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Cutting Ordinary: An ABC True Story

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I’m honoured and particularly pleased to return to La Trobe University to speak about Ordinary People. The last time I was invited to speak at this university I had just begun shooting Ordinary People and I spoke at the time about the film as an imagined object. Tonight I am going to speak about it as a lost object. There’s a repetition in play here which I rather like. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan said that repetition was a missed encounter with the real, and that is my subject: a missed encounter.

The Australian journalist Peter Manning, who knew the history of cutting Ordinary People, said to me last year: ‘what is going to be unbearable for you is that when the film is released, it is going to receive a lot of critical acclaim and you’re going to be left standing in the sidelines saying, but –’. Manning’s comments have proved prescient. Ordinary People screened on the ABC in March this year to critical acclaim. It has been selected for a number of local and international festivals, including Mumbai, The Real Life on Film Festival, and the inaugural Aus Fest, the Australian Digital and Video Film Festival. Before making Ordinary People I’d never held a camera, never done a film-making course and wasn’t even a surreptitious wannabe film-maker. Now I’ve made a film reaching an audience that my academic work will never see, I’ve been paid quite handsomely for it, and nobody has had a bad word to say about the film. So why would I want to jeopardise this almost mythical success by speaking against my own film? Because that’s what I want to do tonight: raise a series of ‘butts’ about the film you’ve just seen.

Raising buts about one’s own film involves a curious and difficult speaking position. Contractually I’m bound to say nothing critical against the funding body that now owns the film. But it is not only fear of litigation that makes my speaking position so difficult. It is also that I’m speaking against my own work, against a film that carries my name. Director, writer, co-producer, researcher: Ordinary People is my film. It is the result of four rather terrible years of hard slog, working in a medium that wasn’t my own, amongst professionals who, in the main, held creative,
critical and aesthetic values very different from my own, and working on and off inside Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. All that adds up to four very difficult years, and yet the act of slogging away to create a work produces love. There isn’t a second in Ordinary People that I don’t love in some way, that doesn’t carry the memory of its difficult capture on camera and the agony of choosing it – those 52 minutes and 46 seconds cut out of over 100 hours of film.

Only recently a rather nasty review came out about my book, The Gauche Intruder, and I felt that rush of defence that one gets when a work of one’s own is attacked, but here I am today to lead the attack against Ordinary People. I am here to murder my darling because the story of cutting Ordinary People is much bigger than the story you have just seen, and much bigger than my own story about a lost work. Telling that story is the one that I have to champion, because it is not just a story about a film, or a film-war, or a work that didn’t quite see the day in the form the director wanted. It’s a story about Australian nationalism and nationalism’s fellow traveller – Australian race relations. It’s a story that illuminates a cultural intransigence; an incapacity to apprehend that nationalism and its exclusions and aggressions isn’t reducible to its visible manifestation in the articulated racism of the rural and urban fringe. Rather it is interior and central to the very cultural institutions that perform an eloquent pageantry of vanguardism qua multiculturalism and a new inclusive and progressive Australia.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan coined the phrase extimité\(^1\) to describe the exterior or disguised nature of that which is most intimate to the self – an unknown or exterior intimacy cloaked by an imaginary substitute, something that stands in the place of what can’t be known. The story of cutting Ordinary People allows us to identify the extimate nature of Australian racism and nationalist jouissance; and how this extimité – this interiority – is cloaked in this instance by the idea of story and of film-values: a particular view of story cloaking an intimately held libidinal investment in a particular view of nation and a particular construction of the Australian subject. But to tell that story I have to backtrack to the story of this film and its making.

Back in April 1997 something was happening that escaped anticipated logic. A script was being performed that nobody had read and its enthusiastic audience wasn’t waiting for the critics’ endorsement. Just a year earlier there had been a widely articulated public confidence that in the event of the fall of the Labor government, Australia was safe from a return to its racist past. Multiculturalism was too entrenched in the popular imagination, Aboriginal reconciliation post-Mabo too institutionalised for a return to a white Australian hegemony. But the election that saw the fall of the Keating Labor government also saw Pauline Hanson elected as an independent with the biggest electoral swing in the nation.

