

Australian International Cinema

Ben Goldsmith

Australian Film Television and Radio School

In an article in *The Age* newspaper in August 2005 entitled 'Revive Australia, the Idea' Martin Flanagan wrote that Australia was suffering because of the narrowness of debate under John Howard. This narrowness of domestic debate was accompanied by a difference between the domestic vision of Australia, and the vision of Australia from overseas. He wrote "I suspect the gap between how Australians see themselves and how they are seen in the world is the widest it has been since the early 1960s".

To extend Flanagan's argument perhaps beyond his comfort zone, I think that the terms of debate around international film production in Australia are too narrow. In general terms, both those who champion international production using economic and industrial arguments, and those who denounce it using cultural imperialist arguments or rhetoric about perceived threats to the Australian industry and Australian cinema (as if they can be neatly separated from the international) are, it seems to me, working in much too narrow a frame. And this, I think, is a great shame as now more than ever we need to advocate for the positive cultural potential of cinematic internationalism, and champion the role that film production can play not only in telling our own stories, but in connecting with and relating to and thinking about our place in the world. The limited terms in which international production is currently discussed in Australia do not allow for serious consideration of the multiple and complex ways such production enables new connections with filmmakers and audiences around the world. The narrowness of the debate also prevents us from considering fully what that production entails for Australian cinema, what it means, who it speaks to, and how it could spark new conversations about the possibilities of filmmaking and storytelling in this country.

For a number of years I have been researching the dynamics of international film production in Australia and around the world, and the relations between the local and the international principally in film, but also in relation to cultural policy. For a long time I was involved with an international non-government organisation comprising cultural organisations and activists from around the world who had been drawn together by concern about the impact of free trade and global capitalism on the cultural sector and on the capacity of states to make cultural policy. This organisation, the [International Network for Cultural Diversity](#), was one of the prime movers behind what became the [UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions](#) which was approved by 148 countries in October last year, and has since been ratified by 16 – well on the way to the 30 necessary to bring it into force. Australia abstained from the vote, one of only four countries to do so (the others were Nicaragua, Honduras and Liberia). The US and Israel were the only countries to oppose the Convention. Both in the lead-up to the vote and since there has been very little public discussion of the Convention or of its implications here, principally perhaps because of the Government's studied indifference to it.

Most of my research was conducted while I lived in Queensland, which has been one of the most active states in working to attract international production to the Gold Coast studios and to a variety of locations around the state. Initially at least, and

perhaps still, this project was looked on suspiciously by those commentators and filmmakers who see international production (which is usually taken to mean ‘runaway’ American production despite the fact that international production in Australia is considerably more diverse than this would suggest) as a threat to or a problem for the Australian industry. I became interested in this stuff because there was so much of it going on around the world, and because more and more places were competing in what Nick Herd usefully calls ‘the incentives game’ by initiating favourable tax policies or building infrastructure like studio complexes in the hope of securing what Malcolm Long Associates in a report for AusFILM a few years ago called ‘A Bigger Slice of the Pie’.

From an early stage in my research I was troubled by the way this production was characterised, both by those desiring its presence for whom it was all about jobs and multiplier effects and tourism potential, and those anxious to expose it as mercenary, as a form of cultural imperialism, and as a threat to the fragility and integrity of Australian film industry which, and this is not just an obvious point, was considered to be an entirely separate thing.

Now it might be heretical of me to say this, but the border protection at the heart of much of the concern about the negative impacts and influences of international production seems to me to be an aspect of what another writer I greatly admire, Ghassan Hage, terms a “culture of insecurity”. In a recent article in the Australian newspaper responding to the Prime Minister’s advocacy of ‘Australian values’, Hage wrote:

The culture of insecurity brings out one of the key differences between conservative and progressive conceptions of our national community. The progressives see community as a process of being involved in an ongoing project of constructing and bettering ourselves. The conservatives see community as a project of rallying in defence of what we have. For if we already have what we value most, what else is there to do other than defend our possession? As such, the conservatives can only promote a defensive and claustrophobic attachment to national values: the other is always out to get or to undermine what I have.

