How can you be found when no-one knows that you are missing?
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'What the reader sees will not be what he hears'
*James Joyce may have said this of Finnegans Wake*

'Since we have already said everything, the reader must bear with us if we continue on a while. If we extend ourselves by force of play. If we then write a bit...'
*Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, 1981:65*

**Script**

Don't get me wrong. Australians make a lot of very fine and worthy films. In the torrid vernacular of Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia The Movie*,

*Crickey, you’d have to be a drongo not to know that Aussies make a shitload of bloody ripper flicks - streuth, they’re bonza mate, they’re really fair dinkum yarns with the best scenery and actors and stories that this bloody great big brown land has to offer. They’re absolodddyfuckinlutely faaaaannntastic. Mate, Cobber.*

The only problem is nobody actually seems to want to see them. Now, none of the following will be news to most of you but for the sake of the argument let’s look at some figures.

Australian-produced feature films have accounted for an average of just 5.1 per cent of gross takings at the Australian box office in the past 15 years. That’s $511 million out of a total of $10.5 billion. Only once in that period did the Australian share reach 10 per cent and that was in 1994, and largely due to the success of *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Muriel’s Wedding*. In 2001, a record $63.4 million was spent at the box office on local features, including *Moulin Rouge*, *Lantana*, *The Man Who Sued God* and *Crocodile Dundee in LA*, but this still represented only 7.8 per cent of the total box office for that year. In 2007, the Australian box office share was 4 per cent (that’s $36 million), a decrease from 4.6 per cent (or $40 million) in 2006.

**Inscription**

How does one link the different registers within which critique is possible - in which 'research functions, by way of allegory, as the *inventio* for an expressive text (thus producing both scholarship and art)'? (Ulmer, 1991) This question lies at the heart of any attempt to understand reflexive remix practices as research and research as a mode of reflexive remix. [1] It was also the driving force behind the "paper" I delivered at the *B for Bad Cinema Conference* at Monash University which sought to explore questions of national identity, genre filmmaking and national cinema. [2] The "paper" took the form of a multi-channeled media performance, in defiance of (and with the full intention of disrupting) the tendency at such academic events to deliver in person a mode of writing that only distinguishes itself from other kinds of academic writing by virtue of being 'read aloud'.

This writing (the writing that you are reading now, whenever that may be) takes place both before and after its own inscription as an event, as the performance of what was written and which can be viewed (performed, read) again in this space as a supplement to its performance. It is not meant to explicate that performance...
Of the Top 50 films in Australia of all time, ranked by total reported gross Australian box office as at January 2008, only 5 were Australian: Crocodile Dundee, Babe, Happy Feet, Moulin Rouge and Crocodile Dundee II.

Australia has now joined this list. To date, it’s grossed $A36.78 million at the Australian box office. Since it’s release late last year, Australia has overtaken Babe’s long-standing box office figure of $A36.77 million set in 1995, and is surpassed only by Crocodile Dundee’s record $A44.7 million set in 1986.

Not withstanding this, Australians do seem to make a lot of good films that unfortunately seem to fail at the box office. You just have to watch the self congratulatory, nauseatingly feel good, look at us mum aren’t we clever AFI Awards ceremony with its bevy of “international” stars who are just so glad to be home to know that there are many critically acclaimed Australian films doing the rounds at any given time. The problem is that very few Australians have actually seen them.

Which of course leads us to ask, and it’s a question that has been asked ad nauseam in the Australian media much to the disdain of Australian filmmakers, what’s the point of a national cinema if the nation actually isn’t interested in it. Forget about making an impact on the rest of the film going world (and, as Phil Brophy sagely points out, the international market cares as much about you as you do about Finnish historical drama), if a national cinema is meant to be congruential, nauseatingly feel good, look at us mum aren’t we clever AFI Awards ceremony with its bevy of “international” stars who are just so glad to be home to know that there are many critically acclaimed Australian films doing the rounds at any given time. The problem is that very few Australians have actually seen them.

