India and Southeast Asia, but the film unit in Australia, established in 1948, was the first outside London.¹⁶ Describing these 'daughter units', Bernard Chibnall notes that individual films were sponsored by the local Shell company and made by the local unit, and 'the London unit played no part in such production',¹⁷ signalling a significant degree of regional autonomy. Occasionally, however, staff would be sent from London to support a large schedule of production elsewhere.¹⁸ While the film unit structure formalized a production strategy for Shell, the company had been sponsoring films since the early 1920s.¹⁹ Understanding the 'film as event' in cultural histories requires not only broad attention to institutions and their agendas but also recognition of the individuals who were key to these histories. While Grierson is one such individual, so too is John Heyer, the Australian filmmaker who was the first head of the SFUA and whose vision is inseparable from the relationship between the stated mission of the unit and the documentaries that resulted.

Heyer is credited as producer or director on at least 19 Shell-sponsored films. An accomplished filmmaker, versed in the British documentary tradition, he was the first Senior Producer at the Australian National Film Board (ANFB) before he left to join Shell. Heyer directed the *The Back of Beyond*, released in 1954, a documentary that became not only Shell's most celebrated Australian film but also the most prominent example of Australian post-war filmmaking. *The Back of Beyond* traverses 330 miles through the Australian desert, following Tom Kruse as he takes his post van on one of his fortnightly journeys from Marree to Birdsville. It is a dramatized documentary, a poetic, tightly scripted non-fiction, with reenactments drawn from Kruse's experiences on the track. *The Back of Beyond* was the result of an explicit brief from Shell to create a film that captured the 'essence' of Australia. In an interview, Heyer describes Shell's motivation:

they thought: 'Let's make a film that is very Australian, one which would demonstrate that by the fact of making it, "we're with you"'. Not something superimposed on Australia, but as if it were with you and seeing your virtues and your weaknesses. They hoped the Australianism [sic] would rub off on to the company's image.²⁰

The brief for this documentary is specific, albeit concerned with the intangibility of a national psyche, and points to a larger public relations

15 Grievson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations*, p. 7.

16 Bernard Chibnall, 'A family affair', *Film User*, November 1962, p. 573.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 572.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 573.

19 See, for example, Ruby Arrowsmith-Todd's account of the Shell Film Unit in Australia, in *Mapping the Settler-Colonial Travelogue: The Shell Film Unit in Australia 1939–1954* (Dissertation: Macquarie University, 2016). See also the discussion of Willy Mullen's *Bataafsche Petroleum Film* (1924), a three-hour documentary made in the Dutch East Indies, in Canjels, 'Films from beyond the well', p. 243.

20 Gordon Glenn and Ian Stocks, 'John Heyer: documentary filmmaker [interview]', *Cinema Papers*, September 1976, p. 190.

21 Canjels, 'Films from beyond the well', p. 243.

22 Burgess, 'Sixty years of Shell film sponsorship, 1934–94', p. 224.

undertaking – a sophisticated approach to the sponsored film that relied upon associative meaning rather than clear propaganda. As Rudmer Canjels notes in relation to the work of the London unit in the 1930s, while Shell initially undertook to produce a schedule of propaganda films, popular science, technical films for specialist audiences and newsreels, filmmakers including Grierson and Anstey convinced Shell of the benefits of the prestige documentary film,²¹ including the merits of subtle forms of association that equated prestige filmmaking with enhanced corporate status.

Linking the prestige documentary to the ways in which Shell grappled with furthering its global reach in the face of the post-war removal of colonial protections to commercial competition, Burgess writes:

Shell recognised that, under the new political and economic conditions, it needed to prove to host countries that it was a 'good citizen'. The company, therefore, sought to justify its presence in the emerging nations and to display its citizen credentials, both of which entailed showing that it understood nationalist concerns about issues such as economic expansion, public health, agricultural development and population problems.²²

Shell worked to marry the commerce of global capital with social good in its films. When it presented activities associated with its core business (petroleum sourcing, production and products), it infused them with vitality and deemed them indispensable to progress. Yet, and perhaps more powerfully, Shell specifically orchestrated a slate of film production that engaged with a range of local/nationalist concerns, and these were often dealt with in a way that spoke to underlying sensibilities of industrial and technological modernity, thus facilitating the work of the company in subtle ideological ways. The SFUA's establishment in 1948 coincided with the mobilization of a wide-ranging nation-building endeavour in Australia that was supported by the Labour Prime Minister Ben Chifley and continued after 1949 with the Liberal, centre-right government of Robert Menzies throughout the 1950s. The Chifley government set into motion initiatives such as large-scale housing construction, the laying of many kilometres of road, and the massive Snowy Mountain Hydro Scheme, discussed below. The Menzies government offered further support to all of these initiatives. Shell's promotional agenda and the optimistic industrialization supported by successive governments dovetailed easily and productively.

The early years of the SFUA coincided with not only a crucial nation-building moment in Australia but also a pivotal juncture for recognition of 'the environment' – in the 1950s the conventional ecological meaning of this term was taking shape and gaining currency in the centres of the West through measurable scientific and policy formations. As Paul Warde, Libby Robin and Sverker Sörlin explain, 'the environment' emerges as a 'crisis concept, born out of a sense of urgency dealing with looming challenges of great magnitude. But it was also, paradoxically, a

23 Paul Warde, Libby Robin and Sverker Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 23.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

25 For a fuller discussion of the environment movements in Australia, see Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *History of the Australian Environment Movement* (Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

26 This becomes apparent when looking at the themes Albert Moran observed in post-war documentary in his 1988 study, 'Nation building: the post-war documentary in Australia (1945–1953)', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1988), pp. 57–79.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