This kind of boundary policing and the ‘culture of insecurity’ around Australian cinema is of course nothing new. In an article on the 1950s, Tom O’Regan wrote about the ‘vitriolic attacks’ on ‘foreign’ productions like *On the Beach* (1959) *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1959) and *The Sundowners* (1960) by Australian critics in the 1960s. In the period before the revival, an important and necessary part of the agitation for government intervention and assistance was the argument that international production in Australia was inauthentic and unrepresentative; in the words of one of the most important and influential critics and advocates for Australian cinema, Sylvia Lawson, these films were ‘not Australian in the sense that matters’. In the campaign Australian cinema was conceived as a thing, a desirable but as yet unavailable object, a formerly held but lost possession, a tradition, a set of values and stories that were unique and distinctive, a thing which needed to be recreated and repossessed. If Australian cinema was conceived at all as a relation or set of relations rather than as a thing, then it was conceived *oppositionally*: in terms of its difference not only from the dominant Hollywood cinema, but also from other national cinemas.

In the period before the Second World War, Australian film production was 'international' in ways that it was not afterwards, and perhaps is still not today. There were of course large numbers of filmmakers who worked in Australia who had come from Britain and America, and France. But there was also an internationalism in the sources of stories: a number of early silent Australian films were drawn from the work of Irish dramatist Dion Boucicault, while others were adapted from British, French and American sources. In an article in the current issue of *Metro* on *Jindabyne* and *Macbeth*, Brian McFarlane makes a point of noting how unusual it is for contemporary Australian filmmakers to adapt works by non-Australian writers.

In his book *Australian National Cinema*, Tom O'Regan argues that the local and the international are 'ineradicably mixed in the constitution of the national cinema project'. O'Regan outlines a number of ways in which this mixing occurs:

- First, as I've just noted, the national cinema project is about marking out difference from Hollywood, and in O'Regan's words 'producing a local presence alongside the dominant imported presence in both the local and international markets', where local films 'provide a viable and healthy local supplement to Hollywood cinema';
- Second, local films are a *contribution* to the international cinema as even if they are not made with an eye to international markets they will usually circulate outside their local market, often at international festivals;
- Third, 'Most national cinemas seek to involve international players (actors, directors, distributors, festival organizers, composers, television buyers) in the creation, financing and circulation of national cinema and television texts';
- Fourth, O'Regan argues that particularly in its higher budgeted form, 'every Western national cinema strives to be explicitly international in its textual form'.

All of these things still hold, I think. But there are significant differences between the time that O'Regan was writing his book – the early to mid 90s – and today. The Australian production industry is now much more integrated or implicated in international production than ever before. There are clearly still boundaries between the domestic and international industries, but they are becoming more and more porous as the connections between them grow stronger and stronger. More Australian filmmakers than ever before are working overseas, or have worked in Australia on international productions. We now have three major studio complexes open for business. And while in the last year the volume of international production has dropped significantly – down from \$248 million to \$49 million according to the [AFC's National Survey of Feature Film and TV Drama Production 2005/06](#) – look at the origins of those films that make up that figure: 'foreign features' one from US, one from India, one from Pakistan, one from Japan. 'Coproduction features' two official Australia UK, one official Australia France. 'Foreign tv drama' one series from US, one from Belgium, two miniseries from Sri Lanka, one from Korea. Coproductions: one unofficial Australia-UK series, one unofficial Australia-China series, and one official Australia-UK mini series. Children's TV drama, one official and one unofficial Australia UK, one official Australia Canada, one unofficial Australia US.

