Australian Cinema in the 1990s

EDITOR IAN CRAVEN

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Contents

1

Australian Cinema Towards the Millennium

IAN CRAVEN

The history of the 'new' Australian Cinema's revival since the 1970s often now feels like a relatively settled one. A range of studies chart the political cultures which talked the 'renaissance' into being, the institutional frameworks which guided production or formulated policy,[1] and survey the eventual output of a growing number of state-backed and independent producers.[2] Significant contributions, of course, to the revision of the critical literatures continue to be made, recognising shifts of commercial and aesthetic direction in the 1980s, and locating the various 'hidden' histories overlooked in the critical project of constructing a 'national' Australian cinema.[3] Such work on the mainstream cinema has triggered research on more neglected areas such as the non-fiction film, the short film, and the experimental and avant-garde sectors. Scholarship across the board has helped stimulate a conspicuous intensification, since the 1980s, of attention to Australian television.[4]

The essays collected in this volume seek to extend this work with reference to the 1990s, by offering a series of overlapping but distinct perspectives on Australian cinema of the past decade, and sketching possible directions for its development beyond the coming Millennium. Attention is given to cinema at every stage of its movement from conception to consumption, and close readings of particular movies, or clusters of movies, are balanced by more contextual work on issues of industry, policy, criticism and reception. Taken together, the essays suggest something of the remarkable diversity of the feature output since 1990, and the challenges that this body of film poses to the critical and theoretical paradigms through which the work of Australian filmmakers has come to be understood both within and without the academy.

The sequencing of contributions aims to suggest the outlines of residual and emergent trends, and to clarify recurrent themes in the output. If the cinema of the 1970s has come to be understood broadly in terms of a national 'project' driven by intellectualist-managerialist impulses, and underwritten by a regime of formal regulation and public subsidy,[5] and the 1980s has been characterised as an era of de-regulation, encroachment by the market, and a new commercialism aesthetics,[6] the 1990s might well be viewed as a period marked by *re*-regulation at the levels of both text and context, and by structures and discourses fusing nostalgia for the heady days of the nationalist 'renaissance' with a futuristic open-ness to the possibilities of the global. Both impulses of course have their counter-tendencies; one need not look far through Australian cinema of the 1990s to identify evidences of scepticism around the once-confident articulation of cultural nationalism with political progressiveness, and of millennial anxiety generating more than a fair share of suitably apocalyptic narratives.

The conflicting trends are contextualised initially here by scrutiny of the film industry's performance and structure, which reveals dramatic shifts in fortune, and almost constantly changing patterns of ownership and control. The picture in terms of policy-making and implementation is equally dynamic. No national film industry on earth seems to have been subject to more constant surveillance, re-definition and re-direction than the Australian; reconstructions of the government film's instrumentality following consultancy reports, position papers and counter-manifestos became almost seasonal at times during the 1990s, and instabilities at these discursive levels played a crucial role in delineating the product eventually reaching movie theatres. Lisa French provides an informative account of the production sector since 1990, with reference to the key policy documents generated, the responses of filmmakers and financiers, and the performance of the industry which they helped to shape. As the hard statistical data indicates, Australian feature-filmmaking remained a fragile enterprise in the 1990s, and the conspicuousness of a small number of films at the international box office often concealed a production sector struggling to find a secure route through distribution to reach audiences still demonstrating a consumer preference for imported, usually American, movies.[7] The few 'breakthrough' pictures of the decade, around which the history of the Australian cinema seems certain to be extended, efface numerous other works whose significance awaits assessment.[8]

The picture of the industry in the 1990s which French delineates does much to explain the unevenness of the output, which often seems to exhibit little consistency beyond its insistence upon the idiosyncratic, despite

sporadic critical attempts to detect a unifying sensibility, preoccupation or aesthetic.[9] Tom O'Regan however provides a useful starting-point for understanding this manifest diversity, when he suggests that: 'The history of Australian film is largely a history of the combinations of possible projects, and an indication of which of these are ascendant', and remarks that the conditions generating these 'combinations' include:

> the nature of state support offered, the policy framework for delivering it, the extent to which talented film workers concentrate in an area, the international opportunities available in commercial and critical terms through working in a film form, and the critical celebration of this or that film-making.[10]

In their various ways, the essays included here work to track such 'combinations', often in very localised contexts, and to indicate the relationship between such conjunctural forces and a wider socio-political culture unifiable at other levels.

Late-National Cinema?

