Essay: Maree Delofski  
Archival Footage and Storytelling in *The Trouble with Merle*

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This presentation is an account of my approach to visualising and structuring some elements of the research underpinning my recent television documentary film *The Trouble with Merle* (2002) about Merle Oberon, the Hollywood star of the 1930s and 40s. The film unpicks the competing stories and claims made by different groups for Oberon’s ethnicity and nationality: that she was either born in India of Anglo-Indian ancestry or that she was Tasmanian-born of Chinese ancestry. In the process of uncovering these stories, the film reflects on celebrity and memory and the way in which racism can shape a life.

There are a number of radically different perspectives or stories held on Merle Oberon’s early life and upbringing. As a filmmaker I’m particularly interested in the function of storytelling in my culture. Unpicking these offered me an opportunity to consider this. In this session I want to reflect on the uses of non-fiction, fiction and occasional faux archival film material in the construction of *my* biography of Merle Oberon. Tracking the ways in which the function of this material changes throughout the film. Along a spectrum from the evidential or empirical to the expressive. I say *my* biography because Merle Oberon’s provenance and early life story have been such a matter of contention to those interested enough to discuss such things, particularly in Australia, where numerous individuals have claimed a family relationship to her.

In the course of researching *The Trouble with Merle*, I uncovered a number of different accounts of Oberon’s early years and nationality – family histories that led me from Australia to the USA, India and Canada.
The challenge was to develop a structure for the film which would draw on this research. I wanted to create a film which could allow the telling of these different ‘Merle’ stories. I also hoped the film might provide, firstly, some insights into the pleasures of storytelling itself, and secondly insight into the way a set of questions about race, class and celebrity attached to the ‘idea’ of Oberon. I envisaged the film contributing to a discussion which might illuminate the tension that often exists between empirical notions of historical evidence and the significance of oral histories and myth in people’s lives. And, of course, the film’s title *The Trouble with Merle* is about this very tension.

Filmmaker Desmond Bell (2004:5), discussing the use of archival footage in the representation of history and popular memory recently has posed the following questions:

*How should we as documentary filmmakers picture the past, how should we conduct the struggle for memory?...Should archival images be dealt with as primary evidence and mute testimony to an unattainable past or as narrative resource capable of releasing the submerged voices of history and attending to their story?* (1)

These kinds of questions also informed *The Trouble with Merle*. The archival material used in the film includes both footage of Oberon performing as fictional characters in her films and actuality footage of her as celebrity film star. It also includes early archival images of Tasmania, newspaper clippings, family photographs, and archival Australian television footage. It was the potential of archival material to function as both indexical evidence and story element that interested me, together with voice-over’s capacity to inflect it in various ways.

I should state at the outset that in researching and creating *The Trouble with Merle*, I was not interested, as a filmmaker, in making a traditional documentary biography of Merle Oberon, narrated by an unseen “voice of god”. Rather, it was the fact of the competing truth claims for her life story that attracted me and the possibility of making a television
documentary film that explored the desire underpinning those claims and thus, the power of story itself. As I shall describe, many Tasmanians of a particular generation have an emotional and cultural investment in their stories of Merle – and it was this I wanted to represent. Thus constructing a linear, causal chronology of a life based on a notion of archival material as sets of illustrative primary or evidential footage with an apparently transparent connection to a historical reality did not appeal. Instead I cast myself as detective/inquirer aiming to explain an enigma. I hoped to explore the possibilities of constructing a meta-account of the Oberon life-stories which might direct an audience away from an idea of documentary biography as a historically transparent ‘given’, towards an exploration of the particular desires embodied in the range of claims on Oberon’s provenance.

There are, of course, other documentary precedents for this kind of strategy. In Australia, writer director Kriv Stenders has explored the nature of memory and its relationship to biography in his documentary film *Motherland* (1993). In this film, Stenders refuses the use of actual archival material in his autobiographical account of his childhood and his relationship to his beloved Latvian grandmothers. Instead, he elects to create a set of dramatised faux archival memories which are so excessive in their representation of an idealised past, so ‘golden’ and strangely ‘florid’ even as expressive black and white re-creations, that their status as unproblematic or transparent memories becomes heightened, and thus questionable.