Significantly, the survey does not count those international productions that were not shot here but which used Australian post-production facilities. The figures would have

been substantially better if they had – and it looks as though they will next year – but to my mind this will still be misleading if all that it does is crudely tot up budgets and create another box for international production to be put in, rather than encouraging us to think about the breadth of relations between Australian and international filmmakers, and to really assess the incredible creative contribution of Australian sound editors, mixers, Foley artists, visual effects artists, and screen composers. They are almost always forgotten in analyses of film production, and yet their international work is not only growing and forming a critical part of their business, it is also enabling them to work on what Australian projects are out there without going broke and without their equipment becoming outdated. Mary Farquhar of Griffith University has just won an ARC grant to look at Australian post production work on Chinese films like *Hero*, which will go a long way to giving this work the recognition it deserves.

The ongoing [DCITA review of film funding support](#) in my view compounds some of the problems in thinking about international production in Australia. In the [Issues Paper](#) released by the Department in July, Australian participation in international production is mentioned only in terms of the financial support that is provided for promoting Australia as a location for filming through Ausfilm; in a description of the Refundable Film Tax offset as “an incentive for attracting large budget foreign film productions to Australia with the aim of providing greater employment and skill development”; and in a note in the section under the question ‘What options are there for stimulating growth in private investment?’ which reads:

In some countries, like Australia, a tax incentive for producers is offered principally to attract runaway productions where eligibility criteria are expenditure-based.

Now while the document mentions the government’s ‘cultural objectives’ a number of times, without really explaining what is meant by this, it is clear that the Department does not see any relationship between cultural objectives and international production. Fair enough, you might think, as this is pretty much the dominant industry position too. International production is simply there to provide employment and income, upgrade skills and enable the purchase of better equipment which might then be used to make ‘quality’ Australian film and television ‘product’. This reminds me of comments made by Toby Miller and Bruce Molloy in relation to *Mission: Impossible* and other film and television series made on the Gold Coast in the 1990s. Essentially, they argued, ‘no aspect of Queensland culture’ was involved in their production, and they had ‘no direct cultural relevance to Qld or Australia’.

I find this sweeping dismissal quite troubling. It may be the case that there are no on-screen indicators of Australia or Queensland in these films, and that the local is disguised by the matte of international production, but I don’t think that it is possible any more to simply write them off as irrelevant given the scale and number of these films and television series and the large number of Australian cast and crew who have worked often exclusively on them. As Tom O’Regan and I wrote in our book *The Film Studio*, ‘once finished and made available for distribution across multiple platforms and channels, these productions invariably become part of the imagination, memory and history of the location, and sometimes become part of its reputation as well’. They form a sizeable part of Australian production, they attract significant government attention and financial support, and they sustain a range of place-based

agents working in what Tom and I call the ‘location interest’, where the goal is to attract as much production as possible to a place, and if possible retain it. I think that although the international productions don’t neatly fit the established paradigms or frameworks for discussion except in economic or industrial terms, they do deserve to be taken seriously in our consideration of Australian screen culture because they represent some of the new relations between the local and the global which characterise contemporary international audiovisual production. To borrow from some recent work by Elizabeth Avram on *Finding Nemo* as a contribution to Australian national cinema, they may not have any direct cultural relevance (although I think this entirely depends on your definition of ‘cultural’) but they do have cultural *resonance*.

The argument that these productions – like all international production in Australia – has no cultural relevance strikes me as odd when you consider that the key criterion in all of the funding mechanisms available to filmmakers here is *the citizenship of the key creatives*. That is, the basis of our funding system here is essentialist: to qualify for funding, the key creatives must be Australian citizens, and for state funding, live in particular places. The idea is that because they are Australian citizens, the filmmakers will by definition produce Australian stories and in the process achieve the government’s cultural objectives. To my mind this makes sense, and is more palatable than a funding system organised around the production of ‘distinctive’ or ‘authentic’ Australian stories, which has been raised again by a number of submissions to the current DCITA review. This would mean someone or some body sitting in judgement on what is or is not a distinctive, authentic Australian story – and frankly for my money right at the moment in the current political climate this is not a desirable option. Some might see the agencies already discriminating between stories, but this kind of overt intervention seems to me to be a dangerous thing.