Following Ulmer’s remixing of Derrida’s ideas regarding grammatology, the performance of the “paper” makes use of the figure of the mise en abyme - a reflexive structuration by means of which a text shows what it is telling, does what it says, displays its own making, reflects its own action. (Ulmer, 1991) In doing so, it is capable of exposing the ideological quality of the research drive, the will to power in knowledge. A conference paper traditionally attempts to display the presenter’s mastery of a field of research, to present “findings”, to attest to the presenter’s status as “expert”. [3] This “paper” takes the ready-made topics for debate about national cinema and national identity as a starting point to demonstrate the recursive nature of such discussions and their almost inexorable critical status. It playfully remixes current discussions of these issues, not in an effort to resolve them but rather to draw attention to its status as, what Greg Ulmer has named, a discourse of “immanent critique” - “a reasoning capable of operating within the machines of television and computing, in which the old categories (produced in the book apparatus) separating fiction and truth are breaking down.” (Ulmer, 1991) Similarly, the “paper” of which this writing speaks was itself driven by the same desire to work through the problem of what happens to criticism when it embraces reflexive remix, not as an object of study, but as a legitimate critical strategy within academic discourse.

But I think his second point is more telling. Apart from Australia (the movie not
the country) when was the last time you saw an Australian film marketed on Australian television for any length of time and with any kind of panache. For all the argst ridden criticism levelled at Luhrmann over the content of his film, and there has been plenty of it, more Australians have seen his film than have seen most of the rest of the Australian films made in the last 12 months put together. This is despite reviews of Baz's film like Peter Conrad's in The Monthly which self indignantly complains:

What should have been a vindication for our undiscovered country has turned out to be a calumny; instead of signalling our proud independence, the film portrays us as timid, imitative colonials, still searching for an empire to which we can belong. The blame needs to be shared around: the failure of Luhrmann's Australia is Australia's failure too. (Conrad, 2009)

This! from a man who has spent the last 30 years teaching at Oxford University.

Now I'm not saying that Australia is a great film. But really what do we actually expect from Australian films. As Phil Brophy points out in his review of the film:

"Australia is inevitably an easy target - but using a narrow-gauge shotgun is an ineffective critical strategy when aimed at the nationalist mirage within which Australian cinema's self-image has shimmered for over quarter of a century. A wide-spray Uzi handled by a blind drunk is a better tactic. Don't shoot the film or the filmmakers: shoot the whole context within which they are positioned." (Brophy, 2009)

This got me thinking. What if we were to apply Luhrmann's clearly successful marketing strategy to a film that, while successful in relative terms, still made 13 million dollars less on worldwide release than the Australian Tourism Export Commission put into Baz's film.

Wolf Creek opened on 151 screens around Australia on November 3, 2005 and, considering the mere 1 million dollar budget used to make the movie, went on to be a financial success. It was also nominated for numerous awards, including 7 AFI awards, 5 Inside Film Awards and the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. An amazing double whammy for an Australian film.

For those of you who haven't seen Wolf Creek, here is a short précis. Three young travellers set out from Broome to travel across the top end of Australia to Cairns. The two women, Kristy and Liz, both British, and their male companion, an Australian named Ben, stop at a meteorite crater called Wolf Creek. There is some romantic intrigue and then their car breaks down. They're rescued by a seemingly benign outback type called Mick who tows them to his camp with the promise of fixing their car and getting them back on the road. Turns out he's not as benign as they thought and what follows is described by critic Roger Ebart as 'a sadistic celebration of pain and cruelty'. In what is clearly an homage of sorts to Tobe Hooper's classic horror film The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, the not so benign Mick, after drugging his young victims, then proceeds to attempt to torture, mutilate and dismember them.

Needless to say, the car never gets fixed.