By the late 1980s, a number of commentators were already speculating about the disintegration of the 'project' which had driven both national-cultural revivalism and national-commercial entrepreneurialism since the 1970s.[11] In their essay here on 'The Heterosexual Dynamic', Nigel Spence and Leah McGirr track some of the thematic shifts which have accompanied this re-definition of Australian filmmaking, and focus in particular on the rise of a personal-relations cinema occupying a somewhat marginal space in the earlier output. As the emblematic landscapes of the 1970s and 1980s have given way to the more banal locales of the 1990s, the authors see the preoccupations of Australian narratives contracting towards a closer concern with inter-personal, especially inter-gender relations. Both a recognition of absence in the earlier output, and a desire to match the narrative standards of the international marketplace are seen as triggering the 'turn' in the 1980s, which develops and becomes more complicated in the 1990s. Starting with higher-profile movies such as *The Year My Voice Broke* (1987), the impulse is seen as finding expression in later works such as *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992), *The Sum of Us* (1994), *Love Serenade* (1995) and many others. The significance of the analysis in this context is that it begins to chart a fresh history of Australian cinema in terms of genres, and more specifically, views an exploration of the heterosexual dynamic as cutting across the more teleological trajectories of the rites-of-

passage sub-texts which have so often underpinned the exploration of character in Australian cinema, to encourage new structures, styles and definitions of Australian filmmaking. This unhinging of self-formation from national-formation is explored across a range of exemplary movies which chart wider movements from 'realist' to 'generic' filmmaking apparent in the 1990s output. If Spence and McGirr reach fairly pessimistic conclusions about the possibilities for creative relations between the sexes suggested by Australian cinema in the 1990s ('a relationship's deterioration [is] regarded as some kind of grim inevitability'), they also chart some fundamentally different preoccupations for a 'late' national cinema.

Creativity stands at the very centre of the works examined by Liz Ferrier in her essay on 'Vulnerable Bodies'. Noting the conspicuousness within the output of movies such as *Proof* (1991), *Bad Boy Bubby* (1994), and *Shine* (1995), centred on embattled artists or performers struggling for recognition and excellence, Ferrier develops an analysis of such films in relation to Australian cultural traditions, which offers a suggestive commentary on contemporary economic conditions. Her study stresses the protagonists' progression from isolation to recognition, and notes the generative axis constructed within the films between elements of the dysfunctional within the family, and their protagonists' subsequent creativity and acceptance. Understood in these terms, the films offer little resistance to a reading as discourses on Australian cinema's own imaginary, and are readily distilled as promises of reconciliation between industrial and aesthetic imperatives largely antagonistic in the 1980s. Ferrier's essay however re-locates such contradictions on new ground, and its attention to the body as a site of discursive conflict re-introduces a discussion of performance in Australian cinema often neglected by a concern with narrative structure and visual style shown in the recent scholarship. Most of the films under analysis here function as enabling contexts for virtuoso performances, narratively motivated as eccentricity, disability, or less specific indexes of a de-stabilising personal history, but also suggesting, amongst other things, a continuing intimacy between Australian cinema and theatrical traditions that has received surprisingly little attention within accounts of Australian movie-making.[12] Ferrier's attention to these performances is suggestive of the issues embedded within them, and of their sophisticated transcodings of socio-cultural concerns with market viability into discourses of aestheticism and creativity. Clearly her analysis of the *faux-naive* innocence seen as preoccupying Australian narrative in the 1990s, could be extended to incorporate a number of other movies not touched upon here, such as *Stan and George's New Life* (1992), *Hotel Sorrento* (1994) and *Mr Reliable* (1996).

Ferrier's characterisation of the 'soft' male body within 1990s cinema is clearly suggestive of profound re-definitions of male identity taking place in the output under consideration here. The stigmatisation of the male protagonist which she notes in *Proof* and *Shine* is also a common motif in the films examined by Philip Butterss' essay on constructions of masculinity in recent Australian cinema, where it is linked expressly to a diminishing 'will to power' associated with shifts characteristic of a post-industrial and post-feminist society. What is striking about his analyses of *The Big Steal* (1990), *Death in Brunswick* (1991), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *The Heartbreak Kid* (1993), is their revelation of the movies' residual commitment to highly-mythologised gender definitions, alongside a tangible awareness of the social inter-texts which may compromise the effectivity of their representational preferences for actual cinema-goers. Butterss reveals suggestively the various ways in which the films work (via ludicrous comedy, an appeal to generic convention, narrative 'sleights of hand', or even an insistence on the very exceptionalism of their representations) to resolve these contradictions, and the aesthetic effects of such transcodings between the social and the textual. In the process the essay underlines the centrality of the oedipal trajectory noted elsewhere,[13] which unifies their narratives, and indeed the more specific project of 're-masculinisation' they develop in response to contemporary crises in gender identities and roles. The framing of 'mateship' as a developmental stage necessarily renounced *en route* to adulthood perhaps suggests more specifically Australian 'accents' within narratives with clear counterparts in both British and American cinema of the same decade.[14]

Post-National Cinema?

