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978-0-521-38768-2 - New Australian Cinema: Sources and Parallels in American and British Film

Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer

Excerpt

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1 INTRODUCTION

By now the new Australian cinema's progress—through the 'ocker' commercialism and tasteful literary adaptations of the 1970s to the blockbuster-oriented thinking of the 1980s and its concomitant casualties¹—has been pretty thoroughly canvassed. There have been chronological and thematic, industrial and critical, accounts of these crucial years in the building of an Australian cinema. And what 'Australian cinema' might mean remains as elusive as ever. Does it mean a sturdy industry turning out a regular stream of marketable products? Is it a cinema which can compete internationally with what is being produced in other English-speaking (or, for that matter, non-English-speaking) countries? Does it refer to a body of work which represents aspects of recognisable Australian experience in terms of narrative cinema? How does it accommodate to what a recent writer has called 'the paradox that for a cinema to be nationally popular it must also be international in scope?'² One of the functions of this book is to try to place new Australian cinema in contexts which may help to illuminate its nature as an art form and, to a lesser extent, as an industry.³

Superficially, the new Australian cinema may appear to have sprung, Venus-like, fully-formed from nowhere. It was preceded, as everyone knows (or assumes), by a cinematic drought of roughly twenty-five years. There were less than two dozen wholly Australian-backed feature films in this period, not ten of which scored even modest commercial success and most of which are now forgotten. There were

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thirty British, American or hybrid productions, which account for most of the better-known titles of the period.⁴ In the period following World War II, the feature films made in Australia (and it is essentially feature films we are concerned with, since it is essentially these which build a film industry) were almost entirely funded from overseas. They were, that is, the products of the two countries with which Australian cinema may be supposed to have the closest connections, formally and ideologically: that is, the American and British cinemas respectively. The feature films made in Australia between 1945 and 1970 were above all American or, to a lesser extent, British films and used Australia as a kind of exotic backdrop.⁵

The British films were no doubt more ideologically tuned to Australian ways of thinking. Bruce Molloy's recent study of Ealing Studio's Australian films—*The Overlanders* (1946), *Eureka Stockade* (1949), *Bitter Springs* (1950), *The Shiralee* (1957), and *The Siege of Pinchgut* (1959)—rightly claims that, 'While these five films reflect, as one would expect, the general characteristics of Ealing films . . . , they also present a unique view of Australian society', and that these two elements are reflected both in theme and in the films' 'semi-documentary style'.⁶ And as film historians Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper have noted of the British, as contrasted with the American, film-makers who came to Australia in this period, '... although their plans failed, their films reflected curiosity about Australia and a desire to crystallise Australian experiences on the screen for British audiences'.⁷ The British-backed films seem genuinely interested in Australian experience, more interested to explore than to exploit the exotic setting. If one compares, say, Ralph Smart's *Bitter Springs* with Lewis Milestone's *Kangaroo* (1952, for Twentieth Century Fox), the difference is striking: the former, for all its naivety, is genuinely interested in the relations between white settlers and Aborigines; the latter is concerned to relocate a routine genre piece in a novel setting. During that period (the 1940s and 1950s) Australians still felt closer to Britain as the 'mother' country (a sentiment fostered by anglophile prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies, 1949–66), and were still suspicious of the tainting and 'vulgarising' influence of America and particularly of Hollywood.

The Hollywood-backed films of the period—for example, *Kangaroo*, Stanley Kramer's *On The Beach* (1959) and Leslie Norman's *Summer of the 17th Doll* (1959, for Hecht-Hill-Lancaster)—were generally not well-received, by either critics or public. Americans, perhaps, were less likely to understand the Australian ethos. Fred Zinnemann's *The Sundowners* (1960, for Warner) is the exception in being popular both in Australia and abroad, evoking, as Molloy suggests, '... a genuinely

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Australian atmosphere, possibly due to its setting in the bush . . . , and to its concern with distinctively Australian occupations such as droving and shearing'.⁸ What, however, seems to us important and what makes it worth looking at these films again, is the kinds of influence derived from their respective home bases these films suggest.