By 1997 Pauline Hanson had formed Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party and was organising inaugural branch meetings in urban fringe and rural Australia. There was a sense of mounting disbelief as Hanson’s national popularity began to rise, and the Prime Minister refused to speak. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s national inquiry into the stolen generation had just been released, and while remaining steadfastly silent about Hanson’s rising star, the Prime Minister was at the same time excusing away the deeds of former and current
generations of well-meaning ‘ordinary Australians’. I was on sabbatical at Melbourne University at the time, trying to write a difficult manuscript on psychosis, but the collective psychosis kept getting in the way. A phoenix rising from the ashes of white Australia while the Prime Minister stood guard, bellows in one hand, black armband in the other.

One of the most disturbing aspects of that period was the sense that nobody knew what to do. So one day I put aside my manuscript on psychosis and set off to Ballarat, where I talked my way into Ballarat’s inaugural meeting of One Nation. I didn’t set out to make a film, I set out to write a book. I had just read Bad Blood, the travelogue of the Irish writer, Colm Tóibín, in which he walks along the Irish border talking to people, and through this peripatetic device takes the reader on a tour of Ireland’s history of bad blood. In his work the righteousness of the nationalist cause dissolves and the ugliness of that border and all its bad blood comes into focus. What interested me about Tóibín’s writing was that like the work of other Irish Catholic writers – Friel, Kearney, Deane – it was a very conscious attempt to generate a form of writing able to shift its audience from the jouissance of re-enacting and re-experiencing nationalist forms of narrative and memory into new ways of encountering the past in which the suffering of both Catholics and Protestants found representation and in which the Catholic narrative tradition entered into a reflection about its own forms of aggression to self and other without foreclosing on the historical memory of colonisation.

It was this kind of conscious reflection about representative form qua colonisation, nationalism and racial hatred that seemed so lacking in the Australian response to One Nation. There was, at the time, virtually no public discourse about discourse, about speech that prior to its articulation contemplated its purpose and its form of address. I was dismayed, like many people, with the critical and conceptual failure of the media and the obvious powerlessness of academic publication to dint the wellspring of popular support for Hanson. So I set out to try and write a book that would escape the restricted audiences of academic writing and yet maintain a critical corpus. I wanted to write a story about One Nation that would engineer an encounter for a larger Australian audience with Australia’s history of bad blood. I had Foucault’s idea of a livre-experience in mind, of a text that stops the reader in their tracks and forces them to think otherly. It was a rather immodest undertaking, but I was fired by my disenchantment with purely academic responses to what I suspected then, and know now, to be a moment in Australia’s history when critical intellectuals have to take aim and fire – not as Sartre ridicules, with ‘eyes shut – merely for the pleasure of hearing the shot go off’, but with all our creative, critical and defensive capacities. The full extent of Hanson’s legacy – of how significant that moment in Australia’s history was – is only now fully apparent as Hansonism moves centre-stage and even the Labor party doffs its hat to her politics of paranoia, racism and fear.

With this in mind I set off to write a book on One Nation, and very quickly ended up inside One Nation, with a bird’s eye view of all kinds of events and discussions that I suspected nobody else – with my critical perspective – was witness to. I knew nothing about film-making, but at a certain point it became almost an ethical obligation to get a camera inside this very closed organisation. At this point I was working with Susannah Scarparo and we were observing things that needed to be
recorded. And so the film evolved, growing from a very amateur affair initially to ultimately a fully funded film. Funded firstly by Susannah and I, then a private sponsor, then the Australian Film Commission, and finally, in the last weeks of post-production, by Film Australia, the Australian Film and Television office and the ABC. Fairly early on in the making of Ordinary People I knew I was making a film that had legs. Nobody else from outside the party had got a camera inside One Nation. One Nation wasn’t going away and the story kept getting bigger. By 1999 Colene Hughes had turned and was starting to speak to camera about what was going on inside the party. It was an absolute scoop. The woman who ran in Pauline Hanson’s seat of Ipswich was slowly coming to realise she was in a neo-fascist organization and was telling me my initial thesis: that One Nation was a totalitarian party and Hanson and Oldfield were, in her words, ‘like Hitler’. I knew then that somehow the film was going to be made and it was going to find its audience.

What was so extraordinary about Colene Hughes as a character was that she was so admirable. As I got to know her better over the three years of filming, I watched her transform from an ardent One Nation supporter to someone who was working really hard at trying to understand the nature of the movement she’d been party to. Her partner Bob was also a deeply sympathetic character. He was someone I couldn’t help feeling affection for as I watched his and Colene’s relationship crumble under the strain of Colene’s two electoral campaigns. Over the years I came to know intimately the story of their difficult lives, and they mirrored so many other stories I heard from One Nation members. Stories that encapsulate post modernism as a lived reality. Stories of fragmentation: of familial structures breaking down, of children scattered across the country, of emotional insecurity, of moral codes that no longer had a context, of paternity reduced to child support payments, and maternity labouring on beside the empty space left by the father.