Consensus seemed to exist amongst commentators on Australian cinema by the mid-1990s that even the residual elements of 1970s cultural nationalism had now finally dissolved. Charting a history of policy discourse which increasingly refuses to recognise the national as a basis for defence of the industry, or offer a justification for the subsidy of cultural-nationalist fiction-building, a growing body of writing constructed Australian cinema as distinctly post-national. Noting a tendency at more representational levels to address experience of the local or regional, rather than the national, this work suggested new divisions within constituencies once united in their polemic for national cinema. Some regretted the apparent dismissal of the national as a category and argued for its retention on the basis of its potential inclusiveness,[15] others welcomed the dissolution of the category, as

heralding a new pluralism, in keeping with the increasingly diverse composition of Australian society, traditionally unrecognised by a national tradition overly concerned with the fabrication of a metonymic Australian masculinity, an ethnic and racial exclusiveness, and an account of progressive politics limited by the assumptions around radicalism as authenticity.[16]

Anxieties about the serviceability of the national category are explored by essays here which examine the narrativisation of Australian anxieties at a variety of often overlapping levels. One of the most problematical connections established for example, almost incidentally, in Butterss' essay is that between gender and ethnic identity made in movies such as *Death in Brunswick* or *The Heartbreak Kid*, which attribute particularly traditional definitions of masculinity to Hispano- and Graeco-Australian males, respectively. Patriarchal authority and sexual machismo often find their fullest embodiment in non-Anglo-Celtic characters on the Australian cinema screen. Whilst the tendency to conflate such definitions of ethnic and gender 'authenticity' is apparent on a wider scale across the 1990s output as a whole ('new' Australian men are often constructed as 'preserving' masculine behavioural conventions either discredited or under severe pressure in the wider culture), the films under specific scrutiny offer a particular distillation of ideological positions, which draws heavily upon their characterisations of ethnicity. *Nirvana Street Murder* (1991) and *Aya* (1991) offer just two of many other examinations of this 'overlapping' of differences which would repay exploration along these lines. In David Callahan's contribution here, a wider take is made on the cinema's figuring out of ethnic presence, in an essay which foregrounds a number of movies which have received very little critical attention, and triangulates between concerns with Aboriginality, whiteness and new 'migrant' ethnicities which rarely find connection.[17]

Callahan's essay provides a refreshingly functional analysis of ethnic presence in Australian film narrative, concentrating on questions of structural position rather then representational adequacy, and on presence as a an effective and simultaneous experience of activation/concealment, alluding to histories and memories, that maintains a principle of deniability crucial to the ideological management of Australian narratives of the nation in general, but with a particular pertinence to storytelling on film and television.[18] Rather than noting again the apparent reluctance the Australian cinema has shown in acknowledging ethnic diversity within the nation, Callahan argues for the necessity of such presences to the discourse of 'belonging' still central to the project of Australian cinema in the wake of

the cultural-nationalist 'push' of the 1970s: 'non-Aboriginal ethnicities provide welcome material through which belonging can be dealt with as a theme' without engaging more problematical questions of entitlement raised by white-Aboriginal relations. At the same time he echoes Butterss' stress on the qualification of critique, in for example, noting *Strictly Ballroom*'s selection of the Spanish, rather than say, the Japanese, as its representatives of an alternative ethnicity to the Australian 'norm'. Signs of greater change are evident however: movies such as *Death in Brunswick* evidence a positional democracy, in which ethnicity itself is regarded as a universal condition of presence, and specific constituencies are detailed by gradations of class and the particularities of gender. Crucially, for Callahan, these ethnicities are experienced as much as liabilities as anchors to otherwise unstable senses of identity, lending support to framings of these works as at least 'yearning' for the post-national, whilst resisting the obliteration of all ethnic presence suggested by movies such as *The Custodian* (1993), or *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996). As a counter, Callahan argues for the necessity of an attention within criticism to 'whiteness' as an ethnic identity constructed in relation to its significant others. One need look no further than a film such as *Romper Stomper* (1992) in order to recognise both the very real problems of attempting such a turn on celluloid, and of the necessity of doing so if the disabling and silencing 'postcolonial ethnic diffidence', of which Callahan writes, is to be avoided.

Several of the essays included here allow some force to environment in their accounts of emerging 'national' tendencies, alongside the more usual qualifying factors of class and gender, and a more cultural-geographical emphasis is intermittently visible in much recent writing on Australian cinema. According to the movies Callahan examines for example, it is in the city, apparently, that ethnic presence seems most tangible, as trigger to narrative conflict, or visual guarantor of cultural exactitude. This emphasis on place is developed further by Ben Goldsmith in his analysis of a suburban consciousness in 1990s cinema, which still demands further exploration.[9] Goldsmith allows suburbia a presence in the films under analysis that exceeds its more classical functions as location in mainstream filmmaking, ie. as narrative *mise-en-scène*, visual spectacle or guarantee of the reality of the events depicted. In the process, Callahan's characterisation of 1990s cinema as practising an 'enclave politics' whose 'principal moral centre consists in shoring up the enclave against the social, the individual against the public, the group against the wider polity', finds a spatial counterpart in Goldsmith's focus on the local, so often constructed as refuge

from the bewildering topographies of the outback, the city or the wider world in recent Australian cinema.

