Men at work: masculinity, work and class in *King of the Coral Sea*

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Abstract
In the aftermath of Second World War and in the beginning years of the Cold War, newly elected Prime Minister Robert Menzies reaffirmed the institutional relationship between masculinity and breadwinning that also spoke to a specific national ideal. In accordance with the 'national narrative of work', this article looks to historicise the relationship between historically specific understandings of gender and work, and how that relationship was represented in the 1954 Australian film *King of the Coral Sea*. Based around the pearling industry in the Torres Strait, the film's narrative shows the introduction of new technology and the management of the workplace; both these representations functioned in accordance with post-war middle-class values. This article argues that *King of the Coral Sea*'s engagement with gendered ideals of work and class not only carries specific national meanings but also had broader implications for understandings of masculinity in the context of the Australian 1950s.

In 1942, during his tenure as leader of the federal opposition, Robert Menzies delivered a speech over radio that would come to shape his leadership once re-elected some 7 years later. The speech, entitled 'The Forgotten People', established a national vision that unfolded along clearly defined understandings of gender and class. For Menzies, civilised masculinity was bound in the middle-class role of the breadwinner, that idealised male figure who, in financially providing for his wife and children, '[gave] them a chance in life' and subsequently produced 'lifters, not leaners' (Menzies, quoted in Brett, 2007: 23). Menzies' speech not only established a clear definition of middle-class masculinity, but connected the middle-class working man to the broader question of national progress after the war. If the post-war world was 'to be a world of men', Menzies reasoned, then 'we must not be pallid and bloodless ghosts, but a community of people whose motto shall be "*to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield*"' (Menzies, quoted in Brett, 2007: 27). Indeed,

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for the future Prime Minister, it was the ongoing relationship between work and middle-class masculinity that served as 'the whole foundation of a really active and developing national life' (Menzies, quoted in Brett, 2007: 26).

Given the continuing popular assumption of Menzies' conservatism and conformity, his advocacy for a conventional gender order may surprise perhaps a mere few. However, to limit the Menziean understanding of middle-class masculinity to the sole domain of the breadwinner would be to ignore the dynamic and shifting landscape of the post-war working world. Not just a matter of men going to work, middle-class masculinity as it functioned in accordance with Menziean political rhetoric unfolded through the ideas of efficiency, modernity, innovation and enterprise. Furthermore, this intersection of gender and class operated in harmony with broader national goals in the 1950s, lending credence to Mark Hearn and Harry Knowles' (2006) concept of the 'national narrative of work', which posits that the question of work, and what it means to work, shares a connection with specific national ideals and their function in a specific historical moment. While these understandings were unfolding in the contemporary political and social landscapes, this article is concerned with their circulation in the cultural sphere of the Australian 1950s. In particular, it looks to the 1954 film *King of the Coral Sea*, directed by Lee Robinson, to explore how the cultural world both constituted and was constituted by specific understandings of post-war middle-class masculinity. This article argues that the film engaged with ideas of entrepreneurship and innovation to advocate a model of masculinity that championed middle-class virtue, in turn representing a national narrative in which work functioned as a way of life in post-war Australia.

King of the Coral Sea stars Chips Rafferty as Ted King, who works for a small pearling business in the islands of the Torres Strait. Arriving from Sydney is millionaire owner Peter Merriman who, while seeking to take a more active role in the business, also eagerly pursues the romantic affections of Ted's daughter, Rusty. Merriman suggests to Ted that he forgo the older helmet and corset diving equipment for newer aqualung technology, in order to compete with their larger competitors. Initially wary of the suggested change, Ted eventually changes his tune after helping the local police solve a murder investigation, discovering an illegal immigration ring that helps Eastern Europeans enter mainland Australia via the Torres Strait. Ted and Merriman use the aqualung to sneak up on and then capture the perpetrators, freeing the kidnapped Rusty in the process. At the end of the film, Ted has learned to embrace the new technology, while Merriman and Rusty finally unite in a romantic relationship.