Making Ordinary People was really uncomfortable, not because the members of One Nation were so awful, but because they weren’t. As the film evolved, the question that emerged qua representation was how to make a film that held in view both the dignity, goodness and genuine suffering of people like Colene and Bob, and simultaneously their blind aggression to others. Putting these two things together in a single frame held the possibility of creating a live-experience. As I wrote in The Gauche Intruder, ‘Hatred of the other has always been located in the telling of white history, in the wings, off centre-stage, peripheral to the real life of a good white Australia’.\(^5\) In The Gauche Intruder I had argued that the ethical challenge facing Australia was to hold in view the aggression of white Australian morality. Central Australian moral codes which I called the Australian Good – a fair go, an egalitarianism, a democratic refusal of visible hierarchies, the cult of the battler, of everyman – are I argued, the constant accompaniment to acts of aggression in Australian history: the genocide, the White Australia policy, the Stolen Generation and now the desubjectivisation and incarceration of refugees. While moral motivation is frequently used to excuse such acts, I suggested that we cannot understand these acts of aggression and restore them to cultural memory unless we recognise the central role that morality plays in their perpetuation. In Ordinary People I wanted to go to the heart of the crisis in contemporary Australia by creating a text that would hold in view the aggressivity of ordinary goodly Australians. Contemporary commentary sought in the main part to understand the ‘Hanson phenomenon’ as an
aberration in Australia’s history; I wanted to demonstrate how Hanson’s support derived from her galvanising of the central moral codes of Australian nationalism.

And Colene was such a good Australian, she believed utterly in democracy and a fair go, she blazed with those traditional Australian virtues of speaking your mind and standing up to authority, and she was a battler and ready to go out and battle for what she believed in. It was impossible not to like and admire her as she grappled with the true nature of the party to which she had committed years of her life. Yet at the same time Colene was an advocate of a far right party, and her disappointment with Hanson never stretched to questioning the underlying premises of the One Nation cause. Colene continued to believe, throughout the course of the film, in the idea of One – One Nation, One People, One Culture. As she said, ‘I’m not a racist, I’m a culturalist’, and the culture she believed to be unquestionably superior was her own.

I was not interested in merely capturing the racism of One Nation on camera. I knew that would achieve nothing. Racism has always been there in Australia, in the next sentence, the one you don’t want to hear. During 1997 and 1998 the press kept on discovering racism as if it was something novel: a farmer from up north who thought Aborigines should never have been given citizenship, or another who claimed they were happier working for rations. These ‘discoveries’, billed by the media as shocking instances of racism, served to sustain a separation between One Nation and the rest of us, to provide a repository in which all that is negative about Australia – its history of race relations, its dedicated parochialism, its uncouth forms of chauvinism and self-affirmation – could be located in this rural rump, leaving the rest of us to our fantasies of urbanity, sophistication and tolerance. The challenge was not to repeat the mistakes of the media and simply prove the rampant racism of One Nation members but to hold in view the contiguity of these views and their ordinariness amongst ordinary goodly Australians. And who could deny this after the last federal election campaign, with its demonstration of mass support for Howard’s and Ruddock’s phantasmagoria of a nation besieged by thieving immoral and murderous Afghans? Or witness Howard’s comments during Hanson’s rise: ‘They’re not racists, they’re just ordinary Australians’.

My challenge was to represent the aggression harbouring within ordinariness without demonising the subjects of the film. This too had been the response of many academics and media commentators, who depicted Hanson and her supporters as a minority of resentful, xenophobic rednecks: losers, incapable of meeting the demands of the present and clinging to their fantasies of an archaic past. As Phillip Adams wrote: ‘Hanson (is) the bag lady of Australian politics. Behold the baggage – a bulging string bag full of ancient hatreds – One Nation is for anyone who believes in anything beyond belief.’ Adams was far from alone in relying on ridicule and lampooning to silence Hanson and her supporters. As Chantal Mouffe has argued, this recourse to the fantasy of primordialism is the only liberal answer to the rise of extreme nationalism and the new right.