This book aims to consider the feature-film revival of Australia in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to two comparators which may shed light on its nature as an art form and/or as an industry. First, we want to consider the persistence of the Hollywood narrative model. By this we mean those formal and thematic paradigms that have been identified and explored by film scholars such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson.⁹ Our concern is to trace ways in which the conventions of classical Hollywood narrative cinema have become inflected in their translation to the Australian scene, while still showing the profound influence of their American prototypes. The nature of our interest in British cinema is somewhat different. We do not mean to suggest that British cinema had no *formal* effect on new Australian cinema. In its refusal to carry through the melodramatic implications of its narratives, in its rejection of traditional closure, in the way the dividedness of its characterisation can impede narrative drive, there is ample suggestion of the contrary. Above all, though, it seems to us that an interesting, perhaps illuminating, parallel can be drawn between what may now be seen as two 'boom' periods: that is, between Australian cinema of the 1970s and 1980s and British cinema of the 1940s and 1950s. Given that both were, in turn, distorting reflections of the classical Hollywood cinema, both were, equally strikingly, cases of English-speaking cinemas, striving for and, in a limited sense, achieving a sense of national identity. At no other time, certainly not in the history of the talking film, has either British or Australian film established such impressive claims to be taken seriously.

From the above, it will be clear that the nature of our interest in the comparisons, in the contextualising exercises, is different in each case. It is not that we regard the formal and the ideological/tonal as totally discrete categories; rather, it is a question of emphasis. By the *formal* aspects of Hollywood cinema, we mean such matters as the following: its structural properties as a purveyor of pictorial narratives (including its use of parallelism and contrast, repetition and variation); its continuity editing (and the so-called 'invisible' or 'zero' style in which this plays so important a role); its preoccupation with the individual-centred, causally-connected narrative (in which, for example, camera movements and elements of *mise-en-scène* are dramatically motivated); its firm sense of closure. These formal aspects have so pervasively accustomed us—as they had British audiences of the 1940s and

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1950s—to what cinema is that it would require a much more revolutionary approach than either British or Australia has ever shown to challenge such models. Where those two cinemas have diverged from classical Hollywood, it has not always been in their interests—a matter to which we shall return.

What is interesting to explore is the extent to which new Australian cinema, with parched roots only in the earlier history of indigenous cinema here, has taken the American models on board. It is at least arguable that the most commercially successful films of the Australian film revival—*Mad Max* (1979), *The Man from Snowy River* (1982), *Crocodile Dundee* (1986)—have reworked American genres (road movie, Western, populist comedy) of forty years ago in such ways as to dramatise the mythologies and to meet the psychic needs of Australians and others in the 1980s. The American industry has always known better than any other what constituted a popular cinema—and been better at marketing this. The fact that Hollywood has so dominated screen-time in such English-speaking countries as Australia and Britain (even during the ‘boom’ periods of these two countries) is unassailable evidence for this.

In a very perceptive paper, Tom O’Regan asked the question: ‘Why has the Hollywood product been able to travel so well?’¹⁰ He proposes more complex answers than the usual ones about how higher budgets lead to higher quality of production, about ‘catering to the lowest common denominator’. What country would not seek to reach a mass audience if it could? We shall suggest that, in formal terms, it is Hollywood’s unmatched grasp of the conventions of melodrama that is at the heart of its success as a narrative cinema. When it ceases to have full-blown confidence in melodramatic structuring—in the later 1960s and 1970s, when it can be argued that it became infected by certain European, ‘art-house’ responses to film narrative—it will gradually lose some of its sway over the mass audience, a process abetted by the increasing dominance of television as the popular narrative source. (During this period, popular television in Australia was dominated by American series—for example, westerns and sitcoms—which no doubt catered to some of the tastes previously satisfied by American genre film-making.) But it is not just a matter of melodramatic stories, geared to elicit heightened emotional responses, to the clearest discriminations between guilt and innocence, to a satisfying disposition of rewards and punishments at the end, that is so attractive. To these satisfactions, and the kinds of psychic needs—and cultural realities—they acknowledge, to the narrative baggage of melodrama, Hollywood has added another key dimension. By this we mean that it has situated the narrative models of melodrama (a *heightening* of life as we know it)

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in a powerfully realist *mise-en-scène* (a representation of life as we know it, or something mimetically close enough to this to convince us for the time being). In fact, of course, the *mise-en-scène* of classical Hollywood cinema is a highly selective business: one of its attributes is that nothing is wasted, that everything will be there to intensify our sense of the drama that is going forward. Its pursuit of the goals of melodrama led not only to a stripping down of narrative to essential bare bones, but also to a *mise-en-scène* which powerfully furthers this cause.

