

# “Cinema has the potential to make us richer in spirit”—filmmaker Paul Cox (1940–2016)

Richard Phillips  
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The death last month in Melbourne of veteran writer-director Paul Cox, aged 76, after a protracted struggle with liver cancer, marks the passing of one of Australia’s most fiercely independent filmmakers. An entirely self-taught filmmaker, Cox directed over 40 dramatic features and documentaries—the overwhelming majority on paper-thin budgets—during his more than forty-year career.

Born in Venlo, Holland, near the German border, on 16 April 1940, Cox’s earliest memories were of the horrors of World War II, recollections that shaped his hostility to war and all those who glorified militarism.

As Cox commented in an email to this writer late last year: “The first five years of my life I spent in a war zone. The smell of death was always hanging low in the rubble of the broken city. Nobody ever discussed the war as I grew up but as I grew older I started to remember more. I started to remember the murder of our neighbours, of some children in the street, of a woman being decapitated in front of my very eyes by shrapnel. There was much horror and confusion that went on right through my early youth.”

Cox emigrated to Australia in 1965, where he became a professional photographer, working with well-known Melbourne photographers John Cato and Athol Smith. He published two photography books—*Human still lives from Nepal* and *Home of man: the people of New Guinea*—in the early 1970s and went on to teach photography, and later filmmaking, at the Prahran College of the Arts.

In 1976, Cox wrote and directed *Illuminations*, his first dramatic feature, and then *Inside Looking Out* (1977) and *Kostas* (1978). These films received praise and had limited releases but it was *Lonely Hearts* (1982), about two shy middle-aged people seeking love through a dating agency, which established his national and international reputation.

*Lonely Hearts* was followed in quick succession by the critically-acclaimed *Man of Flowers* (1983), about a middle-aged bachelor’s obsession with an artist’s young model, *My First Wife* (1984), which deals with a marriage breakup, and *Cactus* (1986), about a young woman (Isabelle Huppert) facing blindness.

Over the next three decades, Cox made another 11 features, including *A Woman’s Tale* (1991), *Molokai: The story of*

*Father Damien* (1999), *Innocence* (2000) and *Force of Destiny* (2015), as well as several visually poetic documentaries—*The Life and Death of Vincent van Gogh* (1987), *The Diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky* (2001) and *The Remarkable Mr Kaye* (2005).

Apart from *Molokai*—a historical drama starring David Wenham as Father Damien, a Belgian priest who cared for lepers in late 19th century Hawaii—and his documentaries, most of Cox’s films were semi-autobiographical. Protagonists in his movies were invariably ordinary people, some of them slightly out of kilter with society, but all striving to find love and affection in a complex and insensitive world.

While Cox was an early member of the so-called “Australian New Wave”—a loose group of talented filmmakers that achieved international acclaim during the 1970s and 1980s—he had little interest in rushing off to Hollywood, as many others did, and to what he thought would be creative oblivion.

As he explained in his 2011 autobiographical book, *Tales from the Cancer Ward*: “Too many people who have talents use them to make money, more money, without realising that these gifts belong to our fellow man and not our bank managers. What a ludicrous world of compromise—today in this way, tomorrow in another—always on the freeway to mediocrity.”

Cox insisted that the true potential of cinema could be realised only when writers and directors were given real freedom of expression—i.e., the decision on the final cut—and yearned for a world where film production was not dictated by profit but an enlightened cultural climate.

“Cinema,” he told this writer, “has been given to us to explore our true potential. It is the greatest gift to our times and yet it is one of the most abused and misused forms of self-expression.”

Cox emerged as a filmmaker in a difficult political and cultural environment—a time when the film industry was being swallowed up by giant entertainment corporations that had no room for intelligent and serious artistic work. However, Cox, along with a loyal group of actors and technicians, determinedly fought to rise above the stultifying climate and somehow always managed to scrape together the necessary financial backing for his low-budget films.

While not all of Cox’s productions were artistically satisfying, his most enduring movies—*Lonely Hearts* (1982), *A*

*Woman's Tale* (1991) and *Innocence* (2000)—were humane and artistically accomplished efforts.