Wolf Creek is a well made genre film that Guardian critic Peter Bradshaw described as a "swaggeringly nasty film which deserves an audience outside the horror fansbase". (Bradshaw, 2005)

What sets Wolf Creek apart from other genre films, however, is director Greg McLean's canny use of local character to make this not just a horror film but a distinctly Australian horror film. The landscape, the characters, the tourist culture, local crime stories and outback mythology are all used as narrative building blocks. As Jim Schembri rightly argues in his review of the film "It's solid proof that genre, when used skilfully, can enhance rather than obliterate a film's cultural fingerprint." (Schembri, 2005) And as an Australian film that could be read as offering an antidote to the patronising tendency to romanticise aboriginal culture in Australian film, Wolf Creek also shows us the dark face of the outback mythology of the benign ionic bushman. As one indigenous critic, Tyson Yunkaporta noted, "the larrikin exterior is stripped away to reveal the hideous doppelganger lurking beneath Australian emotional seizure on the part of the subject.

The use of the joke as a scholarly tool and as a key driver of reflexive remix culture responds to the tendency within academic writing (and culture in general) towards what Ulmer (and others) describes as 'the melancholy seriousness that has been associated traditionally with the emotional experience of academic work' and the 'nostalgia that Jameson and others have identified as the predominant emotion of culture in the period of late capitalism.' (Ulmer, 1989: 61)

[4] Ulmer is drawing here on Jacques Derrida's observation that claims to neutral objectivity rest upon the authority of the scientific model of knowledge which aims to exclude the non-serious (Ulmer, 1989: 61). However, this ideological exclusion of the non-serious, the jest, the pun, the joke, cannot be kept on the borders of critique without exposing the contradiction inherent in the claim for seriousness that this model of knowledge purports to uphold. Derrida writes:

The necessity assumed by classical theory of submitting itself to the very normativity and hierarchy that it purports to analyse, deprives such theory of precisely what it claims for itself: seriousness, scientificity, truth, philosophical value. Because (...) theory claims to be serious, it is normed by part of its object and therefore not impartial. It is not scientific and cannot be taken seriously. (Derrida, 1977: 211)

Derrida is not of course saying that we shouldn't take theory seriously. He is merely demonstrating that the
identity...the audience are unaware of the shadowy Mick Dundee doppelganger that lingers at the core of their identity, pricking their conscience and giving them the heebie-jeebies at the thought of being stranded alone in the haunted outback, alone with the truth of their ancestors and the angry spirits of murdered Aboriginal multitudes’. (Yunkaporta, 2006)

So what might an Australia style marketing campaign look like when applied to Wolf Creek?

Well, first you'd need a major investor like ATEC. But I'm not sure how they would respond to ads like this.

Australia

exclusion of the non-serious, the joke, from philosophical discourse cannot be logically sustained. Wittgenstein, too, suggested 'that the "wit" in his name might lead us to expect that a good philosophical work could be written that consisted entirely as jokes' (Umer, 1989: 62) If we consider the etymology of the word "theory" from its Greek origins in theorein, which means "to look at" and its frequent association with spectatorship, as in "looking at" a theatre stage, then reflexive remix practices, which often rely heavily on the joke to make sense of them, could be said to perform legitimate scholarly critique. They treat serious ideas by way of the jest.

The "paper", as an example of reflexive remix, also draws on Marshall McLuhan's articulation of the power of analogy and the analogical mind to reinvigorate critique through the restoration of arts of exposition and interpretation (grammar) and persuasion (rhetoric) to a trivium dominated by logic (dialectic), which he began in the Nashe thesis, and which formed the basis for many of his future works.[5] McLuhan believed that the truth or non-truth of an assertion is, in the mind of the analogist, inextricably linked to the ways in which that assertion is made. This transgresses a 'fixed set of co-ordinates that most educated Westerners have inherited from Aristotle'. (Kuhns, 1996) For McLuhan, truth to the analogist is a creative act: 'a ratio between mind and things, made by the shaping imagination'. (Kuhns, 1996) In other words, the performance of the "paper" is not adorned by rhetoric and exposition - they form an integral part of its argument. But this can be said of all writing as Derrida designates it:

And thus we say "writing" for all that gives rise to inscription - in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice:
Australia

Wolf Creek

Maybe a merchandising strategy like that used so successfully by other horror films like these.