The question that I kept asking myself, as the film was being made, was how to create a text that wouldn’t fall into a repetition of this discursive and critical failure. What was so extraordinary about the story that the editor Kit Guyatt and I were capturing on camera was not only that this duality was held in frame – the goodness of ordinary Australian people and their rampant...
aggression to others – but that this same group of people, in kicking down, were experiencing suddenly what it is like to be kicked. People who joined One Nation thinking Hanson would re-stabilise their social world, restore moral codes and re-integrate and re-unify the nation found themselves suddenly in that category of people outside their imagined community. The very people who had sought to establish One Nation through banishing foreign elements became themselves the detritus of the One Nation community. Here in essence was the logic of totalitarianism. As Lefort points out, the logic of purging is inherent to the totalitarian fantasy of a harmonious community. In totalitarianism, individuals are incorporated into the space of the collectivity and any independent or divergent thought becomes a target for purging. The need to continuously reaffirm group identity sets in train the logic of purging, and enemies proliferate, the enemy providing the image of the group. In One Nation, ‘white ants’ such as Colene, joined the original enemies – migrants, refugees, the press, intellectuals – as Ettridge urged branch members: ‘look for these people in your branches, hunt them out and report them to head office’.

As the film evolved, Colene in her new structural position as dissident and white ant began to take on mythical dimensions. Transplanting Hanson as the pretender, she emerged as the Australian battler. As she says of Hanson: ‘I think she’s got very used to a lot of people ëa la salaaming’ and I come in and say ëG’day, how are ya?’ and I mean ëG’day’ and how are ya?’’. She was a figure that was going to call forth enormous identification and national jouissance, a figure that a white Australian audience would claim as its own as she made her painful journey into recognition of what she was participating in. My fear was always that Colene would have too much éclat and incite too much identification, particularly in those last moments of the film when her battered face is so beautifully poignant as she speaks of how much the One Nation odyssey has cost her. Those moments scared me – they were invitations to an identification – but as Kit Guyatt and I reasoned, in the long months of cutting, what mattered was the way we used the cut to cut identification. The way we jumped from identification to recoil, because the truth of all our characters was that they both invited identification and subjective recoil. This was the point of the film. But then it came to the last weeks of cutting. Enter Film Australia and the ABC.

By 2001 I’d been working on the film for four years without any wages at all. I’d spent a lot of my own money and I was cash-strapped and exhausted. The producer and particularly the editor and camera operator, Kit Guyatt, had been working for two years with minimal wages with all of us trying to hold down other jobs. When Film Australia offered to inject a very large sum of money into the film – an offer backed by a pre-sale with the ABC – it was not the kind of offer one would turn down. There were misgivings. I was warned they would have ultimate editorial control, but in discussions Film Australia’s executive producer assured me, ‘We’re not going to walk over you’, and we were in the last stages of post-production with a rough cut just a few minutes over length. What I didn’t have was a discussion with the commissioning editor of the ABC. I was told she didn’t talk to directors only producers, so negotiations with the ABC went on behind closed doors.

What I did know was that a deal had been struck in which funding was conditional on me giving up the first person narration. Discussion of the rough cut had focused first of all on my presence. There was something about my voice that rubbed and it had to go. It was hard to tell the story of
the film without me in it, because so many of the key sequences relied on the intimacy that had
developed between Colene and I, and on my presence, to make sense of the dramatic action. But I
had to go. A first person, it was decided, wasn’t going to work, and without a first person my
presence was superfluous to the story. I didn’t like it but I agreed to it. I could see how a third
person narration could still make the central points that had to be made, although the loss of the
first person meant losing a lot of the subtlety of the film’s conception.

Anxiety is recognised in psychoanalysis as the one emotion that doesn’t lie, and I think the anxiety
casted by my presence in the film and in affinity with Colene testifies to the centrality of a
discursive camouflage. One of the essential functions of my presence in the film had been to tie an
urban audience into an encounter with Colene and thus to cut the discursive camouflage so
frequently deployed in the media’s representations of One Nation, in which One Nation members
were structurally positioned as primitive relics of an old Australia, separate from the real
community of modern, urbane and tolerant Australians. The truth is that with a few privileged
exceptions, the values and moral codes of One Nation are overly familiar to all white Australians.
We hear them, if not at our parents’ table then at our uncles’ or our grandparents’ table, or out of
the mouths of our friends or the friends of our friends. There was something very confronting about
simply having me there and having my presence as the support both of a critical narration and at
the same time embodying an intimate relationship with a One Nation member. Losing me meant
losing this stitching device that held different constituencies in rapport and in dialogue.