In another Australian documentary, Tony Ayres’ *Sadness* (1998) the narrator William Yang, explores a broader meaning of ‘family’. He steers the audience narratively between archival photographs of his natural family and archival photos of his family of gay friends suffering and dying from AIDS. These are intercut with a dramatised family memory of an unsolved family murder delivered Rashomon-like from various storytelling positions. In his film, there is a tension between the actual or evidential status of the family stills and the fictionalised, reconstructed accounts of mystery, the indexical character of the still images with their historical
claims to authenticity slugging it out with the (clearly) constructed and thus unreliable, yet visually pleasurable memory sequences.

Each of these documentary films approaches questions of history, biography and its construction on film from a position which implicitly rejects notions of a transparent documentary realism and the documentary tendency described by Renov (1993) as to preserve or record. (2) In these authored works, it is the expressive representation of a past that interests the filmmakers - rather than the evidential. Filmmakers are after all storytellers. One of the things that The Trouble with Merle shares with the work of these Australian filmmakers is the desire to explore the tension between the evidential and the expressive as an element of storytelling itself.

BACKGROUND TO THE FILM
Prior to 2000, had you asked me what I knew of Merle’s (and I would like to refer to my subject by her first name from herein) early history, I would have been able to offer you very little information. I knew she was a famous international actress during the 1930s and 1940s in the UK and the USA starring in many films with leading men such as Gary Cooper, Lawrence Olivier, Robert Ryan, Leslie Howard and Marlon Brando (in her later years). Her best-known films are probably Wuthering Heights (William Wyler, 1939) and The Private Life of Henry VIII (Alexander Korda, 1934). You, of course, may have other favourites.

Like many Australians, I’d grown up believing that she was an Australian film legend. The story was well known - she was born in Tasmania, the tiny island state at the bottom of the map of Australia. Just like that other Tasmanian film star Errol Flynn. They’d both gone off to Hollywood and in local parlance, “made it big”. Merle had even been nominated for an Academy Award and was always written up as “the Tasmanian born movie star”. In Australian writer Hal Porter’s “History of Australian Stars of the Stage and Screen” published in Australia in 1965, he writes of Merle:
Merle Oberon (Estelle Merle O’Brien Thompson) was born on February 12, 1914, at St Helens, a village overlooking the black mud flats of St George Bay on the north east coast of Tasmania. She lived in Tasmania until she was seven. She was taken to live in Bombay, India, where her education was continued and completed in Calcutta. As an adolescent she displayed an enthusiasm for acting...

For my mother’s generation it was as if Tasmania, famous for its apples, was also a breeding ground for film stars. Of course there were in fact actually only two stars, but for a country that had so few “international” celebrities in those days it must have seemed as if Tasmania had something rather special going for it. It’s important to note here that Tasmania is separated from the mainland of Australia by a rough stretch of water, Bass Straits – and that beyond the island lies Antarctica. To a large degree many older Tasmanians’ view of themselves has been shaped by their geographical relationship to an idea of the centre – conceptualised in the first instance as either Sydney or Melbourne and in the broader world view, as Europe or America.

Sometime in the 1980s, and I can’t remember how, I learned that Merle wasn’t Tasmanian after all, that she was Indian, that she may have been pretending to be Tasmanian. To be honest I hadn’t thought about her much until then, and beyond a kind of ‘so what’ response to this news, I didn’t think about her again for another twenty years or so until, by chance, a curious bit of information came my way. It seems that Merle, who died in Los Angeles in 1979, had come to Sydney in 1978 as a guest of the local film industry. She’d been invited as special presenter for a film awards ceremony. The organisers had been looking for a guest presenter with special significance to Australia, and Merle was one of the few international stars alive at the time who had any Australian film industry connection. The fact that she could be billed as “an Australian star from the golden period’ rendered her celebrity status even more alluring.
When Tasmanians heard that Merle was on her way to Australia, the Lord Mayor of Hobart, the capital city of Tasmania, issued an invitation to the former Tasmanian to visit her birthplace and attend a special Welcome Home reception at the Town Hall. When I learned so many years later that Oberon had accepted this invitation and actually gone to Tasmania for the reception, I was intrigued and fascinated. I wondered, if she was really from India, why would she do such a thing...it seemed both odd and foolhardy in the extreme to carry the identity masquerade into the belly of the beast as it were. It was this tantalising scrap of information that catapulted me into the research for the film.