28 Glenn and Stocks, 'John Heyer: documentary filmmaker [interview]', p. 121.

concept grounded in the middle of postwar reconstruction, so it was a concept of peacetime.²³ Natural resources had demonstrated their crucial importance during the war, including their potential as a source of conflict. In 1948 the newly constituted United Nations released a memorandum on the Scientific Conference on the Conservation and Utilization of Resources. Warde, Robin and Sörlin note that this conference and others mobilized understandings of a planetary biotic community, including limited natural resources, heralding a new 'collective endeavour'.²⁴ In Australia the first-wave environment movement, with its focus on preservation,²⁵ declined in the aftermath of World War II. It was eclipsed by the requirement to fully engage the natural environment in the advancement of the new nation, and the management of resources through new technologies was a dominant cultural narrative of the 1950s. This was a precursor to the Australian resources boom of the early 1960s, which capitalized on the extraction of iron ore, uranium and bauxite. I am interested in how the early work of the SFUA sits at the prehistory of the collective endeavour outlined by Warde, Robin and Sörlin. This is rich terrain for analysis, given that non-human nature was visualized and narrativized in a range of films. Indeed, the SFUA was not the only film producer of the time to offer representations of the natural environment; Australian documentary excelled at telling the story of nationhood through the specificity of the continent's wildlife and geography.²⁶

Film culture, and predominantly documentary film, in the 1940s and 1950s was invigorated by new film units and initiatives that included, but went well beyond, the work of the SFUA. The period stretching from 1945 to 1953 is a celebrated period in Australian documentary, especially in the realm of government-sponsored film. As Albert Moran describes, with the establishment of the ANFB in 1945 a new film culture emerged, with a faction of documentary filmmakers fostering 'a variety of film traditions and practices; indeed, they were Australia's first film intellectuals. In doing so they constituted Australian government documentary as a lively, interesting, sometimes moving body of work far from monolithic in subject, outlook or style.'²⁷ Importantly, the story of petrofilms cannot be understood through a set of top-down corporate policy concerns alone, it also involves creative practitioners and the formation of a broad documentary culture in post-war Australia. The SFUA's standing at this time drew Heyer away from the ANFB, partly due to the freedom filmmakers were afforded to pursue projects, and partly to the distribution system Shell had established, a system that meant that '*The Back of Beyond* was seen by a million people in a year and a half. In Sydney, the queue went half way round Wynyard Sq. to the Shell house cinema.'²⁸ By 1948 there was already a unique and impressive distribution and exhibition network for Shell-sponsored films in Australia, which included the Shell Educational Film Library, Shell 'theatrettes' in the capital cities, mobile units that travelled to remote areas, and mobile projection teams in

29 Harvey Mitchell, *A Seat Under the Stars: A History of Shell's Work with Film in Australia* (London: Vega Press, 1989), p. 13.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

metropolitan areas.²⁹ Films were also screened in other venues, including town halls and schools. By the early 1950s the unit had produced a number of films under the official banner of the SFUA: *Rankin's Spring's is West* (Geoffrey Powell, 1950), *Around a Gum Tree* (David Bilcock Jnr, 1949), *Alice Through the Centre* (Peter Whitchurch, 1949), *Farming for the Future* (Geoffrey Collings and Shan Benson, 1949) and *Shellubrication* (John Heyer, 1951). This distribution and exhibition network meant that Shell films could circulate with great efficiency. Within this matrix of distribution, the mobile units offer a particularly interesting study on the terms of Australian geography.

The units were, effectively, vans equipped with lighting, power generators, portable screens and 16mm film projectors. In the 1950s cinemas only existed in larger towns but the mobile film units could travel across great expanses of remote Australia to bring films to isolated communities. The continent is vast, with the greatest proportion of the population by far concentrated in urban areas on the coast, especially the eastern seaboard. Shell's own documentation describes the work of the mobile units in Western Australia (WA), the largest state by land mass. During 1948 the film unit visited 93 centres in WA, and arranged 112 country shows that were attended by 13,000 people.³⁰ While mobile units enabled screenings in town halls or even wool sheds,³¹ projectors could be set up outside with ease in any community that lacked the infrastructure for indoor screenings. In some cases seating did not exist and audiences brought their own makeshift chairs.

Australia's geography fostered isolation and demanded inventive modes of communication to produce the nation's imagined community; the operation of the mobile units suggests one such response. To the extent that they showed the same films in regional or remote communities as in metropolitan areas, they contributed to the project of incorporating city and outback in a shared experience. They fused continent and nation as they traversed isolated parts of the geography, and often screened films concerned with the new nation and its shared agenda. They also implanted cinema *in nature*. The outdoor screenings imposed themselves on the landscape while the environment, no doubt, actively shaped the cinema experience. Far from the darkened, air-conditioned and sound-insulated theatre that film scholars have associated with the 'dream state' of cinema since the 1970s, the mobile units installed cinema in the elements, with dirt, desert or paddock as the floor, and often exposed to the stars, wind, heat, animal life and sounds. There are no records detailing the specific reception practices that characterized the screenings of the mobile cinema units, but it is possible to imagine the varied viewing conditions of the time. There is again a reflexivity in play – just as spectators' sensory experience was infused by the non-human environment, many of the films, whether travelogues about Australian life in the outback, or about agriculture, wildlife and industry, conveyed both the difficulty and potential of the continent's materiality and geography for a colonial settler audience. These are, for

example, the same challenges reflected so poetically in narrative form in *The Back of Beyond* – both the frailty and tenacity of settler or community life, the celebration of technology (particularly the motor car and shortwave radio) and the harshness of the Australian outback. As I note below, moreover, Shell’s mission into remote Australia supported its broader rhetorical associations with travel, mobility and mastering Australia’s interior, themes that buttress the value and ideals of petromodernity.