The British cinema of the 1940s and 1950s represents, of course, an earlier response to the dominance of the Hollywood product. One of the aims of this book will be to consider some of the ways in which the British response to Hollywood's supremacy in its boom period parallels the Australian challenge a quarter of a century later. Allowing for all manner of social and political change, for the different situations existing in a country at war and a country at the end of a long period of complacent peace, there are still some very telling similarities. The new Australian cinema has shared with British cinema of the 1940s and 1950s a taste for the literary. (We shall suggest later that this may not be merely coincidental, but, rather, symptomatic of the straining towards a national cinema.) It has also shared a middle-class distaste for the melodramatic, though that has had a critically unregarded fling in the undergrowth as well as, rarely, on the blockbuster level. There has also been a shared failure to make *mise-en-scène* work hard enough, a tendency (more influential than mere numbers of films might suggest) to dwell on the past at the expense of grappling with the facts of contemporary life, a tastefulness that briefly found favour with an educated middle-class audience, which cannot, however, be relied on to sustain an industry. And so on. It is not a matter of trying to prove something about the similarities between these two attempts at a national cinema, so much as to suggest some of the reasons why, in the end, American film still dominates even when the national industries are at their sturdiest, and how both Britain and Australia have inflected the American paradigms they, at bottom, rely on.

When in August 1947 an import duty of 75 per cent was imposed on all American films coming into Britain, it proved impossible to sustain. We shall consider this in more detail later, but, in essence, American distributors placed an embargo on their films entering Britain. As exhibitors quickly found, what British audiences wanted above all was American films: the absence of new American films was filled, not by equally attractive British films, but by old American films bought in before the tax and by revivals of still older American films. This was a much more complex situation than is suggested here¹¹, but the point driven home by the failure of this import duty was the sheer

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attractiveness of American films to British audiences at a time when British films were making their most significant impact, both at home and abroad. And in Australia in 1976, when the 'revival' might be said to have taken off, it is instructive to compare box-office figures for American and Australian films in local cinemas. Whereas such American box-office successes of the period as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) were still among the top ten 'All-Time Oz Rental Champs' (as *Variety* puts it) ten years later, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Mad Max* (1979) had slipped to, respectively, 81st and 73rd places.¹²

Australian cinemas have never been subject to such deprivation as the British suffered for those few months in 1947–48. Like the British cinema of the period of our chief interest, though, the new Australian cinema has required a continuing intervention from the State and federal governments and their instrumentalities; this intervention has no doubt exercised an important influence over the kinds of films that were made. British film-makers may claim that Harold Wilson (first as president of the Board of Trade, in the late 1940s) was the only British politician who ever showed a really sympathetic and/or intelligent interest in the British cinema.¹³ Nevertheless, there is a considerable history of parliamentary Acts and taxes designed to bolster the local industry against the inevitable domination by its American counterpart. So, too, is the new Australian cinema's course marked, necessarily we would claim, by a series of parliamentary moves. One might well wonder whether a national film industry in an English-speaking country can ever be self-sufficient in the face of American competition or whether it will always need legislative support in one form or other. If it does require such support, will this in turn have an inhibiting effect on the sorts of films that get made? Without wishing to attribute an over-simple cause-and-effect relationship, one might argue a case that, in late 1940s British cinema (the cinema of Lean's Dickens films, of Carol Reed's work with Graham Greene), there is, as well as the obvious intelligence and taste at work, an undue decorousness that always threatens to become debilitating.

In late 1970s Australian cinema (when we were Getting Careers at Hanging Rock), a not-dissimilar tastefulness threatens to displace the more robust manifestations of the nation's life—social and psychic—giving rise to what has been characterised as 'the AFC genre'.¹⁴ The fact that an Australian Film Institute representative once dismissed this as 'unfair'¹⁵, and with some reason, doesn't however quite dispel the notion that once governments are needed to sustain a film industry there is at least a danger that the sorts of films produced will tend towards an 'acceptable' cultural level, at the expense of energy and inventiveness. It is hard to imagine, say, *Alvin Purple* (1973) or *The*

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Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972) finding favour with government bodies in the late 1970s, as they did five years earlier. Whatever the fairness or otherwise of such claims, it is simply true that there has been, in these boom periods in the two English-speaking countries, a need for legislation to help maintain a national industry. Demographics, of course, partly help to explain this. America is populous enough to get the money back on its movies from its home market alone, whereas Australia and Britain, to their varying degrees, could only hope to do so in the case of small-budget films: and up to a point both did so. But in 1950s Britain and 1980s Australia the move was increasingly towards the internationally-slanted film, which required a larger budget and a correspondingly larger share of the world audience, and for an English-speaking cinema that means the United States market.