What attracted me in this initial stage of the research was the potential for a film which explored Merle’s relationship with Tasmania – that unpicking this relationship might provide a way of entering into discussions about our fascination with and desire for connection with celebrity in general and Tasmanians’ view of themselves in the world in particular. Tasmanian-born historian Cassandra Pybus has written of Tasmanians’ sense of isolation and corresponding fascination with Merle Oberon as a sign of the cosmopolitan world that seemed to exist just beyond their physical grasp,

*We all tell stories to prove we exist, Tasmanians tell stories to prove that we have not slipped off the edge of the world.*” (3)

Charles Higham’s biography “Princess Merle” (4) (which he wrote with Roy Moseley) first asserted in the early 1980s that Merle was not Tasmanian but Anglo-Indian, that she was born Estelle Thompson in Bombay. According to Higham, Merle’s Tasmanian provenance was concocted by British film producer Alexander Korda in London after Merle had arrived there from India with her mother. The racism of the period meant that Korda’s studio regarded Merle’s mixed race background as a major obstacle to her becoming a star.
For the film studio Tasmania in the 1930s was a conservative kind of a place, resolutely British (read ‘white’), and so isolated it was sometimes dropped off the map entirely. A perfect place to bury Merle’s inconvenient Anglo-Indian identity. Because it was also so far from the USA and Europe the likelihood of the deception being discovered was minimal – after all it could take over six weeks for a letter to travel to Australia from the northern hemisphere in the 1930s. Certainly the fact that there was also a community of Indigenous people on the island was irrelevant to the studio. And so, Estelle Thompson the Anglo-Indian lass from Bombay transformed into Merle Oberon, a white upper class Hobart girl who moves to India from Tasmania with her mother only after her distinguished father, an officer in the Colonial service, dies in a fox hunting accident. The fact that there are no foxes in Tasmania did not appear to bother the studio publicists either!

While the documentary focuses on the star’s 1978 visit to Hobart as both an emblematic and enigmatic event – the significance of which the audience is invited to consider and explore with me – Merle’s biographer Charles Higham refers to it only fleetingly in his written account of her life. Higham writes that Hobart Council, which had issued the reception invitation to Merle as a famous Tasmanian “returning home”, discovered while doing a routine check for her birth certificate that there was no record of her Tasmanian birth. That it was more than likely Merle Oberon was not Tasmanian at all. According to Higham, the Lord Mayor decided to go ahead with the function in order to save face for both the Council and the community at large, and that Merle attended the reception unaware that some of the guests no longer believed she was Tasmanian. Higham also claims that the business of maintaining the identity-deception proved extremely stressful for the film star and that she broke down and fled the reception room during her “thank you” speech.

It was this idea – that both the Tasmanians and Oberon may have met in a mutually face saving moment – that I also found fascinating. And in part, I imagined that the film would be about this. However, travelling to
Tasmania to research the ‘welcome home’ visit I discovered that not only had many Tasmanians at the reception believed Merle Oberon was most definitely one of them at that time – and indeed, many continue to do so - but that they had several completely different versions of her birth and early life there – stories which were in fact the antithesis of the studio story in terms of Merle’s class and race. When I asked the biographer why he had not included the various Tasmanian claims on Oberon in his book, he dismissed them as preposterous, and somehow unworthy of comment. It seemed that the tyranny of distance was burdening Tasmanians with inattention yet again.