The film had been conceived as an attempt to find a dialogic and representational possibility
beyond the easy polarities of the media, and to open up a representational space that held the
audience in an encounter with their affinity and belonging to white Australia’s uncomfortable
history. In the final film the barely glimpsed presence that asks questions and elicits answers is
situated by the narration simply as ‘the media’. There is no longer any third possibility. In the
dinner dance sequence, the narration explicitly situates the invisible interlocutor as aggressive
media with the words: ‘But media attacks on One Nation have fuelled suspicion and anger’ –
words used to introduce and explain One Nation MP Jack Paff’s violent attack on the invisible
subject behind the camera. I have become the media. A device that makes sense given the third
person narration but that also ultimately closes the possibility of a kind of encounter irreducible to
the polarities of them and us that the media had perpetuated. The irony, of course, is that the film
set out to question these polarities, so an invisible colonisation has occurred simply through the
move from first to third person.

The function of the narration had been conceived as a third voice outside that of Colene and
Pauline’s. It was an unapologetically intelligent voice that provided a critical commentary on what
was going on. It wasn’t critical in an academic sense. It was a poetic voice but it made points, stood
outside the drama, and cut identification with the characters at key moments. I set about writing a
third person narration that I hoped would achieve the same effect, a narration that allowed the film
to be what I had set out to make: an anti-fascist film that explored how a totalitarian party had
gained popular support in Australia, and that explored the logic of the ideology of One – of One
Nation, One Party and One People. It was this idea that had been enforced within One Nation. As
Lefort argues in his analysis of totalitarianism, the logic of one involves relentless policing of all divergent views. One cannot tolerate two, and Colene and her supporters had found themselves in the position of two – hunted down as white ants and enemies of the party. The original narration made this point and anchored the drama unfolding on the screen within the broader frame of Australia’s history of intolerance of the idea of two.

Once I was edited from the film, however, the discussion focused on particular kinds of sentence. The first one to go was a sentence I loved. Initially there was a long shot of me driving into Ipswich with the voice-over: ‘Ipswich was like my own home town. An industrial has-been left off the list of the invitation-only global party’. I showed it to Colene and she laughed. ‘That’s right,’ she said, ‘nobody asked us to the party.’ But the sentence was deemed too complex in structure to be understood by ordinary people. And then there were all the references to globalisation. ‘Do you think people know what that word means?’ I was asked. ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I’ve just recorded one hundred hours of footage of them talking about it’. But globalisation had to go. It was too complex to get into the story. One by one, sentences and ideas were hunted out, until at last it became clear that the only function the narration would be allowed was the imparting of information. The narration was to help the story along and nothing more. As Film Australia’s executive producer explained, ‘This is just journalism. Pure journalism’.

I’ll give you an example of the kind of transformation the narration underwent. The following are three versions of the sequence of me driving into Ipswich, which initially introduced the audience to Ipswich and the narrator.

The first draft:

‘So I packed my bags and headed for Ipswich. I didn’t know much about holding a camera but that was OK. In One Nation being an amateur was what it was all about. And Ipswich was like my own home town. An industrial has-been left off the list of the invitation only global party. Or as Pauline would say, Ipswich was a has-been that’s a wannabe that never can be. But back then she was telling them that they could be. And it was only Us – the academics, the politicians, the pointy heads and cappuccino-drinking chardonnay socialists – that stood in their way.’

I rewrote this in the third person and in response to the no doubt correct criticism that the initial narration was too wordy:

‘In Ipswich they said: She speaks the truth that the politicians and pointy heads in the city won’t hear’. The truth of what had happened to them – of how globalisation’s mad dance had danced the town right off its feet.’

But in the last days of cutting the film: Film Australia hired a narrator who came up with this, their preferred version:
‘Ipswich, once a prosperous industrial centre, is now a welfare town. Over the past 20 years its mines have shut down, its industry moved offshore and unemployment risen to over 10%.’

In the interests of telling a good story that ‘ordinary people’ can understand, a certain view of ordinariness has been mobilised in which ordinary Australians can’t understand concepts about their economic reality, or metaphors which aren’t readily grasped as clichés, or language that involves any poetic quality. This construction of the film’s audience betrays a great uneasiness and ignorance of the florid poetic language one finds in Australia outside the cities and of the long tradition of political dialogue in Australian homes. This kind of uneasiness initially fuelled the media’s attempts to negate Hanson’s influence by simply depicting her constituents as rednecks. These rednecks, for whom the film was now being made, had to be protected from ideas too complex for them to grasp, and in this context my voice – a voice of critique – was deemed elitist.