Using *King of the Coral Sea* to explore historically contingent meanings of masculinity and class means understanding film's ability to not only circulate meaning but produce meaning as well. Historians (see, for example, Brown, 1995; Curthoys and Merritt, 1984; Murphy, 2000; Murphy and Smart, 1997) have worked hard to subvert the popular image of the Australian 1950s as conservative, complacent and monotonous, drawing attention to the social and political changes in the era. There have also been efforts to trace the histories of Australian popular culture and, subsequently, to understand the 1950s in new ways (see Arrow, 2009; O'Regan, 1988; Waterhouse, 1995). However, these dominant histories overwhelmingly dismiss the 1950s as an era of active film production. Certainly, this era is believed to have been a 'dead issue' for feature film production (Shirley and Adams, 1983: 186); Richard Waterhouse (1995) notes that production had 'collapsed' (p. 217) in this period. This article contests this assumption of non-activity: feature films *were* being made in the 1950s, of which *King of the Coral Sea* was one. Additionally, little attention has been paid to the circulation of meaning within this contemporary cultural world. Instead of merely passively reflecting social and political changes, then, this article argues that the cultural landscape of the Australian 1950s was an active and dynamic terrain that was not only shaped *by* cultural meaning but also negotiated, questioned and in turn shaped these meanings. Placing a film such as *King of the Coral Sea* into history, as Alan McKee (2000) suggests, allows the historian to

consider the production and circulation of meaning, as well as film's role in constituting understandings of gender and class. Additionally, the examination of contemporary film reviews and public conversations provides particular frameworks within which film spectators might interpret and understand one potential meaning of a film: McKee (2000) reminds us that a specific 'discursive situation' produces the 'possibilities of interpretation which are offered to a particular … audience'. When film representation shapes and forms 'part of the political possibilities for everyday lives' (Boucher and Pinto, 2007: 313), these conversations around film can assist the historian to determine *how* those possibilities were framed and presented to spectators in a specific historical moment. Film can thus function as a useful source for historical insight, providing an avenue through which to identify and understand the production and circulation of historically contingent meaning.

The film's immigration storyline, which saw Eastern Europeans attempt to make their way to mainland Australia via smugglers working out of the Torres Strait, explicitly engaged in racialised anxieties that were unfolding in the Australian 1950s, given the broader context of the Cold War. Despite the distance, the threat of communism in Europe continued to linger over Australian concerns, and *King of the Coral Sea* functioned to remind its Australian spectators of the continuing potential of communist politics to make their way to Australia. As one newspaper report reminded readers, '[l]et no Australian think that Europe is 10,000 miles away. Europe is here, wrapped up in the lives of a steadily increasing number of Australians' (*Western Mail*, 8 August 1954). In addition, working alongside these smugglers in the film is Yusep, Ted's Malayan employee, mobilising widespread fears about communism spreading throughout Asia – particularly China and Malaya, which both loomed as a 'threat to regional security' (Strahan, 1996: 128). A 1954 *Sun-Herald* editorial named Australia as 'the ultimate target of Communist expansion … in the region' (*Sun-Herald*, 4 April 1954). In her work on the film, Jane Landman (2006, 2009) identifies that *King of the Coral Sea* tells a story about the security of the nation's borders – it is about who is allowed in and who gets turned away. That the pearling industry was the setting for the film drew on a long history of Asian employment in Australia. Made exempt from the 1901 enactment of the White Australia Policy, the pearling industry functioned as a 'classic form of colonial indenture'(Martínez, 2005: 127), and it works in *King of the Coral Sea* to rehearse ideas of Western superiority. This aligns with Landman's (2009) reading of the film; she argues that Australia's regional strength is secured, both despite and because of ongoing British decolonisation, and the Torres Strait is eventually nationalised in the film as one of 'Australia's own colonial territories' (p. 68). This context of international uncertainty in which the film was made and released shaped the non-White masculinities as belonging to the communist 'Other'. That Malayan employee Yusep is eventually revealed to play a crucial role in the immigration scheme suggests the constant threat of communism. In this intersection of race and gender, then, *King of the Coral Sea* casts non-White masculinity as particularly susceptible to the influence of communism.