For Goldsmith, a recognition of the local, and an emphasis on that specifically suburban version of that local in which so many Australian cinema-goers actually live out their lives, helped Australian movie-makers to re-connect with the domestic audience in the 1990s. Often taking its cue from the theatre, which had maintained a closer connection with the suburban scene, the cinema began to generate movies such as *Hotel Sorrento* (1994), *Blackrock* (1997), which spoke more directly to popular experience than the trans-Pacific fare often favoured by producers in the 1980s. Indexing the shifting policy expectations detailed earlier by Lisa French, Australian cinema began to address constituencies effaced in the drive towards the national representation, to propel micro-narratives set within micro-geographies, to relish eccentricity rather than the emblematic, and to refuse the whole burden of representativeness with which cinema had been saddled in the 1970s. Ironically, of course, in doing so, the invocation of suburbia, often seems to have touched upon a sense of national 'authenticity' which had functioned as something of a Holy Grail for the 'official' cinema of the 1970s.

Goldsmith identifies *Metal Skin* (1995), *Idiot Box* (1996) and *The Castle* (1997) as instances of 'noise' within the communications system of Australian national cinema, and generates analyses which are developed in later essays in this collection along rather different lines. Goldsmith's stress is on the 'disturbances' of these films, both formal and mythological, and their tendency towards the 'abjection' of their audiences, via a refusal of secure vantage points and narrative positions, dramatised as much at the level of sound as image. The acoustic dimensions of Australian film style have rarely been addressed in critical writing, and Goldsmith's essay makes a suggestive intervention in this area.[20] These are 'noisy' films in every sense, dramatic networks of tangled communications and half-established propositions, unresolved contradictions and highly ironised narrations. *Metal Skin* emerges as one of the bleakest texts of the 1990s output 'the wail of the repressed, patient, unloved finally demanding to be heard', whose aim is the absorption of its audiences into its own dystopian nightmare. *Idiot Box*, on the other hand, is at least modestly optimistic, 'the characters are at home in their environment, although this is not to say that they do not long to escape... ', whilst *The Castle* is unashamedly populist and nostalgic, 'In many ways the family stands for a core set of values more suited to the 1950s than the 1990s'. The range of different responses to tangibly common issues in the three films ('place and placelessness, home and homelessness

... ') is thus suggestive of suburbia's importance as a catalyst for the generation of 'noise' within the representational system as a whole.

No collection of writing on Australian cinema in the 1990s could claim coverage without offering attention to the three films which, more than any others, reacquainted audiences around the world with Australian production during the first half of the decade. For Emily Rustin, *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of The Desert* (1994), and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) suggested something of a stylistic trend, 'popularly termed the "glitter cycle" on account of their luminescent and colourful visual style', and a critique of national narrative traditions symptomatic of specifically millennial anxieties, and troubled senses of identity in general. All three films have attracted considerable critical attention,[21] which Rustin's essay surveys carefully before allowing her own account of the films to emerge. The stress here is on revisions of inherited narrative traditions, the apparent *limits* of those revisionary impulses, the regional dimensions of the narratives (in particular the presentation of Queensland as 'other' to preferred constructions of Australia, in *Muriel's Wedding*) and the exploration of aesthetic modes which transcend the respectable codes of 'official' realism. Her recognition of the necessity of fantasy underlined in these films, is clearly suggestive beyond their boundaries, and finds an echo in those accounts of Australian economics and politics which have also identified the new rhetorical force of fantasy in the wider Australian public culture.[22]

Of all the movies produced in recent years, perhaps *Babe: The Gallant Pig* (1995), represents the clearest distillation of the turn towards fantasy advocated in the 'glitter' pictures. In her study of the film, Tara Brabazon identifies the movie with a 'de-territorialisation' of Australian cinema, a term suggesting movement away from primitive preoccupations with the tracing of national roots in the soil, towards a fascination with more virtual geographies which deliberately frustrate attempts at specification; 'the New World Order relies on a landscape that is magical rather than national.' Since the time of Brabazon's writing, this has been a move developed further, in the film's sequel, *Babe: A Pig in The City* (1998) set in a collage-city of impossibly juxtaposed national landmarks, and emphatically studio-set locations, which blend filmic and extra-filmic reference in a manner calculated to cancel even the most provisional attempts at the formation of a recognisable geography. This is indeed a cinema of 'semiotic tourism', offering pleasurable lococentric distractions but little in the way of explanation for temporal change; the landscapes of *Babe* thus offer fantasies of a pastoral retro-world existing in parallel with that of modernity and

industrialisation, a space out of time, or rather, a time out of history. More importantly, they eschew a specifically national reference, in favour of a 'heterotopic visuality, where multiple ideologies are collapsed and othered'. Whether or not Brabazon' assertion, on the evidence of *Babe*, that the Australian film industry 'no longer requires a national adjective to verify its importance' remains very much to be seen. It does however seem to suggest that this might appropriately now be so.