*A Woman's Tale* is about an elderly woman (Sheila Florance) dying of cancer and the relationship with her nurse (Gosia Dobrowolska), who is having an affair with a married man. The film is an extraordinary and heartfelt tribute to Florance, who was seriously ill during production and died a few days after winning an Australian Film Industry Best Actress award for her performance.

*Innocence* is about two people in their late-60s—one of them trapped in a warm but passionless marriage and the other widowed—who renew a teenage affair began decades ago in Belgium. The two fall wildly in love.

The movie is punctuated with moments of real tenderness, wry humour and thoughtful social observations as the two lovers, skilfully portrayed by Julia Blake and Bud Tingwell, attempt to deal with the shocked responses of their family and friends to the affair (see: “A sympathetic look at the complexities of old age”).

Cox's first contact with the *World Socialist Web Site* came in 2001, during his media promotion of *Innocence*. The subsequent interview covered the state of contemporary cinema, his hostility to gratuitous violence in cinema, and the moral and political responsibilities of filmmakers. Cox also spoke about *Molokai* and the bitter clashes, and “never again” experiences, he had with the movie's Belgian producers.

“We worked on the film for two years and lived with the lepers of Kalaupapa [in Hawaii]. They were amazing people and I wrote extra parts for them, but then the producers told me that there were too many lepers in the film. Can you believe it, and this was a film about leprosy!”

“I found myself in a war zone that was so ugly, but they discovered that I was as tenacious and stubborn as anybody in the book. I was sacked, together with my people, and then there was a great uprising in which the patients, the lepers, chased the producer off the island ...

“I was called back to finish the film and all was supposed to be forgiven, but it wasn't. I spent two or three months editing it in Brussels and we had a marvellous film but then I was told that they were going to cut it again and they re-cut it like a commercial film ...

“How these people could be so stupid, ignorant and greedy is hard to fathom but they thought it would be commercially successful if they cut it ... This whole business really threw me but this is what most filmmakers—or at least the commercial ones—put up with all the time.”

Cox's 2001 interview was the first of several interesting and impassioned discussions over the next few years. As always, Cox was generous with his time and keenly interested in the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In July 2013, he decided to publicly support the Socialist Equality Party's international campaign in defence of US whistle-blower Edward Snowden. In October, he issued a

statement passionately opposing the privatisation of the Detroit Institute of Arts (see: “Australian filmmaker condemns move to sell DIA collection”).

A year later, Cox again spoke to the WSWS denouncing the Liberal-National coalition government's 2014 social austerity budget and its harsh assault on arts and health spending. “The budget and everything in it is for the elites,” he said.

In 2015, Cox completed *Force of Destiny*, his last and most personal dramatic feature. Starring David Wenham, Shahana Goswami, Jacqueline McKenzie and Hannah Fredericksen, the movie is loosely based on Cox's struggle with liver cancer.

In 2009, Cox was diagnosed with cancer and told he had six months to live unless a liver transplant could be organised. Seven and a half months later—with the filmmaker near to death—a suitable donor was finally found. During the post-operative treatment Cox met and fell in love with Rosie Raka, another liver transplant recipient, who became his partner and remained with him until he died.

Last August, however, and just before a limited release of *Force of Destiny*, Cox was told that the cancer had infected the transplanted liver. Ignoring medical advice to “slow down,” he resolved to make another film and began the strenuous task of raising finance.

In October, Cox discussed *Force of Destiny* with the WSWS and his approach to filmmaking. He also voiced his alarm about rising militarism and war and other concerns close to his heart (see: “Cinema must have a social conscience”).

The last time I spoke with Cox was at his home in Melbourne in late December, just after a fund-raising exhibition of his early photographic work—images that still retain their emotional power after four and a half decades. Visibly frail, he insisted that he would be visiting the US in April to screen *Force of Destiny* at the annual Ebertfest in Illinois (US critic Roger Ebert, who died in 2013, was a consistent champion of Cox's work).

Cox made the journey, but it was the last time he addressed a film festival audience.

While his death in Melbourne on June 18 is a sad loss, his rich body of work and his defiant fight for artistic truth is a powerful legacy for all those serious about cinema and life.



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