We could have chosen to pursue other comparisons with new Australian cinema—the French *nouvelle vague* of the 1960s, or the new German cinema of the 1970s, for example—but the British analogy seemed the most inviting for a number of reasons. ('Analogy' is a useful term here since it implies a sufficient degree of likeness to make comparison rewarding, but does not insist on similarity at every point and cannot be made to 'prove' a case, though it may shed light on it.) We have rejected other possible comparative cinemas in favour of the British one for reasons which we have already hinted at and will develop further in a later chapter. Above all, the problems of two attempts at a national cinema in *English-speaking* countries was the key factor: the fact that, in Bernard Shaw's phrase, each pair (Britain and the United States, Australia and the United States) consists of two nations 'separated by the same language'¹⁶ seemed to us overwhelmingly important. If, as someone once remarked, Spanish were the language of the United States, English-speaking cinemas would have been more advantageously placed. Raymond Durnat, writing of British cinema, has claimed that, 'Britain's common language with America has exposed both her audiences and her talents to the full weight of Hollywood appeal . . . , while offering British producers the alluring yet elusive prospect of crashing through into the American market'¹⁷ (Twenty years later the Australian cinema's situation seems entirely comparable in this respect.) And as recently as March 1991, one reads that '[British] producers believe that any challenge to American dominance of the film market must be through English-language films. A healthy British industry is, therefore, essential to any European challenge [that is, to such dominance]'.¹⁸ In passing, it is poignant to hear in such claims an echo of 1929 when British Dominions Films bravely predicted: 'At present Britain stands at the threshold of success, and, if she is to take her opportunity and go

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forward, there must be unflagging effort. Particularly must energy and money be expended on exploiting British films at home and abroad, developing British stars and finding British stories'.¹⁹ Somewhere along the way, the promised 'supremacy' of British cinema failed to materialise, never seriously coming to terms with that other dominant English-speaking force in the film world.

Further, unlike say French or German films, the products of the British film industry have commanded a wide, if still inevitably minority, following in Australia. This was particularly so during the period of our interest: in the 1940s and 1950s there were in Melbourne alone several cinemas devoted entirely to the screening of British films, and it was not uncommon for them to turn up at other cinemas as well. Apart from the major commercial successes that everyone wanted to see (for example, *In Which We Serve*, 1942, *The Third Man*, 1949, *Genevieve*, 1953), it is probably true to say that they characteristically attracted an educated middle-class audience, which was still relatively numerous in those decades.

Diane Collins, in her account of Australian movie audiences over ninety years, refers to the 'increasing penetration of British films', which helped to account for 'Hollywood's greatly reduced dominance of Australia's total film market' in the postwar period. She writes that: 'While the tussle between Hollywood and Britain never went much beyond the proportions of a David and Goliath contest, Britain's share of feature-film imports did increase from 7 per cent in 1945 to just under 25 per cent in the closing years of the next decade, and the interest in British films continued in the 1960s'²⁰, citing the examples of the Bond films, the 'Carry On' series and the new wave of social realism. To those who grew up in Australia in this postwar period, these figures corroborate a sense of British cinema as a factor to be reckoned with, in numerical terms at least, in a way that was simply not true of films from any other non-American quarter. British films were an accepted part of cinema fare for a wide—if still minority—audience, as foreign-language films were not. The latter remained a much more rarefied taste. Aesthetically, British films were held to be 'understated', 'realistic' and 'natural', or admirable in literary ways (cf. Olivier's Shakespeare films or Thorold Dickinson's *The Queen of Spades*, 1949)—in other words, by implication, all that Hollywood was not. These terms would not normally have been used of Britain's brief vogue for costume melodrama (1943–46), or indeed for melodrama of most kinds, either in Australia or in Britain: reviews expressed a middle-class distaste for these films, as we shall see later. Not until the 1980s were such films seen to have their own value, as a result of the work of such writers as Robert Murphy in his admirable study of 1940s