While the SFUA mobile units offered a particular experience of the natural environment to audiences (both on screen and through modes of reception), they were not new. As Zoë Druick charts, they had been in use in the UK since the mid 1920s and later operated in the British colonies, particularly Africa.³² In Australia, Ruby Arrowsmith-Todd writes, mobile units were operated not only by Shell but also in the Northern Territory by the Native Affairs Branch (although they probably included Shell films in their programming). In this context they were a tool for assimilating indigenous peoples while also “rehabilitating” indigenous audience members at sequestered, educational screenings until they were “ready” to re-enter the realm of commercial cinema-going as citizen-consumers’.³³ Following World War II, the broader use of mobile cinema was associated with particular social purpose, one of which Shell would have been aware. In 1949 UNESCO produced a report titled ‘The use of mobile cinema and radio vans in fundamental education’. This report reflected, as Ian Goode notes, an already proven utility: the use of 16mm film in ‘facilitating education and literacy through mass media’.³⁴ Examining the use of mobile film in China before the Communist Party came to power in 1949, Goode concludes that non-theatrical cinema used in rural areas, such as that facilitated by mobile vans, ‘enables, in the face of relative cultural and economic scarcity, the instrumental use of cinema for ends that strive to affect geographically marginalised audiences according to institutionally centralised objectives’.³⁵ Mobile units were understood to combine the specificity of geography with the instrumental rather than the commercial aspirations of cinema.

How this instrumentality occurred specifically in relation to the SFUA requires acknowledgement of their diverse production slate at this time. Canjels’s work on the international reach of the London SFU refers to the company’s own categorization of “hard-sell” (sales promotion and advertising) and “soft-sell” (public relations, like most of the SFU films).³⁶ For my purposes both of these are salient, and the distinction is in some cases difficult to discern. Both were concerned with the identity of Shell and facilitating public perceptions, not least by impressing audiences with well-crafted documentary aesthetics. *The Back of Beyond* is by far the most well-known ‘soft-sell’ film, with its connections to Shell often mentioned only as a footnote. While this film is crucial to the SFUA archive, I argue that a closer look at the rest of the film work undertaken by Shell has much to offer.

32 Zoë Druick, ‘At the margins of cinema history: mobile cinema in the British Empire’, *Public*, vol. 40, no. 1 (2009), pp. 118–19.

33 Arrowsmith-Todd, *Mapping the Settler-Colonial Travelogue*, p. 45.

34 Ian Goode, ‘UNESCO, mobile cinema and rural audiences: exhibition histories and instrumental ideologies of the 1940s’, in D. T. Gennari, D. Hipkins and C. O’Rawe (eds), *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Context* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 220.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 233.

36 Canjels, ‘Films from beyond the well’, p. 250.

Other notable films of the time include *Around a Gum Tree*, which used the iconic tree as a motif to explore the diverse Australian industries that sit alongside its habitats. A notable series of documentaries, *In the Steps of the Explorers*, followed the colonial explorers, tracing a path through towns, cities and outback to celebrate and memorialize the experiences and achievements of the British masculine colonial endeavour. The first instalment in 1956 focused on Hamilton Hume and William Hovell (Bernard Gandy, 1956). These films promoted either Australian colonial history or the nation's industry and future economic potential through the travelogue, a documentary format that was dominant at the time. Because it frequently sought to show national specificity, the varied Australian geography was almost always a feature of the travelogue film from the 1940s through to the 1960s, even though these films were often diverse in style. With their emphasis on the nation, its people, environment and history, they all signalled an interest in reaching a wide audience demographic. The more explicitly promotional films often sought not simply to advertise products but to educate about the importance and utility of petroleum for contemporary society. For example *The Food Machine* (1952), directed by notable filmmaker Cecil Holmes, instructs viewers about systems of food production (using the machine as a metaphor) including the use of petroleum-based insecticides. *The City of Geelong* (Bernard Gandy, 1957) and *On Steam* (1954) tell the story of the Shell oil refinery built in Geelong through associations with natural resources and the advancement of the Australian nation. Shell contributed to Australian documentary culture in ways that present a tangle of nationalist, corporate and creative/aesthetic interests, producing a body of films that returns consistently to the materiality of the environment. In considering the relation between Shell's rhetorical agenda and the Australian environment in more detail, I now look closely at two of Heyer's productions across the two broad categories of soft- and hard-sell films, *The Forerunner* (1958) and *Let's Go* (1956), respectively. I do not mean to suggest that Heyer's work is representative of the SFUA, but given his contribution to so many productions, his influence is important and pervasive.³⁷

The Forerunner, written and directed by Heyer and produced by his partner, Janet Heyer, was his last for the SFUA. By the time the film was finished he had already taken up his position with the London unit. The film won awards at a number of festivals, including Cannes, Venice, London and Turin, and a copy was requested by the UNESCO Reference Library in Paris. Although far less well known than *The Back of Beyond*, *The Forerunner* was still one of Heyer's most important films. Like all Shell films it was not designed for general theatrical release and was, at least initially, shown only on the international festival circuit, in Shell theatrettes and through the mobile film units.³⁸ Neither Shell nor oil is mentioned in any part of *The*

37 Heyer is also an interesting study for considering the changing ethos of environmental consciousness in Australia through documentary film. Not only did he work for Shell, but in 1967 he set up his own production company, winning acclaim for documentaries made for the Australian Conservation Foundation, including the 1978 film, *The Reef*, on the ecology of the Great Barrier Reef.

38 Shell Film Unit Australia, 'Press kit', *The Forerunner* (1958).

39 As Russell and Piers Taylor note in *Shadows of Progress*, p. 88, from the beginnings of London's SFU an impression of independence was maintained through the way 'references to Shell should be strictly limited to the film credits'.