The studio fantasy had promoted Merle as the progeny of an upper class white colonial family but many Tasmanians believe she was the illegitimate daughter of a poor Australian-Chinese chambermaid from the remote north-east of the island, a woman from a family called Chintock who had been seduced by the wealthy, married Anglo hotelier for whom she worked. The woman, Lottie Chintock, had been forced to relinquish Merle and through various pathways in different versions of the story, the little girl had made her way to India and later Europe to become a star. Between 2000 and 2002 when I was researching and filming this documentary, different versions of this story were still in circulation in Tasmania. Yet in a kind of parallel universe, I also discovered that there were people in India and Canada who claimed a relationship to the film star and who had stories to tell that were equally valid – stories where Tasmanian didn’t rate a mention! Stories of poignant family relationships and family secrets. Captain Harry Selby, an Anglo-Indian originally from Bombay, had been Higham’s informant for his biography claiming that he was Oberon’s nephew. During filming for the documentary he came forward and revised his relationship to the star. He claimed he was her half brother. They shared the same mother, Constance Selby. Constance had relinquished her daughter to her mother who had brought the child up. Due to family sensitivities he had not chosen to reveal this to the biographer at the time of *Princess Merle*’s publication in the 1980s. Now his family was grown up he believed he could, backed by a birth certificate and correspondence.
Nevertheless in Tasmania, many people remain passionately committed to the idea of Merle as Tasmanian and Lottie Chintock’s daughter. Each Tasmanian story of Merle is consistent in that it has her leaving the island at the age of seven to travel to India and live there – sometimes with a British Indian Army officer, sometimes with an Indian silk merchant and once with a troupe of travelling Irish actors. But there is no documentary evidence of her travel arrangements nor of the existence of these people. For the Tasmanian storytellers there is in fact no factual documentation of Merle’s early life there: no birth certificate, no family photographs of Merle as a small girl. Unlike the Indian biography which includes a birth certificate, baptism certificate, letters from the star to family members, etc., all the Tasmanians had were family and community stories about Merle and her Tasmanian mother, Lottie Chintock, and equally importantly, the body of fiction films she starred in. For those committed to the idea of Merle as a Tasmanian born Australian Chinese from the north east of the island, her feature films had become a kind of family archive of images – documentation which proved the validity of their claim on her.

Lottie Chintock, Merle’s Tasmanian mother, was from a little village in the north east of the island state. Although she’d been dead for fifty years, her memory was still strong in Tasmania. Family members had photos of Lottie and stories about her longing for her lost daughter Merle. Was Lottie Merle’s mother? During my search I wanted her to be – but in the Tasmanian Archives there was no official record for anyone who could remotely approximate to Merle, or for a daughter for Lottie. Did Lottie have a little girl? Was she taken from her? What happened to her? Lottie is known to have told her nephew after travelling down to Hobart to see one of Merle’s films, “I saw my girl on the screen, I saw my girl on the screen.” (5) Could each screening of an Oberon film have provided an opportunity to scan her face for evidence of her Tasmanian heritage? Can fictional film provide a documentary moment?
US documentary filmmaker Ross McElwee has also reflected on this in his recent film *Bright Leaves* (Ross McElwee, 2003). McElwee’s family myth maintains that a Hollywood feature film, *Bright Leaf* (Michael Curtiz, 1950), is a fictionalised account of his great-grandfather’s life as a tobacco plantation owner in the South. In his documentary he refers to the film as functioning for him like “a surreal home movie enacted by Hollywood stars”. How much more directly may Tasmanians have connected to the archive of fictional images of Merle – perhaps as Cathy from *Wuthering Heights*. Were there resonances of her lost child for Lottie Chintock when Cathy tells Heathcliff as they stand in the wild world of the Yorkshire moors that she wants “music, parties, the world”? - did this explain to her something of Merle’s glittering journey through life? Did William Wyler’s representation of the Yorkshire moors speak to Tasmanians of the rugged northeast where their Merle was born? Or perhaps there were clues in her scornful speech as George Sand in *A Song to Remember* (Charles Vidor, 1945) where she tells of the struggle she has endured as a woman in a man’s world? These images of the star, together with newspaper articles and the occasional newsreel footage charted the trajectory of Merle’s life for Tasmanians until her death in Los Angeles in 1979 when newspaper banners proclaimed “Tasmanian-born movie star dies in the US”.

**USE OF ARCHIVAL MATERIAL**

The film can be divided into sections: prologue, exposition, journey, dénouement and epilogue. While the quest appears to be centred around the primary enigma of Merle’s origins, in fact an answer to the mystery is given before we even see the film’s title. My narration tells us that:

“*Merle was really Estelle Thompson, an Anglo-Indian from Bombay*”.

However, while providing an answer to one mystery the narration also suggests another, for it is followed by the question:

“If it were that simple, why are there Tasmanians today who still believe she is one of them?“
The images we see are a mix of studio glamour stills and moving images of Oberon as various characters in her films, together with actual images of Merle the celebrity. While the opening is perfectly conventional, on the one hand, illustrating the range of personae the star embodied – it also indicates that the distinctions between categories may not be so rigid. A kind of slippage is suggested when a fictional Merle, Jane Benson in Over the Moon (Thornton Freeland, 1939), reads from a book about the “oriental set” of someone’s eyes,

...... his eyes smouldered with all the passion of the Orient, flickered with unsated desire.

prefiguring the discussion of race running through Tasmania’s claim and the strategy in the film of appropriating this kind of fictional material in order to transform it into narrative and expressive elements of the story. The prologue sets up the double function of factual evidence and story element that archival images will perform through the film.

