

FREDA FREIBERG – AN APPRECIATION

In this short appreciation of Freda Freiberg, I address her contribution to Monash, and to the importance of her presence at Monash under a number of frameworks

- Freda as a colleague.
- Freda as a Researcher, especially on Japanese cinema.
- Freda's networking.
- Freda's teaching at Monash in the 1980s, where we had a comparatively large number of women taking Film Studies units—and, moreover—making up most of the students taking the Honours program in Film Studies
- What was the Monash Film Studies community at the time that Freda joined? As you would be aware, there has been a 3 volume study of Cinema Studies at Latrobe University, but the early history of Film Studies at Monash, in what at that time was known as the Department of Visual Arts, has never been researched or written about.

To some degree these frameworks will be woven together, because they are interrelated.

Freda as a Colleague

Freda was a particularly congenial colleague to have at Monash, given her interest in Asian cinema but also due to her personal qualities. Freda taught in several courses and even supervised some Master's Theses. On occasions, if I was on leave, she would take over and teach the Asian cinema course in a way that satisfied all the students. Importantly, as well, Freda was a feminist, serious and informed in her approach to woman's issues. At the same time, despite her skills, her knowledge and her concerns, Freda was an unpretentious person whose intellectual capabilities, aptitudes and achievements in no way separated her from others but were used in supportive and facilitating ways. It was a pleasure to know her.

Freda as a Researcher, especially in Japanese cinema

Barbara has talked about aspects of Freda's scholarly contributions; Annette has outlined Freda's editorial work for *LIP* and of her very large range of other commitments. I would like to add to this by making some remarks about her approaches to working on Asian cinema.

Freda knew that to do genuinely insightful work on a filmmaker from a country with a different language from English, such as Japan, one should learn the language as far as possible. Freda understood that while words in one language (or combinations of words) can be translated into another, that many key words partly derive their meaning from the unique social context in which they are used, so they have a meaning that is not simply equivalent to a similar term in another language, but when properly understood illuminate the values and frameworks of perception in their own society. This is one reason for Freda's dedication to learning Japanese.

To give an example: in my own experience this richness of implications in a language can be seen in the full implications of the Indonesian term *gotong royong* (which literally means ‘mutual support’), but refers to specific cultural values that take a number of forms widely shared and understood in Indonesia—a country which despite the corruption at some levels, and widespread poverty, is still very much a group-oriented society rather than an individualistic society. This sense of community and of mutual support made for me researching in Jakarta over more than 30 years always a pleasurable experience.

I recently re-read a finely-honed book-chapter that Freda published in 2007: ‘Turning Serious: Yamanaka Sadao’s *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (1937)’—in a book published by Routledge, *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*. I was impressed by the extent to which—in addition to developing her own position on Yamanaka’s films— Freda had read, in the original Japanese language, extensive untranslated Japanese scholarship on Yamanaka and on the various different social contexts within which Yamanaka had worked in Japan in the 1930s, and within which his work was received. For Freda, the study of Japanese cinema, among other things, was a way of coming to see and understand how major artists in a particular country perceived their society in its own terms, in discourses important at the time. This kind of research is particularly important for Australia, with its relative proximity to Asia, and its history of ambivalence at what it might find there. Asian Film Studies is not just about ‘auteurism’ and the work of the foremost directors, but also about coming to know and understand Asia better from an Asian point of view.

Freda’s research on Japanese cinema was disseminated in a number of ways: in a monograph, book chapters and journal articles. Freda even did audio commentaries on DVDs, doing ‘select scene audio commentary’ on the Madman Australian release of Kurosawa’s *The Lower Depths*, and on the British Film Institute’s initial boxset (in 2007) of key films by Naruse, where she did both video introductions and select scene commentaries on the films *Floating Clouds*, *Late Chrysanthemums* and *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*. The recent (2024) BFI release of a newly restored and high definition Blu-Ray of *Floating Clouds* contains in its extras an interview with her by Adrian Martin, and a commentary by Freda on a key scene in the film. This new edition of *Floating Clouds* is co-dedicated to both Freda Freiberg and to Paul Willemen. See: <https://shop.bfi.org.uk/floating-clouds-blu-ray.html>

Freda’s Networking

When Freda came to teach in Film at Monash in the mid-1980s she already had many kinds of important community involvements, clear from her involvement in the feminist publication, *LIP*, from 1977 onwards, about which Annette has spoken. Her work with *LIP* meant that she was not simply an academic teacher and researcher but already networked with politically-savvy people who were part of an increasingly prominent transformative social movement at the time, namely feminism, and with socially-concerned people who in turn provided access to other networks. But the involvement with *LIP* and people associated with it was only one area in which Freda was involved.