40 The Snowy Mountains scheme is located in southeast Australia and consists of 16 major dams, seven power stations and 225 kilometres of tunnels, pipelines and aqueducts. Constructed between 1949 and 1974, it was designed to redirect water from a number of major rivers in order to provide both hydroelectricity and irrigation.

Forerunner, with the company logo appearing only before the opening credits.³⁹ There are explicit aspects of the documentary that fulfil the objectives of Shell's public relations project as it is outlined above, the main one being that *The Forerunner* associates Shell with Australia's most consequential nation-building project of the 20th century, the Snowy Mountain Scheme.⁴⁰ In this respect it demonstrates its commitment to nationalist concerns, apparently displaying in audiovisual terms its investment in the initiatives of the Australian government of the day and, by proxy, the Australian public. *The Forerunner* is divided into three parts of roughly equal length, producing a triptych. The first two parts address Australia's problem with flood and drought, respectively, and the third depicts the solution to these – the Snowy Scheme. With its attention to environmental extremes and demarcation of 'nature as problem', the film's proportions are epic. It is also, however, an uneven film, made in an impressionistic style that differs across the three parts.

The triptych is brought into some form of unity through the soundtrack, a custom-written song titled *Grand 'Ol Man of Summer*, and the introductory, direct-to-camera addresses given by C. H. Munro, Professor of Civil Engineering and the Director of Research at the Water Research Foundation Australia. In a room adorned with maps and graphs, Munro opens the film by informing the viewer about Australia's status as the driest continent on earth and, pointing to a map of Australia, of how it 'lies between the world's two most important rain-bringing winds – the monsoons in the north and the Roaring Forties in the south. There's likely to be great downpours in some places and not a drop of rain for months on end in others.' He outlines the purpose of the film as giving 'an impression of the flood and drought that can result', and showing how 'Australians are answering nature's challenge in the south east with one of the greatest engineering projects on earth, the Snowy Mountain Scheme'. Munro describes the scheme as a bold and innovative 'forerunner', a major step towards 'solving' Australia's water problem. This opening address, and a similar one that occurs later in the film, bring the authorization of the expert (in its masculine, rationalist mode) with the effect of designating 'nature' as an object of science. It also punctuates the broader impressionistic and lyrical style of the documentary to give an explicit indication of the purpose of the film. Munro himself helps the viewer make sense of the realism that drives the film's expression of human/non-human worlds, when he asks them to 'first listen and watch – the sight and sound of too much and too little'.

In the wake of Munro's appeal, *The Forerunner* devotes 20 minutes to visualizing a flood, including scenes of Australian suburbs and farms besieged by flowing water. Cars wash down the street and a table floats around inside a dining room as a kitten meows, trapped on the sideboard. The focus then turns to the rescue effort, with a montage of aeroplanes dropping supplies into flooded areas, people queuing for goods and being rescued by emergency services in a boat. The aftermath is also shown, with houses devastated by landslides and furniture hanging from

powerlines. The images emphasize the human experience of the flood without commentary (except for a radio report requesting that someone attend to some stranded children), as the camera focuses on possessions adrift on the water and the dynamism of planes and trucks responding to the people in need. The emphasis on the visual serves to convey a deeper meaning about the fragile balance of the ecology that conjoins nature and society, as the settled materiality of human existence is overturned. The objects of everyday life, such as hot-water bottles or handbags, even domestic pets, are out of place, swept up in the water. A similar sense is evoked as the roofs of houses are shown surrounded, the houses themselves submerged in water or with an entire wall washed away, exposing their contents; in a more sombre shot, coffins are loaded onto the back of a truck. All the flood footage was recorded during the Maitland Flood of February 1955, which was caused by a massive overflow of the Hunter River in New South Wales. Thousands of homes were inundated, some washed away, and 25 people lost their lives. Viewers in Australia would be highly aware of these events and their magnitude, having seen newsreels and newspaper photographs in the preceding years. With no narrator to interpret the scene, the viewer, already cognisant of the events depicted, is left to apprehend the spectacle as a suggestion of, variously, catastrophe, frailty, resilience and the unpredictability of nature.

Rather than footage of a specific past event, the sequence depicting drought is conveyed more as a dramatized vignette accompanied by footage of an unnamed, dry outback landscape. Wide shots show the expanse of desert, dust blowing on the horizon, dried river beds and cattle carcasses. A shot of a single lamb is juxtaposed with that of a dying sheep. Native lizards dart across rocks, enhancing the sense of barrenness and the vision of a place where only desert animals can survive. A small farmhouse appears, set against the empty horizon, and a white Australian family finish loading belongings onto a horse-drawn cart outside. As they leave they look back at empty animal pens, and the depiction of a forsaken homestead is amplified by the sight of a lone lizard crawling into the house. While the sequence is again without narration, the lyrics on the soundtrack offer a melancholic description of drought and of people leaving the land. The visual storytelling dwells more on desolation than the flood scenes, possibly because they are shot specifically for the film, with the family vignette composed for the camera. This dramatization focuses on the landscape, producing a heightened sense of nature as a force that is indifferent to human enterprise.