Directly or indirectly, several of the essays gathered here address the growing sense of connection evident between Australian cinema and television in the 1990s. It has indeed become a commonplace in economic accounts of both mediums to find combinatory reference to the 'audio-visual' or 'moving image' industries, rather than to cinema or television *per se*. Studies of policy frequently recognise a correspondence of concerns around questions of ownership and control, support for training, archival funding, and of course in areas such as the establishment of censorial standards. Stephen Crofts sees clear signs of aesthetic convergence between cinema and television in his analysis of *The Castle* (1997), which he discusses as a site for the drawing together of codes developed in small-screen political satire in the 1980s, and nostalgic film comedy of the 1930s. Contra-*Babe*, the film demands a nationalising 'adjective' at every turn, relishing its national origins, and celebrating the vernacular. For Crofts however, the return to such emphases does bespeak a new politics; *The Castle* is no *Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972) for the 1990s; the former's critique is affectionate rather than ridiculing, with its protagonists cherished by the narrative rather than rendered grotesque by the potential cruelties of its discourse. For all its differences of tone and visual style, *The Castle* is therefore perhaps closer in spirit to earlier comedies such as *Emoh Ruo* (1985) or *Spotswood* (1992), than to the acidities of its televisual antecedents. For Crofts, the movie still involves a certain cultural assertiveness however, but draws out a sense of identity rooted in the domestic, rather than the national, and displays a visual style that owes more to the adhoceries of 'reality television' (the video-diary, the home video, the 'blooper' show) and the academic naturalisms of much Australian cinema in the 1950s, than the award-seeking cinematography of the 'renaissance' pictures. Its centring on the 'battler' Kerrigan family, struggling to prevent the compulsory purchase and demolition of its home, is not without ambivalence of course: endorsement is regularly undercut with sarcasm, distanciation alternates with identification, but an overwhelming approval saturates the film. As such, *The Castle* suggests something of a pre-millennial nostalgia for mid-century securities at both formal and thematic

levels. This is a nostalgia which Crofts links to the film's underlying anxieties around questions of race and gender, signalled as much as anything by its reliance upon an almost deliberately implausible 'deus ex machina', in the form of the retired QC who will argue the Kerrigans' case for free, as far as the High Court in Canberra. The very 'ordinariness' of the values that the Kerrigans supposedly embody (defined perversely through the stigmatisation of their expression in particular taste-preferences and lifestyle-choices) is thus secured thanks only to the intervention of fate, and the good offices of an exceptional individual prepared to 'side' with them against the largely abstracted logics of a marketplace, which refuses to recognise those values, let alone their supposedly 'essential' Australian-ness.

The ambivalent address of *The Castle* is a far from isolated phenomenon in Australian cinema as it approaches the Millennium. Kay Ferres' analysis of *Idiot Box* (1996) finds similar hesitations in her examination of that film's transcoding of the discourses surrounding discussions of television-effects in Australia. Highlighting the movie's blending of picaresque affection and bemused satire, she identifies ficto-critical variants of the generational backlashes against contemporary youth culture, which have been identified elsewhere, and with which the film sees television as crucially implicated.[23] Concerns around the effects of television on the social behaviour of young people are dramatised ambiguously in *Idiot Box*, specifically around the story of would-be desperadoes Kev (Ben Mendelsohn) and Mick (Jeremy Sims), who plan a bank-heist to demonstrate their superiority to the screen criminals they see brought to justice week after week on their television sets. When their skills as 'active' spectators, manipulating generic codes, producing subversive readings etc., prove only minimally transferable to the world outside the sitting room, backlash is demonstrated graphically, in the form of a sustained set-piece demonstration of police firepower, reminiscent of numerous earlier crime dramas. Appropriately enough, Ferres' analysis aims less to discuss *Idiot Box* as a representation of contemporary experience in the outer suburbs, than to locate points of contact between *Idiot Box* and surrounding debates about television's place within social relations, and its consequent role in the formation of class and gender identities. It is the maintenance of this insistently media-oriented and economic dimension which distinguishes *Idiot Box* from countless other youth-alienation pictures of the 1980s and 1990s. Here, 'alienation' is contingent and dynamic, a strategic response to a range of improvisatory situations; at the same time, the cultivation of a 'poetic disposition' is far from incompatible with a surfeit of video-watching, routine trips to the bottle shop, and cruising the local shopping mall.