However, Judith Brett (2007) reminds us that 'the communists stood for all [Menzies] opposed' (p. 70). In opposition to communism stood Menzies' belief in middle-class masculinity and middle-class superiority. Within this racial framework, *King of the Coral Sea* engaged with meanings of masculinity, work and class to legitimate not only a middle-class masculinity that pushed the constitutive boundaries beyond the idealised male breadwinner, but a specific national narrative that held cultural currency in the 1950s. It is worth remembering, of course, that immigration was a population-boosting endeavour explicitly engaged with the post-war working landscape. That the film represents the relationship between work and middle-class Australian men, however, reveals its mobilisation of the discourse of Western superiority. Additionally, the reviewer for *The Sun-Herald* (12 September 1954) suggested that a film focusing solely on 'pearl fishers' would be preferable to this film's inclusion of the immigration storyline, indicating engagement with the

film's treatment of work and class in the 1950s. By focusing on *King of the Coral Sea*'s representation of work, this article provides insight into how understandings of masculinity and the middle class functioned in the Australian 1950s while acknowledging the perceived importance of Western superiority in the Cold War context in which the film was made and released.

Masculinity and management

Crucial to understanding how *King of the Coral Sea* functions to legitimate Menziean middle-class masculinity is understanding the class distinctions that were in operation in the Australian 1950s. The film opens to Ted's discovery of a floating body when he is out working at sea. Describing the body as 'city dressed' with his 'collar, tie, city shoes, the whole works', Ted marks a discrepancy between the deceased man and himself. Ted wears his casual worker's uniform and sailor's hat, marking him as a working-class man separate from those in the city who wear suits and ties. Also affirming Ted's working-class identity was the actor who played him: Chips Rafferty was a well-known Australian actor of the post-war years who embodied common understandings of working-class masculinity. The reviewer for *The Australian Women's Weekly* (22 September 1954) confirmed that Rafferty was 'well-suited to the role of laconic Captain Ted King', speaking to his recognisable masculinity. Ted's discovery of the body establishes the immigration storyline in *King of the Coral Sea*, at the same time as it sets up depictions of post-war Australian class distinctions. Furthermore, the arrival in the Torres Strait of Peter Merriman, owner of the pearling business and described as having been born 'with a mouthful of silver spoons', introduces the concept of the upper class. Although both positioned outside the boundaries of the middle class, Ted and Merriman also function in the film to explore the potential for class mobility – and, subsequently, the opportunity to join the middle class in the Menzies-led Australian 1950s.

Menzies' vision of post-war, middle-class Australia positioned his 'forgotten people' as 'the backbone of this country', albeit 'in danger of being ground between' the upper class, who were able to protect themselves, and the working class, whose wages and conditions were protected 'by popular law' (Menzies, quoted in Brett, 2007: 21). A man's place in the workplace was one criterion by which one could engage in middle-class masculinity, continuing the relationship between work, breadwinning and masculinity that had been officially institutionalised in 1907 by Justice Henry Higgins' concept of the family wage (Hearn, 2006). However, although the Prime Minister espoused the superiority of the middle class, he also believed in its accessibility. John Murphy (2000) notes that more important than the social position of the middle class was their values and argues that 'anyone could be in Menzies' middle class, if they lived by the virtues and sentiments that made up its "way of life"' (p. 7). It was these values – of frugality, of discipline, of self-sufficiency – that circulated both around and beyond the figure of the breadwinner. *King of the Coral Sea* represents these values in accordance with the workplace more broadly, thus emphasising the possibility of inclusion in the middle class. Both Ted's and Merriman's eventual embodiment of Menziean middle-class masculinity unfolds in *King of the Coral Sea* through an engagement with these gendered, class-based models.

