Mark Hartley’s new film straddles unpretentious glee and obsessive research, writes Alexandra Heller-Nicholas.

The main intent of Mark Hartley’s documentary on Australian commercial genre cinema of the 1970s and 1980s – or, more affectionately, Ozploitation film – is to highlight trash as an integral building block of the Australian film industry as we know it today.

Film scholars in Australia have very little experience observing the mechanics of the legitimization of local cinematic trash, watching it turn from fool’s gold into a rich mine of valuable cultural artefacts. While we can view with detached fascination the myriad instances of this occurring in foreign contexts, Not Quite Hollywood (2008) challenges local audiences – critics and punters alike – to direct the mirror inwards. The result is that films that have been successfully deleted from the filmic landscape are now playing at such credible cultural events as the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF).

The informal patron of the film – and of the Ozploitation renaissance that this documentary will no doubt trigger both here and abroad – is Quentin Tarantino. The American cult film icon leaves little room in Not Quite Hollywood for even his most vocal critics to question his encyclopedic knowledge of Australian commercial genre film of this era – a deliberate incitement to the cultural elite in this country that Tarantino refers to as ‘snobs’. At the 2003 Australian premiere of Kill Bill: Vol 1 in Sydney, Tarantino famously dedicated the screening to Brian Trenchard-Smith, to the shock of a few but to the bewilderment of most. Along with a cache of other key players, Trenchard-Smith is a central figure in Not Quite Hollywood, and demonstrates in person all the boisterous charm of his films. This documentary unapologetically aims to rescue Trenchard-Smith – and Richard Franklin, Antony I. Ginnane, John Lamond and Terry Bourke, to name a few – from their contemporary obscurity, and Hartley actively positions their films in direct opposition to mainstream Australian film culture. As he observes: ‘For every Caddie there was a Felicity. For every Picnic at Hanging Rock there was a Stunt Rock. For every Jimmie Blacksmith there was an Alvin Purple.’

Not Quite Hollywood launches with Rose Tattoo’s euphoric bogan anthem ‘We Can’t Be Beaten’, a track that in both lyric and mood emphasizes the raucous (if somewhat delusional) self-aggrandizing spirit that permeates many of the films the documentary examines. In fact, it is this precise tone that also governs many of the most engaging interviews: from the outset, a spectacularly grumpy Bob Ellis clashes horns with an equally deadpan Phillip Adams and Barry Humphries as they thrash out a historical framework upon which Hartley elegantly builds his narrative. Segueing neatly from what Adams calls the ‘great cinematic silence of Australian cinema’ of the 1960s, through to the fascination with Australia of foreign directors such as Nicolas Roeg and Ted Kotcheff, the popularity of comedies such as Stork (Tim Burstall, 1971), Alvin Purple (Tim Burstall, 1973) and the Barry McKenzie films (Bruce Beresford, 1972 and 1974) is praised as laying the foundations for this new mode of Australian cinema.

Encompassing both the Ocker comedies
and sex comedies in this introductory section, *Not Quite Hollywood* succinctly and economically ticks the significant textual boxes: *Felicity* (John D. Lamond, 1979), *The Naked Bunyip* (John B. Murray, 1970), *Petersen* (Tim Burstall, 1974) and *Eliza Fraser* (Tim Burstall, 1976) are all landmarks in establishing the textual cartography of Australian genre film from this era. The bulk of the documentary is then divided neatly into two sections: horror and action cinema. Aside from Hartley’s admirable grasp of the material in question, it is the simple structure of the film that so effectively demonstrates both his main claims regarding the unjust orthodox refusal to acknowledge the influence and impact of Ozploitation film, and the charm and power inherent in both the films themselves and the motley cast of characters responsible (and, in many cases, irresponsible) for their production.

The conceptual logic of the ‘body genre’ rubric allows the Ocker comedies and sex comedies to fluidly segue into horror, and it is here that Hartley’s hardcore insight into softcore trash becomes apparent. Hartley is, in street parlance, *bona fide*: this is no poseur ego trip by any stretch. In fact, one of the most simple but overwhelming pleasures on offer in *Not Quite Hollywood* is the chance to see – even if just in short clip form – snippets of texts rarely (if ever) seen outside of late-night 1990s television or $1 ex-rental VHS cassettes, blurred, chewed and almost unwatchable. Hartley tips his hat enthusiastically towards...
Hartley tips his hat enthusiastically towards the ‘big name’ horror films, but the real treat is the humble, ‘no big deal’ manner in which almost-vanished films are treated to equal curatorial insight.

...his finest film. The refusal of *Patrick* to lose its charm despite (or perhaps because of) its self-conscious campiness is almost as supernatural as the telekinesis bestowed upon its title character. The sadly underappreciated Robert Thompson (who appeared in *Thirst* [Rod Hardy, 1979] and a few episodes of *Prisoner*) is unrelenting in his determination to pump up the intensity of *Patrick*, despite his muteness throughout the film. *Patrick* was a huge success in the United States and Italy, the latter spawning the unauthorized sequel *Patrick vive ancora* (Mario Landi, 1980) which, despite the slagging-off it receives in *Not Quite Hollywood*, is an example of the bizarre lengths to which Italian genre film was pushed in the 1970s.

*Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1978) is given pride of place in the horror section; Tarantino in particular waxes lyrical about the horror that stems from the relatively simple storyline and the taut screenplay by Everett De Roche (who also wrote *Patrick*). *Thirst*, *The Survivor* (David Hemmings, 1981) and *Harlequin* (Simon Wincer, 1980) are included (again, three films that have aged remarkably well, despite the latter’s insistence on placing Robert Powell in snug-fitting spandex), and Russell Mulcahy’s self-flagellation over *Razorback* is...
balanced out by Tarantino’s somewhat backhanded compliment that Mulcahy is ‘a poor man’s Ridley Scott’.