But strangely while the funding guidelines are based as I say on essentialist guidelines, it is not the case that every film that Australians work on or every film that is made in Australia is celebrated as a contribution to Australian cinema or to our cultural objectives. Naively perhaps, I’d ask: why not? And why is it that the only terms in which we can talk about international production are economic or industrial?

I am not arguing that the range of support structures, subsidy schemes and tax arrangements that enable film production in Australia should be done away with. I am well aware of the importance of such mechanisms to local production. But it is my contention that the ways in which these structures have been argued for in the past have contributed to the narrowness of debate around screen production and screen culture in Australia, and to the ‘culture of insecurity’ around Australian cinema. Redefining the terms of the debate would enable us not only to consider anew the kinds of stories that are told here and the connections they make, but would also allow a necessary reassessment of the place and resonance of international production in Australia.

It is now widely accepted in academic and critical commentary that ‘national cinema’ is no longer a useful or adequate term because it can limit, prescribe and proscribe the kinds of films that are Australian ‘in the sense that matters’; that is, the idea of ‘national cinema’ imposes from outside a set of expectations and critical standards on films and filmmakers that may be anachronistic, politically driven, and insensitive to the actual contemporary cultural diversity of Australia. If, to bastardise William

Mitchell, cinema today is more about connections than boundaries, then rather than trying to stake out cultural territory (our *possession*) in order to exclude international production – so effectively we say we shall decide which productions are culturally or economically significant, and the terms on which they count – shouldn't we instead be concentrating on the *relations* including the cultural relations between Australian cinema, Australian filmmakers, and the international? As I put it in a [review of Nick Herd's book *Chasing the Runaways*](#) rather than viewing international production in 'broadcast' terms – that is, as 'runaway' production which travels unidirectionally from one place, usually Los Angeles, to many other places – it is more productive to understand the international production system in network terms in which connections between locations, producers and audiences are multiple, complex, ever-changing and multi-directional. What would this do to our thinking about cultural objectives and cultural diversity in Australian cinema? And what would happen if we then tried to write a history of Australian international cinema, as distinct from Australian national cinema? What else might that include?

In conclusion, I think that the narrow terms in which we allow ourselves to talk about international production is in part a result of the terms in which the industry has had to be consistently argued and fought for, and also in part the result of the complete absence of discussion here in Australia about the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Now while the Convention does reinforce the position of those keen to shore up local cultural industries against the deprivations of global media corporations and international audiovisual production by explicitly recognising the right of governments to make cultural policies that give protection to their own cultural producers and shield them from the baser effects of market forces, for me the critical point about the Convention is its emphasis on dialogue, exchange, and collaborative relations between cultural producers, industries and audiences in different countries. Examples would include the collaboration between filmmakers from Australia and Bhutan on *Travellers and Magicians* perhaps, or even between Australians and Koreans on *Musa* or Australians and Chinese on *Hero* or *The House of Flying Daggers*. And while the Convention was not deliberately framed with footloose large budget American production in mind, its emphasis on dialogue and collaboration suggests a way of thinking about that production and its relations with the places it lands up that to my mind is more productive and interesting than the terms of the debate we currently have.

Instead of a division between what Tom and I identified as the 'location interest' and the 'design interest' (with the latter being policies and practices intended explicitly to support production that is initiated or led by Australian creatives), we could concentrate on the dialogue between the local and the international. We could consider Australian cinema as an international rather than a national cinema. This would enable us to conceive of Australian cinema and dare I say it Australian cultural identity not as a fixed thing not as a possession, but as an evolving, changing, set of relations with international cinema and with the rest of the world that to borrow from Hage again "highlights ongoing achievement and love rather than past achievement and defensiveness". That I realise is an incredibly provocative thing to say at a Film and History conference, and I may have just succeeded in banishing myself from this community.