I came to know Freda well through my involvement in the early 1980s with the Australian Screen Studies Association. It was at a meeting at Freda’s home in Kew—where meetings of community groups were often held—that Ina Bertrand (an associate professor at

Latrobe University Media Centre) proposed that I should be the President of ASSA from late 1981 onwards – a time when ASSA would be planning and organising the Australian Screen Studies Association conference to be held at Latrobe University in late 1982. At this same meeting it was proposed that the highly efficient and responsible Annette Blonski, at that time about to begin her 4th honours year in film at Monash, should be the Hon. Secretary of ASSA, a very large and potentially onerous task, particularly given the priority that need to be accorded to Annette's academic work.

What was Monash Film Studies like when Freda came to Monash?

The Film Studies program in the Department of Visual Arts at Monash was different in a number of ways from film programs at other universities in Melbourne

1. For one thing, although the student numbers in film and the number of courses on film being taught justified the appointment of at least two lecturers from its very beginning in 1977, there was only one full-time film lecturer for the first 13 years. The appointment of a second full-time lecturer with tenure path only occurred in 1990, with the appointment of Dr Leonie Naughton. I won't go into the reasons for this here, but talk about its consequences. Anyone undertaking a sub-major plus an honours year in film would be taught by the same lecturer in up to 7 or 8 units over 3 years – as you would be aware, an unheard of situation in most academic departments. No wonder staff at Latrobe, particularly Dr Bill Routt, on a number of occasions lobbied Monash to appoint a second lecturer. Although film was not offered in first year Visual Arts, by the mid-1980s we had more students taking film courses in second and third year than were taught by the 4 or 5 Art Historians teaching Art History in the Visual Arts Department in the same year levels.
2. A second aspect of Monash Visual Arts is that we appear to have been the only Film Studies unit in Melbourne that regularly offered a course on Asian cinema throughout the 1980s. Hence its attractiveness for Freda. By late 1980, a postgraduate student from Sri Lanka had successfully completed his MA thesis on three films by the Japanese director Oshima Nagisa. And later in the same decade, one of our postgraduate students, Ma Ning from the People's Republic of China, obtained a lectureship at Griffith University in Queensland on completion of his PhD with us on film in the PRC. Moreover, through my being associate supervisor of Krishna Sen's PhD on Suharto New Order ideology in Indonesian films of the 1970s and 1980s—with renowned politics professor Herb Feith as main supervisor—we already had a growing affiliation with the prestigious Monash Centre of Southeast Asian Studies.
3. A third and very notable aspect of film at Monash throughout these early years was the number of talented women—who later would go on to have remarkable careers—taking the honours program, many of whom found Freda's presence very important. I will mention some of their names because, as I stated earlier, the history of film at Monash is little documented or even remembered. These talented and very productive women include:

- Anna Grieve (graduated Honours 1979), who went on to tutor in film at Monash for a short time before being awarded a scholarship to the Australian Film Television and Radio School, and who subsequently become a documentary film writer/ director/ producer in Sydney.
- In the same year as Anna was Stephanie Bunbury who is now a well-known free-lance film critic based in London and only recently was awarded a special award by the Cannes Film Festival for her writings and her support for cinema.
- In 1980 Annette Blonski began a two year sub-major plus an Honours year in film. As we know, Annette has had a very successful career in script development, working for (among others) the Australian Film Commission.
- In the same years as Annette, was Susan Stewart who wrote a 4th year honours thesis on formal aspects of films by Ozu Yasujiro, a thesis which was assessed by Lesley Stern at Latrobe University, who was so impressed with it that she sent a copy of the thesis to renowned film historian and theorist, Professor David Bordwell at Wisconsin-Madison University. Bordwell then wrote to Susan and congratulated her on the thesis. Susan later gave expert lectures during my year of study leave in 1988, just as Annette Blonski had taken lectures during my first period of study leave, 9 weeks in the first semester of 1984. Freda as a Japanese film specialist was always important to Susan.
- A couple of years later, Deb Verhoeven undertook the three year honours program in film. Subsequent to her time at Monash, Deb published a very clever book, *Sheep and the Australian Cinema* (it was her PhD)—and shortly after—a study of the films of *Jane Campion* (Routledge). Since then, Deb has been a Professor at Deakin University and an Associate Dean (in Innovation and Technology) at the New South Wales Institute of Technology. Currently Deb has a 6-year appointment as Canada 150 Research Chair in Gender and Cultural Informatics at the University of Alberta.
- In the same honours year as Deb was Sophie Cunningham, now a well-known Australian novelist and non-fiction writer, who has published at least 10 major works. Sophie is a Member of the Order of Australia for her contributions to literature, has been Chair of the Australian Society of Authors, and has recently completed a Writing Fellowship in Paris.
- Another distinguished student from the 1980s who knew Freda well and benefited by contact with her is Adelina Modesti, who was primarily a student of art history but did some film units and who has now published a book on the 17th century Italian painter, Elisabetta Sirani.
- Sandra Sdraulig, the director of the Melbourne International Film Festival from 1997 to 2000 was a Film Studies student at Monash in the 1980s.