Tracking the changing function of the archival material through the section of the film dealing with the Tasmanian stories reveals that I have constructed it to move between the denotative and connotative. By this I mean that while some archival material is used in an evidential or literally illustrative fashion, other material is used in an attempt to signify something more, an expressive presence.

The Tasmanian stories are explored in the first half of the film. They are preceded by a short section which sets up the historical background to Merle’s stardom, her role in The Private Life of Henry VIII and her marriage to producer Alex Korda. Archival footage of Merle as Ann Boleyn, stills of Merle and Korda, combine with a narration that essentially outlines “facts”. There is no hesitancy in my voice-over. The narration tells us that the studio hid Merle’s Anglo-Indian background and chose Tasmania as her new birthplace. Biographer Charles Higham appears on screen and confirms this story with further detail. The style is
Authoritative, or as Bill Nichols (6) might describe it - expository - typical of a conventional biographical television documentary. Images are in the service of the narration in an unambiguous and direct way. They seem to provide an unproblematic access to history.

Yet, one of my aims in making The Trouble with Merle was to try to suggest the seductiveness of story and myth. Myth of course cannot necessarily be “proven” by documentation; its validity lies in the way it satisfies a culture’s needs. It is through myth that we can begin to understand people’s needs. Narrative theorist Peter Brooks (1992:3) has written of myth:

The narrative impulse is as old as our oldest literature: myth and folktale appear to be stories we recount in order to explain and understand where no other form of explanation will work. (7)

The dissemination of myth also draws into the foreground those who tell the stories, for if we are to believe the story we must also believe in the storyteller’s integrity, their authenticity as storytellers. And so, a further imperative developed in the creation of the film – the need to represent in some way my own ambivalence regarding Merle’s origins, an ambivalence which had developed after hearing the Tasmanian stories during the research trip. I had set off to Tasmania accepting biographer Higham’s version of her life, that she was Anglo-Indian, born in Bombay. However, while I had been conducting the Tasmanian research I had become more and more drawn to the Lottie Chintock story. The fact that it couldn’t be proven made it more attractive – if it couldn’t be proven then perhaps it couldn’t be disproved?

In the section I am describing my own journey in Tasmania from my arrival in Hobart. The time frame moves from past to present to past and for the first time in the film archival fiction footage is introduced not in order to illustrate a factual aspect of Oberon’s career but rather to suggest something more, something about the relationship between the star and her Tasmanian audience and to perhaps contribute to a sense of
her vulnerability at the time of the visit. Thus footage from *Lydia* (Julien Duvivier, 1941) performs a number of functions; importantly, it allows us an opportunity to “look” at the star, perhaps in the same way as Tasmanians may have “looked” at her in the cinema in 1941 when this film was released, projecting their desires and hopes onto her screen image. Re-inscribing these images in a new narrative context, that of her strange 1978 visit, I hoped would contribute to a re-reading of them. This section sets up the 1978 visit as a site of ambiguity and enigma. In order to both understand and be drawn into the Tasmanian stories, the film’s audience had to be equipped with knowledge of both the “official” studio story and the seemingly paradoxical nature of the 1978 visit.

I had decided to represent the conflicting stories about Merle’s past through a recreation of my research journey as both as literal and figurative journey through the Tasmanian landscape. As you will see, the status of archival material in this section changes. When we see a still photograph of the woman who is said to be the midwife who delivered baby Merle in Hobart, the photograph is offered unambiguously as factual evidence of her existence.

There are also varying treatments of archival Tasmanian footage shot in the northeast, Merle country. On the one hand it is used in an apparently evidential fashion to illustrate St Helens around the time of Merle’s birth and early years there, but there is an odd disparity between the emptiness of the images and the voice-over which describes it as “quite social” at that time.