There are clear references in the film to *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), both directed by Pare Lorentz to promote the agenda of the New Deal in the USA and well known for their visions of ecological catastrophe. *The Forerunner's* scenes of drought strongly evoke those established in *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, with shots of open dry horizons and the skeletons of dead

- 41 See Deane Williams, 'International documentary filmmaker: John Heyer (14/9/1916–19/6/2001)', *Metro Magazine*, nos 129/130 (2002), pp. 248–53. For further discussion of the relationship between *The Valley is Ours* and the New Deal films, see Janette-Susan Bailey, "'Dust bowls", TVAs and Snowy River waters: John Heyer, *The Valley is Ours* and an early post-war "image of Australia"', *Environment and History*, vol. 22, no. 4 (2016), pp. 589–627.
- 42 Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 35.
- 43 Ibid. Brian R. Jacobson describes how, by the 1960s, 'energy had an important place in ecological thought', due to the way energy exchange was thought to play a role in organic and inorganic systems. For Jacobson, this opened a door for companies like BP to promote their role in managing the environment through the control of energy exchange, and this could be seen in films such as *The Shadow of Progress* (1970). See Jacobson, 'The *Shadow of Progress* and the cultural markers of the Anthropocene', p. 167.
- 44 Ibid., p. 36.
- 45 Drought and soil erosion were also aspects of the Australian environment addressed successfully by indigenous agricultural practices in Australia over millennia. New light has been cast on these practices in recent work by William Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2011), and Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (Broome: Magabala Books, 2014).
- 46 Throughout *The Forerunner* animals experience and witness the events depicted, and there is much more to be said about Heyer's multi-species engagement that is beyond the scope of this investigation.

livestock in the sand. The images of flood and dam construction echo, to a lesser extent, those seen in the *The River*'s skilful rendering of the ecological issues proximate to the Mississippi River. Heyer's own 1948 film commissioned by the ANFB, *The Valley is Ours*, draws on the themes, poeticism and rhythm of Lorentz's work in its depiction of the Murry River Valley.⁴¹ Both of Lorentz's films follow the New Deal impulse for agricultural reform, as Finis Dunaway writes, by castigating 'Americans for their mismanagement of resources' and calling 'for the moral uplift of the nation's farmers and the ecological improvement of the nation's soils'.⁴² Significantly, Dunaway observes how the documentaries of the New Deal were informed by the science of ecology. The web of interrelationships amongst organisms were given an aesthetic interpretation with the use of a wide-angle lens that encouraged 'spectators to consider not just the isolated parts of a landscape but the entire ecological fabric'.⁴³ In *The Forerunner* this is also evident in the wide shots of the vista of the outback drought. Importantly, however, unlike *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, *The River* and even *The Valley is Ours*, *The Forerunner* does not tell a story of agricultural mismanagement or, in Dunaway's assessment, a story of fall and redemption.⁴⁴ If non-human nature is out of synch with human flourishing in *The Forerunner*, it is because there is an intrinsic challenge posed by agentic nature, albeit one that can be mastered with human, in this instance colonial, ingenuity.⁴⁵

The stories of drought and flood are bracketed by a return to Munro's room and an explanation of the Snowy Scheme, which cuts to the Snowy Mountain Authority where a group of new employees (including one woman) stand over a model of the terrain as they are informed about the project and where they will be located. The film then moves through a number of the Scheme's sites, including a forest where bulldozers sweep through the trees (observed by a frog, a lizard and a koala)⁴⁶ and the alpine regions with scientists and heavy vehicles at work. It is not until five minutes before the end of the film that the viewer is shown the enormous dam under construction and men working in the snow. Heyer no doubt chose to use these images only at the end of the film to achieve maximum impact on the viewer, evoking a sublime synthesis of nature and technology. However, the most carefully crafted sequence in the documentary features a medium-shot of a tunnel followed by an explosion and falling rubble. From behind the rubble a group of workmen walk towards the camera in silhouette, whistling. The real object of the final sequence is the men labouring, with the help of machinery, towards the goal of the finished project. This focus on the humanism of labour echoes a key theme of the British Documentary Movement of the 1930s. The harmony of the film's shift from desolation to generation is reinforced with actual harmonies – the final scene depicts a bluegrass band inside the workers' huts performing the song that has persisted throughout the film, this time with lyrics describing work on the Snowy.

As one of the ‘film intellectuals’ described by Moran, Heyer’s interpretation of the Shell prestige agenda is realized through his interest in combining humanism *and* the textures of the non-human (especially what might have been termed ‘nature’ or ‘the land’ in the 1950s). While events are posed through the anthropocentric perspective of human modernity (albeit with animals as witnesses), the emphasis on offering a filmic experience of nature allows for an unsettling of the clear dualisms between active and passive, culture and nature, because nature is forceful – it is a constitutive force in the nation-building project rather than a backdrop to human events. The first two thirds of *The Forerunner* achieve an interesting reframing of the influential New Deal narratives of either fall and redemption or mismanagement. It provides an experience of, rather than instructions for, living in an unforgiving environment and the human capacity to transform this same environment in profound ways. Munro twice asks us to ‘look and listen’, and this is key to *The Forerunner*. The viewer, again, will have had clear images of the Scheme in mind when watching the film, given the public campaign that accompanied it.⁴⁷ The documentary does not seek to offer new information or educate viewers about the events depicted, instead the impressionistic crafting produces a sensibility or a sensory evocation of the relation between human sociality and the forces of nature.

Indeed *The Forerunner* differs from the New Deal films and *The Valley is Ours*, all produced by government agencies, in that it does not privilege a role for the state as a driver of good management. Its expressive style both fits with prestige documentary of the era while eschewing the promotion of a particular government policy, a logical move for a corporate sponsored film that was not seeking to speak on behalf of the state.⁴⁸ It is notable that the migration project that famously sat alongside the Snowy Scheme is entirely absent from the film. Despite the brief appearances of Munro as an expert commentator, moreover, the documentary poses an almost experimental aesthetic oriented to the common good rather than the authoritative tone of expository filmmaking. It continues the project Heyer began with *The Back of Beyond*, one that asserts that Shell is empathetic to the challenges facing the Australian nation, while trying to capture its essence. My next example fits securely into the corporate promotional agenda, and thus posits a more explicit relationship between petroculture and the Australian environment.