One of the most conspicuous signs of development within any national cinema is the gradual displacement or supplementing of one cluster of screen performers by another. Just as the 'new wave' of the 1970s established the screen images of actors and actresses who would become national and international stars, so the 1990s witnessed the re-alignment of these screen presences in relation to newer arrivals. Over time, longer-standing performers assume iconic status: the fabrication of their star images, and their embellishment in screen narratives built around them, allows particular performers to come to embody sets of values, whose significance may certainly be 'national'. Performers such as Wendy Hughes, or Bill Hunter or Russell Crowe, become 'living proof' of an Australian reality, almost 'texts' on which the national context is inscribed. Despite occasional recognitions of such processes of inscription, studies of particular stars are rare in writing on Australian cinema, and Alan McKee's essay here on Ernie Dingo makes an original contribution to the field. His study of Australia's best-known Aboriginal screen performer emphasises Dingo's role in a mediasphere ceaselessly troubled by indigenous issues. Partly his significance is as 'auteur' (his industrial status is suggestive of a point of representational origin); partly it relates to Dingo's apparent 'realism' (his star image synchronises with the meanings attributed to his screen characterisations, underwriting their authenticity); partly it is a matter of his functioning as a site onto which cultural aspirations can be projected (Dingo provides an embodiment of the possibility of reconciliation); partly it is a matter of his seeming ability to live 'between' cultures, retaining a connected-ness with Aboriginal lineages, whilst functioning effectively within a non-indigenous 'mainstream' (Dingo is thus suggestive of fluidity and expediency, rather than any sense of identity as essence or fixity that is fundamentally non-negotiable). McKee's analysis is thus suggestive of the highly layered quality of Dingo's image, and its ability to sustain contradictory readings across distinct audience constituencies; crucial to this capacity is that image's parallel circulation in cinema *and* television: if cinema may be tempted to explore the exoticism of the Aboriginal performer, television insists upon its banality and availability. Concentrating, as the essay advances, on the television mini-series *Heartland*, McKee begins to suggest something of the crucial role played by his stardom in negotiating a 'nice politics' between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia; *Heartland*'s narration may be sceptical of his character's ability to live between two cultures, but Dingo and media constructions of his celebrity seem to be proof that this is possible. Above all, Dingo's image seems to stress its idiosyncrasy, and to refuse the burden

of representativeness which his positioning seems to accrue. Like all the other essays collected in this volume, McKee's analysis of Dingo's image says much about the 'noise' of Australian cinema in the 1990s, struggling with its own histories, struggling with its own sense of possibility. As that cinema approaches the Millennium, it seems on the evidence of these essays that cinema in Australia as a whole, has at least begun to escape its 'burden of representativeness' too.