Hartley also enthusiastically embraces the acton segment. Swiftly edited interviews with a variety of key players hilariously outline the outrageous production histories of Stone (Sandy Harbut, 1974) and Turkey Shoot (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1982) in particular, and – as the director of the latter – Trenchard-Smith is positioned as a vital personality in the documentary and seated next to Tarantino in a few pivotal interview scenes. Trenchard-Smith’s The Man from Hong Kong (1975) and Dead End Drive-In (1986), Mad Dog Morgan (Philippe Mora, 1976) and George Miller’s Mad Max (1979) are discussed at length, but – like the horror section – it is the soundtrack in which lesser-known films are incorporated that provides the real treat.

Most notable of these is Fair Game (Mario Andreacchio, 1986), and Tarantino’s analysis of this grossly undervalued exploitation classic demonstrates his remarkable insight into the defining nuance of Australian commercial genre film in this era. Calling it ‘a female Straw Dogs’, Tarantino is fully aware of the weight of this comparison and makes no bones in clarifying that he is not speaking hyperbolically. Violent and terrifying in its depiction of violence against women, Fair Game is a deeply unpleasant and frequently ugly film; but it is powerful, poignant and allows no room for the topic to be softened by namby-pamby filmic metaphor. It is, as Tarantino states, an outrageous film, but its literalization of the centrality of the car to Australian masculinity makes it as significant to national film studies as this grossly undervalued exploitation classic demonstrates his remarkable insight into the defining nuance of Australian commercial genre film in this era. Calling it ‘a female Straw Dogs’, Tarantino is fully aware of the weight of this comparison and makes no bones in clarifying that he is not speaking hyperbolically. Violent and terrifying in its depiction of violence against women, Fair Game is a deeply unpleasant and frequently ugly film; but it is powerful, poignant and allows no room for the topic to be softened by namby-pamby filmic metaphor. It is, as Tarantino states, an outrageous film, but its literalization of the centrality of the car to Australian masculinity makes it as significant to national film studies as Mad Max. The violent attempt to obliterate and humiliate Cassandra Delaney’s Jessica in the name of hyper-masculinized sport demonstrates an insight into the brutality of the Australian outback rarely depicted as intensely in our national cinema.

Between the pole dancer gyrating behind John Lamond and the outrageous anecdotes surrounding Antony I. Ginnane, the self-defined Australian Roger Corman, it is easy to miss the fact that Not Quite Hollywood also illustrates the nitty gritty mechanical aspects of Australian film production, particularly the influence of the tax breaks 10BA granted local film productions. The decline in quality of much Australian commercial genre film is directly associated with 10BA, but the film also spends much time exploring the significance of non-Australian personnel being imported to the national scene. Stacy Keach and Jamie Lee Curtis are both interviewed extensively in relation to the production of Richard Franklin’s Roadgames, and discuss, together with Australian interviewees, the cultural and industrial response to imported American talent being utilized in a supposedly ‘Australian’ film. The question of national identity is expanded even further in Hartley’s examination of Philippe Mora’s Howling III: The Marsupials (1987): can a sequel in an overtly American franchise be considered an Australian film per se?

In considering the attention devoted to the question of national authenticity and its relation to imported aspects, it is curious that David Hemmings receives such short shrift in Not Quite Hollywood. While he is mentioned – on the subject of Australian commercial genre film it is unavoidable – it is only in passing. To a viewer unaware of both Hemmings’ career in general (his broader filmography is not mentioned) and his close relationship to Australia, it is likely that they will leave this documentary thinking of him as an ambitious drunk rather than an English film star and heartthrob of the 1960s who later became a successful director and character actor.

More significant is the awkwardness of the tack-on ending of the documentary as a whole. While the commercial viability of Not Quite Hollywood clearly depended upon its relevance to contemporary Australian film culture, the hasty and far-too-tidy manner in which films like Wolf Creek (Greg McLean, 2005) and Undead (Spierig Brothers, 2003) are declared as the Next Wave with very little explanation seems to expose the clumsiness of the premise. Paradoxically, the documentary until this point goes to great lengths to demonstrate that film history is far from simple, and the abruptly simplistic conclusion appears to contradict such a view. Indicative of this awkward concession to market relevance is the inclusion of the banal observations of the Saw (2004) snake oil merchants, Leigh Whannell and James Wan, who – in comparison to auslander Tarantino – demonstrate that Australian origins do not make one an expert on Australian film. Hartley is clearly no fool, and one wonders if such compromises were required to simply get the film made. That being said, one can daydream about a potential ‘director’s cut’ that can afford to slum it a little more with the genre trash he knows so well, without capitulating to a hurried and undeveloped narrative arc: notable omissions such as Philip Brophy’s iconic Body Melt (1993) and cult favorite Houseboat Horror (Kendal Flanagan and Ollie Martin, 1989) could perhaps find a place there.

Despite the commercial pressures that appear to influence the film’s conclusion, Not Quite Hollywood is not merely successful, but victorious in its pursuit of reviving interest in a grossly neglected field of truly spectacular, locally produced film. With his past work in releasing many of these titles on DVD through Umbrella Entertainment, and co-curator the Ozploitation program at this year’s MIFF, Hartley continues to bring these films back into the public sphere, and has insightfully chosen the right time to strike. At this stage, it is only the ‘big guns’ that are getting a long overdue airing – five of the six MIFF Ozploitation features are available locally on DVD, and the other sells for under $5 on US eBay – but it is hopefully just a matter of time before films like Next of Kin, Lady Stay Dead and Fair Game will populate DVD store shelves next to Quentin Tarantino’s films. It’s where they belong.

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Endnote