Made in 1956, between the release of *The Back of Beyond* and *The Forerunner*, *Let’s Go* is a short promotional film approximately 10 minutes long that depicts the work of Shell’s touring service and the production of Shell road maps for retail. With the narrative arc of a well-crafted short, *Let’s Go* indicates how promotional films were part of the documentary culture of the period. Also directed by Heyer, it reflects his ability to work across both innovative documentary and more utilitarian or hard-sell film. If, as Damluji writes, petroleum companies have had a ‘fundamental role in shaping our collective imaginaries about the modern

47 The Snowy Scheme had its own film unit which produced 150 documentaries over the decades of the project’s construction. There are 300 moving image items stored in Australia’s National Film and Sound Archive and attributed to the unit.

48 It should be noted, however, that in the 1940s Shell did collaborate with the Australian government on film production in the interests of supporting the war effort. Additionally the SFUA and the ANFB co-produced the 1949 film, *Farming for the Future*, which focused on the problem of soil erosion.

49 Damluji, 'The image world of Middle Eastern oil', p. 147.

50 Robert Murray, *Go Well: One Hundred Years of Shell in Australia* (Melbourne: Hargreen Publishing, 2001), p. 187.

51 In the years following World War II, car ownership grew exponentially from 506,000 in 1945 to 1.8 million in 1960. This was only one component of the expansion of petroleum products, contributing to the seven-fold increase in consumption of these products in the quarter-century after the war. Moreover, in the early 1950s single-branded petrol stations caused the number of stations to proliferate, especially in metropolitan areas, facilitating greater consumption. See Murray, *Go Well*, p. 140.

52 Arrowsmith-Todd, *Mapping the Settler-Colonial Travelogue*, p. 20.

53 Ibid.

54 Alongside this, the standardization demonstrates the same preference for integration that was so successful in the case of film production and distribution.

world',⁴⁹ the impetus underpinning *Let's Go* is one that shapes an imagination of the Australian continent as a site available to be mapped, safely navigated and traversed by car. Rather than the film-cultural networks of the soft-sell example of *The Forerunner*, it is more appropriate to follow the connections that tie *Let's Go* into the promotional web of Shell's public relations apparatus, while being attentive to how non-human nature becomes part of the storytelling process of petroculture.

The film unit was not Shell's only public relations initiative, but sat alongside a number of other enterprises including the 'Around Australia Mapping Unit', which produced consumer-grade maps from the 1920s until the 1970s. According to Shell's corporate historical record, for some time 'Shell maps had been the only road maps available for more remote parts of Australia'.⁵⁰ After the war Shell's interest in facilitating automobility intensified in ways that coincided with the democratization of car ownership.⁵¹ The Shell Touring Service was in operation until the 1970s, offering free information for motorists, including maps, in a bid to encourage outback and regional motoring. Automobility appeared on the marketing agenda as early as 1939 when, as Arrowsmith-Todd notes, Shell decided that the production of maps was not enough and that more could be done to promote motoring, especially to 'capitalise on the growing public interest in the red Centre as a tourist destination'.⁵² The documentary travelogue *Through the Centre*, produced on the 1939 Shell round-Australia map-making expedition, was an immediate result of this new promotional agenda. The rise of privatized and individual transport from the city to the regions or inland required a discursive shift in the public imagination, particularly in the characterization of the continent and how its natural features and resources were made available to motorists. Arrowsmith-Todd understands this challenge in respect to how Shell had previously constructed the inland space as empty and available to resource extraction:

In contrast to the representation of inland Australia as an empty expanse in Shell's mode of mapping for resources, here profit lay with foregrounding the marvels of difference on offer to the tourist whose own journey was to be remarkably standardised: following Shell's road maps, fuelling their vehicle with Shell's petrol and marking their border crossing courtesy of the Shell Touring Service.⁵³

The 'marvels of difference' to which she refers include remote indigenous communities, folding the recreational consumption of the non-human landscape into colonial objectification and exoticization.⁵⁴ It moreover sustains the same narrative that facilitated the mobile film units: that Shell could be relied upon to create infrastructure, and bring modernity, despite the challenges of Australia's expansive geography.

Let's Go was produced at the height of the push towards encouraging individual automobility, and would have been shown as part of any Shell public screening programmes with the aim of reaching the widest

possible demographic. The film offers a humorous humanism in its opening and closing sequences: in the first shot a woman loads blankets into a convertible on a modest suburban street, irritably pronouncing ‘Come on, let’s go’; a man sitting in the car replies ‘I’m not sure which way’.

WOMAN: Where we went last time of course.

MAN: The paper says there’s been a landslide.

WOMAN: Well it’ll all be cleared away by the time we get there.

MAN: Yeah, and it mightn’t be too.

The couple also features in the final scene, when a car drives past a country turn-off, stops, and then reverses back to take the missed turn. The frame is filled with street signs as we hear the couple’s voices again, questioning if this is the turn, or whether, perhaps, it is further on. The woman says ‘If only we could ask someone’. The street signs offer a montage, reading ‘How to go. Where to Go. Ask Shell.’ The small drama that brackets the film serves both to comically reflect the target market (middle-class, city-dwelling Anglo-Australians) back to themselves, and to identify the need for the Shell Touring Service specifically.