*St. Helen’s was very much like perhaps the Gold Coast of today, it was where everyone went for holidays, it was quite social.* (8)

We see more archival images of the coast around St Helens. There are few houses near a deserted beach. The scene doesn’t look madly social.
Similarly with images of a ‘generic” ocean liner leaving the harbour at Hobart. These images are used three times from three different angles in relation to the three different stories of Merle’s departure. It is the same ship we see each time. It is not the actual ship of course because we do not know whether in fact Merle actually travelled by ship from Tasmania to India. It is the image of a ship which I hoped would connote the “idea” of her ship.

Unlike the photograph of the midwife we see in an earlier section, when photographs of Merle and her Tasmanian mother Lottie Chintock are compared for evidence of their relationship and as a relative’s “proof” of the family resemblance, their status as evidence of this fact becomes weaker for it becomes clear that Merle was a little like a chameleon, that she had many fictional “appearances”. We see different photographs of Merle in various roles, the kinds of photographs that fan magazines would have published, photographs that Tasmanians might have had access to. The photos of Lottie which are offered as comparison are instead remarkably fuzzy. It’s almost impossible to be sure that these two women could be related, or to even see Lottie clearly. But such is the power of his desire for connection that Merle’s Tasmanians nephew tells us,

*I’ve got no doubts in my mind that Merle is Lottie’s daughter because of the likenesses in the photographs, if you compare the photographs...*(9)

Instead of evidential archival material confirming Merle’s Tasmanian status, I hoped the juxtaposition of photographs might encourage the audience to question both the status of the archival evidence and their own desire for ‘proof’.

I was also interested, as I have indicated earlier, in exploring the way in which fiction film footage might be used as a way of expressing something I perceived of the relationship between Merle and Tasmanians. Thus small moments from *I Claudius* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1937) are woven through this section. This Korda film in which Merle starred as Messalina
was never actually completed. But for my purposes there is something “knowing” in the exquisite images of the (then) very young star. Although ironically most Tasmanians would never have seen her performance in this role, unless they saw the documentary on its making *The Epic That Never Was* (Bill Duncalf, 1965), the images seem to allow the possibility of creating a dialogue on screen between the actress and her public. When Charles Laughton as Claudius agrees with Caligula (Emlyn Williams) that Merle as Messalina is “fantastically beautiful” it is as if he is a star-struck fan, perhaps like the Tasmanians were in this period. In response to his gushing praise, Merle walks on glancing over her shoulder triumphantly and, as I argue, knowingly – she has no doubts about her power over either Claudius or her audience. During the course of the film I have used the same image from *I Claudius* twice. It is a CU of Merle/Messalina responding in different contexts to the statements by different storytellers. In the first instance she appears to respond to a rather bald claim by a Tasmanian that “the story was that Merle Oberon was born in Tasmania that she was of mixed parentage, that she was illegitimate”. (10) This Merle/Messalina seems to look slightly hurt by this revelation. Later in the film, the same Merle/Messalina shot is used during an exchange between myself and one of the Tasmanian storytellers who claims to know where proof of Merle’s birth lies. This time her “look” is inflected differently by the speaker’s statement – of course, music in both instances assists in reading of her expression.

**CONCLUSION**

Merle’s studio biography was a construction fabricated for industrial and ideological reasons; in many respects it read like the scenario for one of the many melodramas she would later perform in. Similarly Tasmanians constructed their own biography of the film star – one that reflected their particular cultural, ideological and geographical needs and desires. Like the studio story, it too is a kind of melodrama where the mother who has transgressed cultural and social boundaries must pay the ultimate sacrifice by giving up her child to a “better” life. Tasmanians were confronted with a mosaic or grid of potential connections and informations
about Merle which they pieced together into a cohesive narrative in their own idiosyncratic fashion.

My narrative is really just one more to add to the set of tales that have attached to Merle Oberon over the last thirty years. One of the great ironies of the Merle stories out of Tasmania is that in creating them, Tasmanians returned her to the circumstances the studio had attempted to disguise: poverty, mixed race and illegitimacy. Like the Tasmanians I also attempted to create my Merle story, one that has a beginning a middle and an end, one that raised questions as it tried to answer them, one that tried to make some sense of the sea of stories. Not necessarily with a definitive answer but the possibility of answers. This approach does not always satisfy every audience. A prominent Australian critic writing of the film criticised its knowledge strategies precisely because the film as he said, *raised more questions than it answered.* ... I was rather pleased with his response.

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