For Merriman, this progression to middle-class superiority is framed by his adoption of scientific management techniques that flourished in Australia after the Second World War, despite being developed in America the previous century (Patmore, 1991; Rowse, 1978; Wright, 1995). Although Merriman arrives in the Strait with the promise to Ted that he will not disrupt the running of the business, he eventually becomes concerned over the relatively small volume of pearl shell the boat is taking in. His subsequent suggestion that Ted use the aqualung rather than the helmet and corset is derived from unease regarding the company's production costs. Ted assures his boss that the company '[operates] cheaper than any company in Australia', but Merriman is set on increasing the

output of shell per worker. 'You can still work cheaper', he tells Ted. 'For a start, simplify your diving methods'.

Merriman's concern with production costs and efficiency demonstrates the place of scientific management in post-war Australia. Also known as Taylorism, after its American founder Frederick Winslow Taylor, scientific management is a system that emphasises the maximisation of economic efficiency through the analysis of workflow and worker productivity (Wright, 1995). The implementation of Keynesian economic policies in the years following the Second World War, with its principles of aggregate demand, full employment and indirect governmental economic control (Whitwell, 1994), enabled the increasing popularity of scientific management in Australia, giving employers a means through which to discipline their workers and increase productivity in order to 'take advantage of the post-war mass markets' (Fox, 1991: 167). Scientific management's emphasis on reduced costs and maximum labour productivity aligned with Menzies' vision of post-war labour and economic health, and the Prime Minister linked industrial efficiency with the national good (Hearn and Knowles, 2006). This connection perpetuated the importance of financial discipline, crucial to the stability of both the public workspace and the private, domestic space of the home, which Menzies made clear in his 'Forgotten People' speech: he claimed that the 'home spiritual' was 'produced by self-sacrifice, by frugality, and by saving' (Menzies, quoted in Brett, 2007: 24).

Merriman's employment of specific management methods subsequently connects him to a model of masculinity that functioned according to the importance of efficiency and frugality and, in accordance with Menzean ideals, displayed the superior virtues of the middle class. Thus, although Merriman does not move towards the middle class via a loss of material wealth, the film represents his shifting class alliances as a journey of class mobility that has unfolded through his adoption of specific middle-class values. *King of the Coral Sea* represents his engagement with these specific management methods, demonstrating the beginning of his process towards middle-class masculinity that mobilised particular understandings of work and the economy.

Masculinity and entrepreneurial innovation

In addition to Merriman's engagement with scientific management, it is his emphasis on the new technology itself that also marks his progression towards an embodiment of middle-class masculinity. The importance of the technology to the film was suggested in material produced from its publicity campaign, with numerous promotional posters and pamphlets, including images of the aqualung.[1] Through Merriman, *King of the Coral Sea* conveys the importance of technological innovation in the post-war period, while also positioning Merriman as a post-war entrepreneur:

Merriman: You can still work cheaper. For a start, simplify your diving methods.
Ted: The helmet and corset's the best method there is. We proved that in the past.
Merriman: In the past, yes, but –
Ted: … The helmet and corset's used, and we still take the most shell.
Merriman: Maybe. But your output per man is still low. I did a bit of underwater work for the British navy during the war. We used the aqualung gear they developed for the frogmen.
Ted: That fancy stuff might be alright for the navy frogmen, but they're not in the pearling business Mr Merriman!

Merriman's suggestion of the more modern equipment positions him in the film as an entrepreneur who embodies the increasingly significant technological innovations in the post-war years through to the 1950s. While the figure of the entrepreneur has predominantly been associated with

a predilection for risk-taking (Mill, [1848] 1864; Schumpeter, [1934] 1983), others have argued that the 'critical factor' that distinguishes the entrepreneurs from non-entrepreneurial managers and small business owners is not risk but *innovation*. Economic scholars James W. Carland et al. (1984) write that the entrepreneur is 'characterized by a preference for creating activity' (p. 357) and determine that an entrepreneurial venture can be categorised as such if it meets one of five criteria that each identify some innovative endeavour: the introduction of new goods, the introduction of new methods of production, the opening of new markets, the opening of new sources of supply and/or industrial reorganisation. That Merriman insists on the benefits of the new, modern equipment to increase productivity (and, by extension, profits) marks him as an innovative entrepreneur who represents the focus in post-war Australia on technological innovation and modernity in the 1950s.