NOTES

1. Of the various invaluable histories, see in particular: Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia Vol.I: Anatomy of a Film Industry*, and *The Screening of Australia, Vol. 2: Anatomy of a National Cinema* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987 and 1988); Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996) and James Sabine (ed.), *A Century of Australian Cinema* (Melbourne: Mandarin, Reed Books, 1995).
2. Brian Reis, *Australian Film: A Bibliography* (London and Washington: Mansell, 1997); Scott Murray, *Australian Film 1978–1994: A Survey of Theatrical Features* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995).
3. Jocelyn Robson and Beverley Zalcock, *Girls' Own Stories: Australian and New Zealand Women's Films* (London: Scarlet, 1997); Karen Jennings, *Sites of Difference: Cinematic Representations of Aboriginality and Gender* (Melbourne: Australian Film Institute, 1993).
4. See, for example; Albert Moran, *Projecting Australia: Government Film Since 1945* (Paddington, New South Wales: Currency Press, 1991); Peter Mudie, *Ubu Films: Sydney Underground Movies* (Kensington, New South Wales: University of New South Wales Press, 1997); Stuart Cunningham and Toby Miller, *Contemporary Australian Television* (Kensington, New South Wales: University of New South Wales Press, 1994).
5. Ben Goldsmith, 'Government, Film and the National Image: Reappraising the Australian Film Development Corporation', *Australian Studies*, Vol.12, No.1 (Summer 1997), pp.98–114.
6. Neil Rattigan, 'Film', in Philip Bell and Roger Bell (eds.), *Americanisation and Australia* (Kensington, New South Wales: University of New South Wales Press, 1998), pp.210–227.
7. For reliable statistical data on the industry, see Rosemary Curtis and Cathy Gray (eds.), *Get The Picture: Essential Data on Australian Film, Television, Video and New Media* (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1996), esp. pp.46–89, and 136–173.
8. Adrian Martin, 'More Than Muriel', *Sight and Sound*, Vol.5, No.6 (nos) (June 1995), pp.30–32.
9. The consistencies identified of course vary according to what is being demonstrated. See for example: (on aesthetic unity) Karl Quinn, 'Drag, Dags and The Suburban Surreal', *Metro*, No. 100 (Summer 1994–95), pp.23–26; (on linguistic unity) Tim Rowse, *Arguing The Arts* (Penguin: Ringwood, 1985), pp.70–72; (on institutional/industrial unity) Peat, Marwick, Mitchell Services, *Towards A More Effective Commission: The AFC in the 1980s* (Sydney: Peat, Marwick, Mitchell, 1979) and Australian Film Commission, *Film Assistance: Future Options* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986).
10. Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.175.
11. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, 'Australian Cinema: An Anachronism in the 80s', in their *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in The Late 1980s* (Sydney: Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 1988), pp.117–131.
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13. See for example, Barbara Creed, 'Mothers and Lovers: Oedipal Transgressions in recent Australian Cinema', *Metro*, No.91 (Spring 1992), pp.14–22.
14. See Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer, *New Australian Cinema: Sources and Parallels in American and British Film* (Cambridge, New York and Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1992) for an extended discussion of areas of overlap and distinction between Australian and other Anglophone cinemas in the 1990s.
15. Graeme Turner, 'The End of The National Project?: Australian Cinema in the 1990s', in Wimal Dissanayake (ed.), *Questions of Nationhood and History in Asian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp.202–16; James Walter, 'From *The Weird Mob* to *Strictly Ballroom*: Politics and Public Culture in Australia Since The Forties', *Australian Studies*, No. 10 (October 1996), pp.1–14.
16. John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
17. For a valuable recent contribution to the study of ethnic presence see Jon Stratton, 'National Identity, Film and the Narrativisation of Multiculturalism and "Asians"', in *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis* (Annandale, New South Wales: Pluto Press, 1998), pp.134–168.
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19. See, for example, Ian Craven, 'Emoh Ruo: The Suburbanisation of Australian Cinema', *Antipodes*, Vol.11, No.1 (June 1997), pp.25–32; Rose Lucas: 'Round the Block: Back To the Suburb in *Return Home*', in Sarah Ferber et. al. (eds.), *Beasts of Suburbia: Reinterpreting Culture in Australian Suburbs* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), pp.111–126. An important contribution to cultural-geographical study in relation to Australian film is represented by: Rosalyn Haynes, *Seeking The Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
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22. See, for example: Doug Cocks, *Future Makers, Future Takers: Life in Australia 2050* (Kensington, New South Wales: University of New South Wales Press, 1999), and Lindsay Tanner, *Open Australia* (Annandale, New South Wales: Pluto Press, 1999).
23. See, for example: Mark Davis, *Gangland: Cultural Elites and The New Generationalism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1997); Rob White and Christine Alder (eds.), *The Police and Young People in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

2

Patterns of Production and Policy: The Australian Film Industry in the 1990s

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This paper offers an overview of the Australian film industry in the 1990s and attempts to track the shifts in policy that have affected patterns of film production. The primary focus of this article is on Australian feature films, although the associated television production industry is also discussed.

The Current Climate for Film Production in Australia

It could be said that currently the Australian film industry is enjoying a degree of maturity and success that compares favourably with other non-Hollywood film locuses of film production such as France, India, Canada and the UK. Internationally, the film industry is dominated by the Hollywood players, particularly in the US domestic market, but also throughout the world. One example of the Australian industry's accomplishments is the critical and commercial success of *Shine* (1995), a film which won a host of both national and international awards including an Academy Award for Best Actor, Geoffrey Rush. The film, which cost just over $6 million to produce, has grossed over $64 million Australian dollars (April 1997 figure) at the international box office. It was the subject of a fierce dispute to acquire US distribution rights at the 1996 Sundance Film Festival, and is now regarded internationally as a model of accomplishment.

The industry's success is perhaps the culmination of the experience gained since the industry's rebirth during the 1970s, and the steady development of all aspects of film production. Before *Shine*, the Australian film industry has enjoyed other notable successes, either at the box office, critically, or both, with such films as *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *The Piano* (1993),

Strictly Ballroom (1992) *Babe* (1995), and *Green Card* (1991). The latter two films are particularly of note in the current context in view of the involvement of American studios. *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996), directed by Emma-Kate Croghan, was also notable in securing a sale in the order of $1 million to Miramax for distribution in the US, virtually double its budget. By way of contrast, *Shine* is an example of a film which was produced with funding from the Australian Film Finance Corporation (AFFC) in conjunction with local funding, with international sales agent Pandora having rights to market the film throughout the world outside Australia, and Ronin Films, a local distributor, having domestic distribution rights. The film was developed with assistance from the Australian Film Commission (AFC), the South Australian Film Corporation and Film Victoria, and illustrates a successful partnership between private and public sectors.