In making the film I had the German film Profession: Neo-Nazi in mind – another film about the far right in which the director had come under extreme fire because of his failure to create a third position between his audience and the neo-nazis on screen. To me a third position was absolutely essential, but the funding bodies insisted that such a voice would interrupt the telling of the story, its drama. Because I kept remonstrating, in the final week a new narrator, whom I wasn’t allowed to meet, and who in one day produced the journalistic voice you hear on the film, was brought in.

Now one of the things that is interesting about this voice is that it ties the audience securely to Colene. In the interests of telling the story, the audience is brought back again and again to an identification with Colene. We meet her first up with the words: ‘In 1998, another Ipswich woman, Colene Hughes, was about to enter politics’ – so that the unfolding story becomes a drama about Colene. Our next identificatory tag is: ‘Colene has a fight on her hands. Her opponent, Bob Gibbs, has been a Labor MP for 22 years.’ And the narration proceeds in this vein, tying the audience into Colene’s story as she emerges as a champion of democracy within One Nation. At the end of the film we feel empathy for a woman who has emerged as a very traditionally drawn heroine. By then, Colene fits into a long line of Australian battlers who have stood up against authority and hierarchy for what they believe is fair, democratic and morally right. She has become an iconic Australian heroine, providing a way for an Australian audience to effect a narrative retrieval of the ordinary Australians who rallied to Pauline Hanson’s cause.

But it wasn’t until the final days of the cut that I realised there had never been any intention on the part of the ABC to create a critical/political documentary. In the second last week, I finally got to meet the commissioning editor from the ABC, the one who didn’t meet directors, only producers. I only met her once, and on that occasion I discovered what my film was about. ‘This isn’t a story about One Nation,’ she said. ‘This isn’t a political film. This isn’t pro-One Nation or anti-One Nation. This is a story about one woman. This is Colene’s story.’ Again a remonstration on my part, and I was told: ‘I don’t like your attitude, and I suggest you change it or remove yourself from the project.’ So the final week of editing in what had been for me a four year project ended with me directed to keep out of the editing suite, and in that week the film transformed into one woman’s story.
Now you don’t have to make big changes to completely transform the meaning of a text. What I would say about the film now is simply that it’s not true. Despite being billed by the ABC as a true story, it’s not a true text. It doesn’t provide us with the truth of our characters, and in lieu of this truth it creates a heroine that we are able to identify with in historically given ways. The film has moved full circle. From a film that began as a critique of the Australian mythos of ordinariness, it ends as a celebration of an Aussie battler. The title has loses its irony and becomes an appeal to those very virtues whose aggressivity I had set out to critique. It tells a story about Hansonism in which an Australian audience is invited to enjoy traditionally given Australian characteristics such as defiance of authority and plain speech. What Film Australia kept stressing was that the film had to be open text and that it had to tell its story in an unfettered way – but telling this story involved editing out the unpalatable details that make the Australian story so difficult for us all to inhabit.

In conclusion, I would like to discuss what happened to the film after cutting. The film was originally to screen during the 2001 federal election campaign, but at the last minute someone high up in the ABC pulled it, the justification being that it was too controversial to show during the election campaign and that other political parties might want equal air time. So already at that point the ABC recognised that the film was open to the interpretation of being pro-One Nation. And how right they were. I have a letter of congratulation from the head of One Nation praising me for the film. He correctly interpreted the film as critical of the triumvirate but as essentially open to the One Nation cause.

Long after Hanson resigned and One Nation had become a spent political force, the film finally went to air as a true story, with a heavy promotional campaign that focused on Colene. One of the extraordinary aspects of this story is that the media in its interviews and articles about the film interviewed not the director, but Colene. Film Australia said the media want to talk to ‘the talent’. Now it is inconceivable that in any other country in the world a film could be made about the far right and the subjects of that film be treated by the national public broadcaster as ‘the talent’. And yet how redolently this speaks of Australia’s incapacity to come to terms with its own history and the reverberations of that history in the present. Celebrity replaces analysis. National jouissance replaces critique and the audience gets a feel-good film. In one of the publicity blurbs, the film was described as being about Colene Hughes, ‘dynamic One Nation candidate, and her whirl-wind adventures’. As Colene said, ‘They’ve done to me what they did to Pauline. This wasn’t about me, it was about One Nation and how they became like Hitler.’ And in true Colene style, she said, ‘They souffléd it. That’s what they did. They souffléd it.’

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