After the opening scene the film elaborates on the need fulfilled by the touring service, particularly addressing the uninitiated car owner: ‘Motoring isn’t just a matter of having a car or truck, it’s a matter of knowing about the road, and where you can get petrol and what are the garage hours’. The image shows a poor male motorist in the dark outside a closed petrol station. The audio is filled with his futile knocking on the station door. The narrator continues: ‘It’s a matter of what to expect when you get there and what you’ll see on the way. Is it flat or hilly? Are there corrugations and potholes? Is it bitumen or gravel? It’s a matter of knowing about bridges and their clearances.’ The film cuts between scenes on the road, various hazards, such as a bridge too low for a truck to pass under, and the stylish interior of the touring services office. Here the camera is positioned to take in or cut between multiple activities, from a woman behind the desk giving advice to a man about where to go on holiday and which golf courses are recommended, to a man looking up a card catalogue of documented roadworks or hazards. The film recites the system Shell has in place for checking the roads and the work of each of the offices in the state capitals. Noting how the service deals with emergencies, the film cuts to further footage of the Maitland Flood to convey the potential extremes of weather. In another sequence a group of men stand contemplatively by an isolated road sign and are shown camping in rough conditions. These are, the narrator tells us, special touring service mapping expeditions, and he goes on to explain the map key and how long it takes to update a map, while the final images focus on maps, showing alternately the Australian continent and industrial printing presses producing foldable maps of each state, with maps falling upon maps, the names of the states clearly visible.

Let's Go offers the viewer a filmic experience that folds together the production, symbolism and utility of maps with the actual experience of traversing the landscape by car. In this case its address is pedagogical, oriented towards assuring the car owner that the strange or threatening aspects of non-human nature can be mitigated by petromodernity and the services it provides – the continent can be easily (and enjoyably) navigated with Shell's help. At times in *Let's Go* the motorist is referred to as an 'overlander', offering a distinct reference to settler colonialism. It evokes, moreover, what Georgine Clarsen and Lorenzo Veracini refer to as 'settler colonial automobiles':

'Motoring or 'touring', as it was practiced and represented in the metropole, were terms that were inadequate to the realities of early automobile travel in non-urban Australia. Instead, the term 'overlanding' was borrowed from explorer narratives and the pastoral industry. 'Overlanding' by car became a popular landscape practice that historicised territory, working to inscribe and naturalise settler meanings onto indigenous terrain and generating new, 'indigenised', settler subjectivities.⁵⁵

The implications of Clarsen and Veracini's point about the reprising of explorer narratives in the guise of the overlander motorist resonate with histories of not only mobility but cartography. Histories of imperialism have made significant use of western practices of mapping and Australia is no exception – Cartesian maps played a role in erasing indigenous peoples and conceptions of territory from the continent, an omission of the violence of invasion. The road maps highlighted in *Let's Go* and produced by Shell to encourage motoring play to this erasure by naturalizing settler perceptions of the environment (echoing the historical proclamation of *terra nullius*). Throughout the middle of the 20th century Shell made particular use of this narrativization of the natural environment, with the *In the Steps of the Explorers* series explicitly retracing colonial excursions, narrated from the letters and diaries of the explorers themselves.

Let's Go evokes what Peter Bloom refers to as a 'classificatory gaze, projecting geographic itineraries' across the continent. His discussion focuses on an interesting precursor – the French colonial crossing films that were sponsored by automobile manufacturers in the 1920s and 1930s and encouraged tourism into the Sahara. Yet while Bloom's examples exoticized the landscape, this film works to domesticate Australian geography for a local audience. If *The Forerunner* emphasizes the extremes of a forceful environment and, ultimately, nature as a site for human transformation, in *Let's Go* nature is deployed as navigable by the infrastructure of colonizing modernity and a field for human transportation. In this short film, outback and regional landscapes are bisected while journeying to another destination, and this is part of the dynamism around which the film is crafted. There is a hint at a further reality here, one that acknowledges that beyond the security of the motor

55 Georgine Clarsen and Lorenzo Veracini, 'Settler colonial automobiles: a distinct constellation of automobile cultures?', *History Compass*, vol. 10, no. 12 (2012), p. 896.

56 In the first wave of the Australian environmental movement before World War II, outdoor recreation groups and lobbying for national parks played a significant role. As I have noted, after the war the movement waned when confronted with the Cold War and a pervasive nation-building agenda that placed a strong emphasis on the crucial role of natural resources in advancing the young nation. Shell's interests could be neatly inserted into this public culture, and this was further supported by the way that outdoor recreation groups declined as car ownership rose. The romanticism of national parks could be easily sidelined by the allure of technology in the form of automobility, as *Let's Go* demonstrates. See Hutton and Connors, *History of the Australian Environment Movement*.

57 Warde, Robin and Sörlin, *The Environment: A History of the Idea*, p. 23.

vehicle there is the unavoidable materiality of ecologies, wildlife and wide distances of unpopulated areas.⁵⁶ As with the case of the mobile film units, nature persists, even though the aim might be to facilitate connections across Australia's wide land-mass by road, enabled by the attainable technology of the motor car.

The Forerunner and *Let's Go* are both compelling because they provide two distinct ways of understanding the natural environment. *The Forerunner* offers nature as phenomenon on a scale of epic extremes, amplifying how this might be experienced through sound and image. Drought and flood are both indicative of nature as a force, and available for human (specifically colonial Australian) modification – in both instances human and non-human are entangled, visually and narratively, pointing to an existential interdependence. *Let's Go* offers a more straightforward dualism and focuses on navigating rather than experiencing the landscape. Mapping becomes both a social good and an aesthetic practice that emphasizes the colonial mastery over geographical challenges as a way to offer the continent as a site of individualized adventure. The films align with, and offer greater nuance to, the dominant narrative of the moment – that the environment is a challenge to be overcome in the nation-building process and that technology will aid this endeavour. While this notion is not limited to a petroleum agenda, *The Forerunner*, *Let's Go* and other films produced by the SFUA mentioned here share an important thematic that is not uniform across films of the time – ultimately they reassure the viewer that the Australian continent and the sites of seemingly unassimilable nature can be safely acculturated.