In fact, I whipped up a few of my own at home.

The application of rhetorical strategies and the careful consideration of the manner of exposition in terms of the performance of the "paper" do not come after the meditation on the dialectics of the argument. This is what McLuhan meant when he spoke of the power of the analogical mind to re-integrate the trivium under electric conditions. The 'shaping imagination' of the analogist recognises the interdependence of grammar, logic and rhetoric in the delivery and reception of persuasive arguments. And he anticipated, along with Derrida, an ideo-pictophonographic writing that could not only draw upon multiple writing instruments - the word, television, cinema, computing technologies and so on - but could draw on gesture and oratory and the use of rhetorical tropes such as allegory, hyperbole, paradox, alliteration, pun, enigma, satire and invective. Dismissed as superficial (as in 'to be found on the surface') in traditional scholarly writing, rhetoric and exposition assume their position alongside dialectic in helping us to convey and make sense of complex ideas in reflexive remix practices.

Donald Theall, speaking about the work of Joyce (whose writing is also remixed throughout the writings of both McLuhan and Derrida), alludes to this when he discusses 'the poetic' in Beyond the Word: Reconstructing Sense in the Joyce Era of Technology, Culture and Communication. (Theall, 1995: 11) The poetic,
But in keeping with the car breakdown theme, I thought the RACV might make a good partner. They have a long association with horror and suspense as the following clearly demonstrates.

And I was surprised to find that the RACV were in fact already one step ahead of me as Theall uses the term, refers to inventive cultural productions whether they are achieved in language, another medium or a mixture of media. While recognising the ambivalence that permeates all intense poetic activity throughout history, Theall argues that

"[the poetic emphasis on the complexity of assemblage, with its corresponding intensity (for the poetic work embraces a complexity of the surface and a density of the depth of the work), generates new ways of seeing, sensing, and understanding. Since the poetic work invites discussion, judgement, and understanding rather than closure, it permits exploration and evaluation; it may even have a value when the artist is a conscious propagandistic agent. (Theall, 1995: 243-244)"

This precisely conveys the work that the performance of the "paper" as reflexive remix and reflexive remix practice in general seeks to do. If academic activity is meant to not only open up new ways of seeing, sensing and understanding the world but to also propagate those ideas (at a conference, on a Youtube channel, in an academic journal), then this "paper" makes and marks a gesture towards that ambition.

'The death of the book is not the end of language: it continues' John Cage, For the Birds

This video is available at:
http://www.youtube.com/v/pfHvKV1dtcn8
Clearly what Australian national cinema needs is not more Aussie stories about Aussie heros and outback adventures - they just need a cracking good ad campaign.

Author's Biography

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Notes

[1] I'm using Eduardo Navas' idea that remix can be categorised in three ways - extended remix, selective remix and reflexive remix. The latter 'allegorizes and extends the aesthetic of sampling, where the remixed version challenges the aura of the original and claims autonomy even when it carries the name of the original; material is added or deleted, but the original tracks are largely left intact to be recognizable.'
http://remixtheory.net/?page_id=3 [back]


[3] Interestingly, the etymology of the work "expert" is derived from the Latin experientia which derives from the Greek verb peirao (try, attempt, test, get experience) from which we also get the word "pirate".
[back]

[4] Ulmer also quotes Michel Serres - 'At its birth, knowledge is happy, delivered natively from all culpability. It is perhaps happy by nature. However, in the institutions which direct it, exploit and transmit it, for the individuals it overwhelms it fosters in fact the death instinct. Throughout my youth I believed I discerned on the walls of amphitheaters or on the brows of the learned the hideous word - sadness alone is fruitful. How the change came about I don't know. By whatever means its own nature might be restored it is urgent on pain of death to
respond to this question.’
(Quoted in Ulmer, 1989: 61)
[back]


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