Freda was very important to have as a presence at Monash, given all these female honours candidates and only one full time lecturer. Indeed Freda brought breaths of fresh air and breathing spaces into a program that had only one main full-time lecturer.

Another person who, along with Freda, brought different kinds of energy and spirit into Monash Film Studies at this time, was Academy Award winning British filmmaker, Peter Watkins, best known for his film *The War Game*. Peter taught a research component documenting dominant codes of television news and their political consequences, in a 2nd and 3rd year course on Television Studies that I had introduced, and came to Monash for 6 weeks at a time over two (or was it 3? years). Costs of Peter's visits were not paid primarily by Monash but by the Melbourne-based 'Peter Watkins Support Group' (of which I was a member), which was also supporting the production of Peter's film *The Journey*.

I could talk in more detail about other aspects of Freda's and Monash involvement in the academic community at large, and in other kinds of community work, such as Film Festivals, but here will only outline them:

- Firstly the work done by Monash people and by Freda in organising the very large Australian Screen Studies Association conference held in the Cinema Studies Division at Latrobe University in late 1982. For one thing, apart from organising the conference, it was Monash people and others on the ASSA committee (which included Barbara Creed, then a lecturer at the Coburg Teacher's College) who raised the money to bring to the Latrobe conference the five distinguished international guests, who included feminist film theorist Professor Janet Bergstrom from the USA; Indonesian writer/director/ actor Slamet Rahardjo; and German TV producer, Eckart Stein, who had created a television program, *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel* ('The Little Television Play'), that provided a venue for the screening of films by independent filmmakers. The Australian Film Commission staff were so delighted at the Monash inclusion of Eckart that they asked that he extend his stay in order to meet with filmmakers in Sydney. Subsequent to the ASSA conference, members of the ASSA committee edited two volumes of its proceedings: the papers from the 'Narrative and Sexuality' stream in the conference were published in the *Australian Journal of Screen Theory* No. 15/16, and most remaining papers in *Papers and Forums on Independent Film and Asian Cinema*, edited by Barbara Creed, John Davies, Freda Freiberg, David Hanan and Kim Montgomery (AFTRS & ASSA, Nov. 1983).
- Secondly, in 1983 the ASSA committee was involved in the lobby to have a National Film and Sound Archive—with its own building and independent management—created out of the small unit handling deposits of film in the National Library in Canberra. We made a statement in *The Age* newspaper about the importance of this development, and as a result, I, as ASSA president, was invited to speak as the representative of film scholars at the forum in Canberra—organised by the Hawke government—about the need and purposes of a national film archive, a forum at which filmmakers and arts administrators (e.g., from the Australian Film Commission and the Australian Film Institute) also spoke.

- Thirdly, it was Monash and ASSA people who played a key role in the re-configuration of the Melbourne International Film Festival in 1984. After an embarrassing press controversy over the screening by the festival of an overtly racist South African film, the Victorian Minister for the Arts, Race Matthews, who had quickly dissolved the previous Board of Management, asked Monash Film Studies staff to create a new Board of Management—a new Board that came to include Freda. This led to a number of new initiatives over the years, important from my point of view. The mid-1980s era saw the commencement for the first time of visits by Southeast Asian film people as guests of MIFF, beginning with the visit in 1985 of Indonesian leading actress (and subsequent producer), Christine Hakim. In later years, Monash Film, in conjunction with the Melbourne Film Festival, curated and organised two Australian Film Weeks in Indonesia at the invitation of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, the first in Jakarta, the second some years later in 4 Indonesian cities, with the Australian guest being Norwegian-born Australian independent filmmaker, Solrun Hoaas, whose 1990 feature film, *Aya* (about a Japanese war bride living in Melbourne in the 1950s) was a main attraction in the program. Solrun, who had done some early tutoring in Monash film courses, was fluent in the Japanese language, having lived in Japan for much of her childhood and in later years as well.

Conclusion

I think I was first introduced to Freda by Solrun—in August 1981, at the time Les Rabinowicz as director of the National Film Theatre (a division of the AFI at the time) brought the distinguished Japanese film director, Oshima Nagisa, to Australia for a retrospective of his films, and Solrun was one of Oshima's interpreters.

I got to know Freda well shortly afterwards, in 1982, when we were both on the ASSA committee. I last saw Freda in 2018, when both I and my brother, John, had a memorable lunch with Freda at a restaurant in the Botanic Gardens. By that time Freda had moved from her house in Kew, where so many meetings were held, whether of women's groups, festival or film studies committees, and groups interested in Japan.