The two examples sit at a pivotal moment when 'the environment', as I have noted, is about to take hold as an international conceptualization, one emerging from a 'sense of urgency dealing with looming challenges of great magnitude'.⁵⁷ *The Forerunner* and, I would suggest, *The Back of Beyond* are both focused on the impression of magnitude and the fundamental relationality across human/non-human worlds. They hint at what will be a more widely acknowledged sensibility in the decades to come, but they do so through the documentary aesthetic of the time, albeit an innovative one. Importantly they also indicate an authorial intervention as much as a corporate one, with Heyer's interest in posing the natural environment as a complex and rich phenomenon clearly evident. *Let's Go* belongs to a more established era of imperialism and to a commercial agenda unabashed in its celebration of petromodernity, with severe environmental and geopolitical problems yet to appear on the horizon.

As popular cultural artefacts, these films were produced and circulated to both fulfil the SFUA agenda and appeal to audiences of the period. They show us the cultural imagination of the time and how it was shaped in ways that histories of science and policy cannot. After 1960, Shell's 'good citizen' image required significant revision given the changes in public sentiment. Brian Jacobson describes the next step in the

58 Jacobson, 'Big oil's high-risk love affair with film'.

59 Ibid.

60 Prominent examples of this include *The Shadow of Progress* (Derek Williams, 1970), as already noted, made by BP, focusing on pollution and overpopulation and its industrial solutions. In 1991 Shell produced *Climate of Concern* (Glyn Jones, 1991), which depicted problems of extreme weather, flood, famine and climate refugees as fossil fuel-burning warmed the planet. The film, unacknowledged for many years, was 'rediscovered' by *The Guardian* newspaper, which intended to stoke controversy about Shell's knowledge of the impact of petroculture.

61 Canjels, 'Films from beyond the well', p. 260.

62 Mitchell, *A Seat Under the Stars*, p. 23.

63 Each film in the series began with the following introduction, squarely aligning Shell with science and conservation, without undertaking any action towards environmental goals: Shell seek to 'stimulate greater knowledge of and interest in the environment in which the Australian lives and works' and hopes the film 'will be of interest to organisations such as the Australian Conservation Foundation, Keep Australia Beautiful Council and the National Parks Authority in each state'.

chronology: 'The emerging environmentalist movement of the 1960s led Shell and BP to portray themselves as benevolent guardians of the natural world'.⁵⁸ He notes that films such as *The River Must Live* (1966), produced by the London unit, 'acknowledged problems posed by industry but avoided implicating the oil industry itself'.⁵⁹ In the years that followed, the oil industry ironically played an important role in early environmental cinema, producing a form of what Jacobson refers to as 'industry environmentalism'.⁶⁰ In the face of a growing recognition of the damage caused by petroculture, rather than ignoring the problem oil companies have turned their powerful public relations teams towards an attempt to appropriate and reorient the narrative in ways that would again create faith in the unstoppable benefit of technological industrialized progress.

In terms of Shell's production in London, prestige documentary and the soft-sell mode was becoming harder to justify through the 1960s, as economic pressures prioritized guaranteed results.⁶¹ In Australia there remained strong production across more utilitarian modes of film (such as science and agriculture), with a particular focus on sport through the 'Spotlight' series. From the mid 1960s there was greater emphasis on sponsorship rather than in-house production, and this was facilitated by the rise of television. The Shell library was, at this time, their key mode of film circulation, and primary and high schools accounted for 80% of film lending.⁶² The accent on the natural environment persisted, but moved away from nature as a nation-building resource and towards a focus on natural history. In the early 1970s the Shell brand was associated with television series by Robert Raymond, such as *The Australian Ark* (1971–75), *The Amazing Marsupials* (1970) and *The Survivors* (1975), which were also available through the Shell library. *The Australian Ark* is a significant example – it was rebadged as *Shell's Australia* and 13 episodes were shown on Channel 7. With high production values, the series made an effective contribution to the development of the natural history documentary in Australia.⁶³ The environmental movement revived in 1960s Australia, owing much to the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which focuses on synthetic, petroleum-based pesticides but draws attention to environmental issues more broadly. It is no coincidence that as Australian activism turns to the expansion of resource extraction industries, Shell's Australian documentary production and sponsorship becomes more benignly associated with the natural history or wildlife film, a mode often focused on constructing a natural world isolated from human impact.

Oil companies are now known around the world for slick promotional campaigns that weave a story of corporate social and environmental responsibility. Mid-century petrofilms must be viewed as part of a different trajectory. They contributed to the petro-industry's project of advancing global capitalism, but that is only part of the story. In order to bring nuance to our knowledge of how industry has used mass culture to

shape environmental consciousness over time, we need to examine not only how petro-industries *sought* to deploy film but also the resulting films and circulation practices. Mid-century petrofilms were embedded in not only economic liberalism but also the British documentary movement that took shape in the 1930s, and its mission to educate the public about the world around them. The moment before the environment took hold as an idea is also a moment when companies such as Shell were willing to provide film units both with funds and creative freedom. In the two films I have discussed here, it is possible to perceive how film practitioners in Australia interpreted Shell's agenda in ways that aligned with their own cinematic aspirations. They convey transnational film sensibilities as well as strong references to the vibrant documentary culture in Australia at the time. In this respect the oil archive offers evidence of a film-cultural formation that is dispersed across geographical locales, personnel and a range of audiences and aesthetics. The SFUA films, beyond a preoccupation with a generic outback vista, do not provide a consistent catalogue of iconography, be it of species or landscapes. This may be because the primary audience was a domestic one who needed to be convinced that Shell was 'with them', rather than an international audience who would most likely have been appeased by familiar tropes. Addressing a local audience, the SFUA films and practices effectively recast the relation between nature and modernity in ways that were specific to the Australian continent and its topography, in order to assuage the unpredictable materiality of non-human phenomena with the surety and reassurance of modernity.

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