

## **Freda Freiberg in memoriam**

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Nostalgia, as the old gag goes, ain't what it used to be! So please forgive me if I become both somewhat reflective and also a little vague about dates, as I share a few reminiscences of Freda, especially in the days when we were both teaching in Visual Arts at Monash.

It's about 45 years since I joined the staff at Monash, 35 or more since Freda and I became colleagues, and some 15 years since I last taught here. So it's all a bit blurry in parts... But I do remember clearly how much I always admired Freda's spirit and humour, and enjoyed her company, in an era when the nature of universities was changing rapidly.

Many of the changes were inevitable, and also important, of course, subjecting history and culture to searching critical examination, and, as we've heard, Freda was a great exemplar of that, especially when it came to contributing to new understanding of women's cultural production and a critique of the patriarchy. But, on reflection, I valued Freda most for the humanity of her outlook. Humanism, of course, came in for deserved criticism in the postmodern era. But I admired the way in which, for all her determination to participate in contemporary cultural developments, Freda was always a humanist in the sense that she always gave the more worthwhile achievements of the past their due. Much of this I gathered not so much in academic settings, but mainly through informal conversations with her, often with other Monash colleagues.

Visual Arts at Monash was a marvellous experiment, formed in the mind of Patrick McCaughey back in the mid 1970s, and then carried on by Margaret Plant and many others. The main courses of this intellectual smorgasbord were:

- the art of past and present, from antiquity to the here and now, including (initially) an in-house gallery and curator;
- film, the greatest art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the Visual Arts menu from the start;
- and architecture, added a little later, with the appointment of Conrad Hamann

It was a volatile mix, reflected by the variety of personalities and interests involved, and in the end, inevitably perhaps, the blend proved to be unstable, as methodologies jostled for attention, and film numbers grew like topsy. It certainly wasn't all that easy to administer!

Freda's colleagues have spoken with great insight about her contribution to film studies both at Monash and beyond. But in my conversations with her I don't recall her ever speaking as if there was some sort of gulf between film studies and "art history." For her, the complexity of the imaging of women in Japanese cinema, for example, was of a piece with the type of analysis other Visual Arts lecturers would apply to how women were portrayed in Renaissance Florence or postwar New York, or Marion Mahoney's role as Walter Burley Griffin's partner in the planning of Canberra.

In more recent times, post Monash, Shirley and I have continued a friendship we had both formed earlier with Freda, independently. It was in these more recent years that I came to appreciate even more clearly her remarkable range and depth of knowledge on numerous

topics, from photography to music. Our last contact was at the Lee Miller exhibition at Heide only a few weeks before she died, a visit she enjoyed enormously, and during which she spoke with much feeling and insight, especially about the remarkable photos Miller took in Berlin at the end of World War II. Rest in peace, Freda.