Merriman's advocacy of the more modern aqualung equipment over the older helmet and corset demonstrates *King of the Coral Sea*'s engagement with wider push for modernity within the manufacturing market, particularly in the years following the Second World War (Hearn and Knowles, 2006). Promotional material for the film that featured the aqualung often linked the equipment with ideas of modernity and adventure: one poster (National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) Title # 493906) included a large image of Merriman using the aqualung, with the tagline inviting spectators to 'Sail the South Pacific … to Spectacular Adventure!' This drew on contemporary ideas about production, manufacturing and a new world. Before his second stint as Prime Minister, Menzies had encouraged modernity in the form of rapid production to benefit the wage-earner and declared that high levels of production equated to happier, healthier employees and a more powerful Australia (Menzies, 1945, reprinted in Thompson et al., 1986). For Menzies, the production of consumer goods functioned within a larger national narrative that affirmed the health of the manufacturing industry and, by extension, the middle class. Full employment and healthy industry meant that families were ostensibly able to live comfortably on one wage – that of the male breadwinner. Thus, production and manufacturing pointed not only to a modern future for Australia to reach but also to a specific understanding of masculinity that constituted – and was constituted by – the importance of breadwinning.

Merriman's suggestion of the new aqualung equipment not only signalled a specific embodiment of middle-class masculinity but also speaks to the health and importance of the manufacturing industry to post-war Australia. Technological development and innovation, and economic control, assumed greater importance in the 1950s, given the lingering memories of both the Depression and the Second World War (Hearn and Knowles, 2006). In an effort to subvert Depression-era *laissez-faire* economic policies, the Labor federal governments of the 1940s established and assumed 'an activist role for the state, quite unlike that which had preceded the war' (Bell, 1993: 18). However, this increased intervention into the economy, as well as plans to nationalise the banking system, led to fears of a socialist-influenced Labor government. Given increasing fears about the spread of communism, this fear distinguished Menzies as the alternative to Labor's perceived weaknesses (Deery, 1995; McKinlay, 1981; Sheridan, 1989). While this Labor attempt to assert an activist government into economic affairs marked an attempted redefinition in the state's role in the economy, it was under Menzies' prime ministership that the manufacturing industry experienced rapid growth. In the 4 years following the end of the war, 149,000 new manufacturing jobs signalled a post-war boom that would continue throughout the era (Bell, 1993). The manufacturing industry provided one of the fastest growing providers of employment in the 1950s and 1960s and experienced an average annual rate of growth of 6.5% between 1946 and 1960 (Bell, 1993; Boehm, 1993; Hearn and Knowles, 2006). The introduction and development of new technologies and skills were paramount and were linked to Menzian middle-class values: Stephen Bell (1993) writes that 'manufacturing [underpinned] the goals of full employment, population growth, and national self-reliance and security' (p. 17).

Tied to this push for manufacturing is the representation of modern technology constituting a new way of work, and thus a new way of life, for Ted as the manager of the small business. After rejecting Merriman's offer to use the aqualung, Ted continues his survey dive using the older helmet and corset – only for the dive to go awry when his air hose is caught on coral, and he cannot free himself, leaving him at danger of drowning. The black-and-white cinematography adds to the eerie tension of the sequence, with Ted's black silhouette contrasting with the vast nothingness of the water. When Merriman, Ted's daughter Rusty, and his assistant Janiero on the boat realise the danger, it is Merriman's aqualung that proves effective. Merriman is able to not only locate Ted but also free him from the helmet and offer him a new air hose, by which he can safely ascend and make it back to the boat. Despite being saved by the aqualung, Ted is still reluctant to embrace it and the possibility it represents for his work, admitting only that 'it's not a bad sort of contraption'. As the film progresses, however, Ted's opinion of the equipment changes. The revelation of the immigration ring running throughout the islands brings to Ted's attention the involvement of his Malayan employee, Yusep. After Ted fires Yusep, the latter kidnaps Rusty and holds her ransom on one of the islands. Each using the aqualung, Ted and Merriman are able to inconspicuously travel to the island, eventually rescuing Rusty and handing Yusep and his co-conspirators to the police. Ted is left newly enthusiastic about the gear, and the film ends with his admitting its commercial potential: '[y]ou never know, it might come in handy for pearl shelling'.