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British cinema, *Realism and Tinsel*. In this study, he argues persuasively that 'many of the films dismissed by the critics have qualities over and above their curiosity value'.²¹

In the 1940s and 1950s such terms as 'understated' were held to be complimentary by the audiences who filled Melbourne's Athenaeum, Grosvenor or Odeon cinemas. It is also probably true that these audiences substantially overlapped those audiences for Australia's 'flagship' films of the 1970s, before what Tom O'Regan has described as a 'sundering of the close connection between Australian film and its bourgeois audiences' in the 1980s.²² The Australian audiences for British films in the 1940s and 1950s and for Australian films in the 1970s and 1980s were a good deal less specialised than those who sought out foreign language films at any period. Certainly, too, there were no cinemas that specialised in French or German films; the non-English-speaking films were lumped together as 'foreign' and were located in what were recognisably 'art-houses'.

The two boom periods to be considered here lasted for roughly the same length of time. It was the war which gave British cinema a new sense of national, consensual identity, ushering in a period of hitherto unmatched film-making prestige, before a tapering off in the mid-1950s. In Australia, it may be countered that the installation of the Labor government under Gough Whitlam, bringing to a close nearly a quarter of a century of placid (complacent?) Liberal government, ushered in a more potent national awareness than this country had known since the 1890s. It was, too, a more *sophisticated* awareness, one that was ready to speak with its own voice, even if that voice was necessarily in a language shared by the two nations whose influence, to that time, had been most powerfully felt in Australia. That nationalism was not enough to sustain a local film industry in either case is reflected in the unflagging, occasionally successful efforts of both Britain and Australia in their respective boom periods to solicit mainstream distribution in the one market that could ensure incontestable box-office *éclat*—that is, in the American market. Finally, in both of the periods under consideration, a new, rival contender for the viewing audience made itself felt in the second decade of the boom. In Britain television contributed enormously to the decline in cinema attendances in the 1950s, and in Australia the extraordinary proliferation of the video recorder in the 1980s has enabled all but the most dedicated filmgoers to pursue their interests in the cinematic arts in the comfort of their own homes. What was left for the cinemas was—apart from the comparatively rare major popular success—essentially a young audience, still prepared to seek its pleasures outside the home.

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We have spent more time in justifying our choice of the Australian/British comparison than that of the Australian/United States narrative models. To anyone interested in cinema it must, we feel, be obvious that all narrative cinema is indebted to the American paradigms and practices. It is, perhaps, not going too far to claim that, where such paradigms do not dominate, where their enunciatory practices are not espoused (for example, in Soviet films of the 1920s, the French *nouvelle vague* of the 1960s), they are *consciously* challenged. Eisenstein is on record as admiring Griffith's story-telling procedures even though he deliberately pursued a deviant practice—deviant, that is, in its relation to the practice that even by the 1920s had become the dominant institutional mode of representation (in Noel Burch's phrase).²³ Godard, as we know, deliberately drew attention to the apparatus of cinema in a way that not so much ignores as calls into question the Hollywood invisibility of style. Hollywood by the 1920s, perhaps by the previous decade, had established, as Christian Metz writes, that: 'The basic formula, which has never changed, is the one that consists in making a large continuous unit that tells a story and calling it a "movie". "Going to the Movies" is going to see this type of story'.²⁴ What Metz calls 'this type of story' is essentially the type to which Hollywood had habituated world audiences. Australian and British cinemas, in their key periods and in the feature films which essentially constitute the sense of an 'industry' in each case, were certainly no exceptions.

Australia's history, institutions and culture have, unsurprisingly, been markedly more the result of British origins than of those of any other film-making and film-exporting country. This alone would make the two 'national' cinemas a subject for fruitful comparative study. We have chosen our two periods because, if there were times when the term 'boom' might be applied, these are they. At no other time in the history of British cinema was film-making so prolific or so culturally distinctive or so aesthetically significant as in the 1940s and 1950s. Our study of British cinema, the critical writing about it, and interviews conducted with many survivors of the period (see chapters 4 and 5 for more detailed recollections and perceptions) confirm such a judgement. Similarly, in the comparably patchy history of Australian cinema, only during the late 1970s and 1980s were Australian and international audiences aware of the Australian film as a contender to be reckoned with, critically or commercially. If neither manifests the staying power, the confident grasp on the imagination of the mass audience (changing as its composition may be) as their American rivals, that, too, is another incentive for looking at them in tandem.