Since the seventies, it has been consistently recognised that government has a crucial role to play in supporting the film industry. It has been repeatedly argued that some degree of subsidy is required if Australians wish to see Australian culture on their screens. Despite the domestic and international successes of some recent Australian films, this argument is as valid today as it was in 1970. The Howard Liberal Government, brought into office in 1996 ending thirteen years of Labor rule, presides over film policy at the national level. In line with the Howard government's general economic philosophy, federal policy on film can be characterised as encouraging the free play of market forces while reducing the involvement and size of government funding to the industry.

Shortly after taking office the federal government initiated a review of film policy which culminated in a report titled, 'Review of Commonwealth Assistance to the Film Industry', written by David Gonski (hereafter referred to as the Gonski report). One of the Gonski report's main recommendations, the development of FLICS (Film Licensed Investment Scheme) as a source of film funding, is yet to be implemented, although a revised version of the scheme is due to become a reality in 1999 (discussed later in this paper.) Despite this review, some sectors are still under the microscope; the Department of Communications and The Arts (DOCA) have just begun another review of screen culture. The Gonski report recommended that the AFC reallocate funds from screen culture to other core activities and to script development but the current government did not implement this, particularly due to lobbying by the group formed for this purpose, the Australian Screen Culture Industry Association (ASCIA).

In general, the Federal Government has not dismantled the policy set by its predecessor under Creative Nation in 1994, as was initially feared. However there has been a consistent reduction in funding allocations to film bodies, particularly the AFC. In the past the AFC has been a source of funding for low-budget features and script development but at present does not seem to have the resources to maintain this role (the effects of which will only become apparent in the years ahead.) The national broadcaster, the ABC, has also been cut and this has drastically reduced the amount of quality television drama being produced locally.

Overall, exhibition is currently doing well, with domestic box office grosses continuing at high levels, although many Australian releases do poorly – the most notable recent failure is the film *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997), which despite its $20 million budget and the support of Fox Searchlight, a subsidiary of Fox in the US, only took around $1 million domestically. This film also fared badly in the international market. All government-funded film bodies rely for part of their funding on returns from previous investments, and returns from *Shine* will top up the resources of the Australian Film Finance Corporation. However, the industry will perhaps soon require a break-out film like a *Shine* or a *Muriel's Wedding* to keep money flowing into the coffers of the AFFC and the state-funding bodies.

One development in the Australian industry over the past several years has been the gradual infiltration of overseas interest, particularly from the US. Several international distributors have offices in Australia and actively seek participation in new Australian films, including Miramax and Fox Searchlight. Fox Studios recently opened in Sydney, and Queensland continues to function as an offshore Hollywood backlot, with a number of films being shot at the Warner Brothers/Village Roadshow Movieworld studios.

To conclude, the current position of Australian film production is broadly market-driven, with a number of players in production, distribution and exhibition successfully surviving and thriving in the marketplace. Government policy appears to recognise that the economics of film production require significant government underpinning and support, and much of the infrastructure established by the previous Labor government, and earlier governments as well, remains in operation. But in many areas funding has been reduced, in some cases significantly. Competition for both government support and marketplace interest amongst new and established filmmakers has perhaps never been more intense. The influence of overseas involvement in film production is yet to be determined and the effect of

cutbacks, particularly on film development, have yet to make themselves felt. And there are other significant issues troubling the industry looming on the horizon, including the decision by the High Court of Australia to allow New Zealand production to count as Australian production in television quotas, and the fight for Australian scriptwriters for their moral rights.

The Historical Context

The current situation of Australian film production must be viewed in the context of recent film history stemming from the renaissance of the industry in the 1970s, a history that has been well documented elsewhere. Although Australian film production began strongly at the turn of the century, it declined until there was little activity from the 1930s until the late 1960s. Throughout the 1960s lobby groups argued for government financial support until, in 1970, the federally-funded Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC) was established by the Gorton government. This body was later re-established with wider powers as the Australian Film Commission (AFC) in 1975. Between 1972 and 1978, state-funded government agencies were established in every state. Although in several instances their scale and function was re-defined significantly in the 1990s, these instrumentalities (with the exception of Tasmanian Film Corporation), continue to function.[1]

From the 1970s there has been a recognition of the pivotal role of government in fostering and regulating the development of Australian film and television. Historically, the Australian film industry has been Federally-funded at both the 'commercial' and 'experimental' levels. As Tom O'Regan notes:

> In the 1970s there was the mainstream Australian Film Development Corporation and the minor stream Experimental Film Fund; from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s there was the mainstream Industry Branch and the minor stream Creative Development Branch of the AFC; since 1988 the division has been represented by the Australian Film Finance Corporation and the AFC.[2]

Within the AFC there are various schemes which have particular targets, such as the Women's Film Fund, the Indigenous Film Branch and funding for New Media, documentary and short film production. As the Gonski report found, the Commonwealth currently plays a dominant role in support of the industry with state/territory funding being under 15 per cent of the Commonwealth total. However, state organisations have supported different