Ted's acceptance of the aqualung speaks to an acceptance of ideas about modernity shaping not only the workspace but also the life of the worker in the 1950s. In distinguishing the entrepreneur from the small business owner, Carland et al. (1984) argue that if the entrepreneur is defined by innovation, the small business owner manages their business 'for the principal purpose of furthering personal goals'. That is, '[t]he owner perceives the business as an extension of his or her personality'(p. 358). True, Ted does not own the business, nor is he an entrepreneur as is Merriman. However, *King of the Coral Sea* legitimates these connections between work, masculinity and the life of the worker through the film's emphasis on the mutually beneficial relationship between the two men. Through working with Ted, Merriman learns the value of hard work, while Ted is exposed to the value of management and innovation. Ted's acceptance of the aqualung not only shapes the company, and its potential commercial success, but shapes Ted's life as well. No longer bound by the past, he has opened himself up to external influences and allowed himself to be shaped by Merriman, whose own progression towards middle-class membership unfolded through an engagement with the masculine values of innovation, responsibility and hard work. In this case, then, the entrepreneur has offered innovation to the small business owner that will continue to shape his work – and his life – after the end credits of the film have rolled. *King of the Coral Sea* engages with gendered and class-based ideals of work that speak to work's centrality in a man's way of life in the Australian 1950s. Ted's eventual acceptance and advocacy of the aqualung thus signal his acceptance of a present – and a future – that embraces technological modernity and its importance to the manufacturing industry, crucial to the proliferation of Menziean middle-class ideals in the cultural sphere.

Merriman's introduction of the modern diving equipment also enables, at film's end, his and Ted's successful retrieval of Rusty from her kidnappers. This narrative progression and eventual satisfying resolution not only serve to affirm Merriman's move from the upper class to the morally superior middle class but also to legitimate middle-class masculinity in the context of the Menziean post-war national vision. Rusty functions in the film to symbolise the Australian nation. She is, writes Landman (2009), a 'signification of the nation's youth [and] bounty … naturalis[ing] the discourse of the Australian way of life' (pp. 70–71). For Richard White (1981: 161), the Australian way of life was a vague and ill-defined concept that nevertheless functioned as a broad, general means of exclusion, by which ideals of 'stability and homogeneity' were mobilised in the face of

communism, change and cultural diversity. That Merriman's middle-class technological modernity successfully rescues Rusty, and the two end the film happily secure in their romantic relationship, further demonstrates that *King of the Coral Sea* represented Menziean class-based masculinity as the path to secure both Australia's modern future and its safety from the unknown.

Conclusion

While *King of the Coral Sea* engaged with the male breadwinner, the film also revealed that understandings of middle-class masculinity expanded beyond this idealised figure. The film's narrative progression, in which both the upper-class, wealthy Merriman and the working-class Ted move towards this model of masculinity, served to legitimate Menziean understandings of gender. Indeed, *King of the Coral Sea* engaged with Menziean political rhetoric to remind spectators that engaging with the ideals of middle-class masculinity was not simply a matter of going to work. For this understanding of masculinity, work functioned rather as a specific way of life and affirmed the importance of efficiency, innovation and technology in the Menziean vision of Australia in the 1950s. That the film negotiated the meanings of middle-class masculinity, and their role in the constitution of work's meaning to the broader national narrative, reveals that historically specific understandings of gender and class function in contingency with the historically specific national narrative. *King of the Coral Sea*'s legitimation of Menziean, middle-class masculinity, then, affirmed the centrality of work to not only gender but also the very idea of post-war Australia.

Funding

Note

1. The National Film and Sound Archive holds a range of publicity material and other documentation relating to *King of the Coral Sea*.

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