

# **Australian Cinema, Autonomy and Globalisation**

**Rochelle Siemienowicz**

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# **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree in any university or other educational institution; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

I further declare that the ethical principles and procedures specified in Swinburne University of Technology's document on human research and experimentation have been adhered to in the preparation of this report.



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## **Abstract Introduction**

Building on a critical theory that sees narrative performing an active and fundamental role in the way national communities understand and orient themselves, this dissertation focuses on Australian feature films of the 1990s. If national communities are to be distinguished, in Benedict Anderson's words, 'by the style in which they are imagined', then what can be made of the tendency of Australian narratives to articulate a model of the world where, in Graeme Turner's description, '...survival is all, resistance is futile and ideals are to be tempered by contingency'? What kinds of authentic freedom or resistance are available to Australians through their stories, particularly in the context of rapid cultural, political and economic integration? Using Honneth's interpretation of the dialectic of recognition, Bakhtin's concept of the multi-voiced Polyphonic Narrative, and Bourdieu's notion of the cultural field, national narratives and national identities are shown to have the potential to be open rather than closed. The protection of this diversity is enabled, however, only through an autonomous field of the nation, and its associated cultural fields. The Australian cinematic field is discussed as being particularly reliant upon the idea of the distinct nation, and upon the institutional support that arises from this foundation. A close textual analysis of ten very diverse films, made and released in Australia in the 1990s, will explore the contemporary development of the ways of seeing ourselves as simultaneously free and imprisoned. The themes and preoccupations of the films are discussed as narrative responses to the threats and possibilities posed by globalisation. Building upon these ideas, it will be shown how globalisation affects the capacity of the national film industry to operate as an autonomous storytelling field. Using interviews with the directors of the films studied, in combination with a broadly outlined map of the financial and symbolic relations that make up the cinematic field, the dissertation demonstrates the manner in which this field relies, for its very existence, upon the threatened and unfashionable belief in the importance of 'nation' and 'national identity'.



# Chapter 1: Australian Narrative, Freedom and Globalisation

*Autonomy, the key to dignity in the modern world, requires authenticity; freedom depends on identity, and destiny on a shared memory. – Anthony D Smith<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction:

Australian stories are not renowned for their happy endings. Imprisonment and exile are far more familiar as themes than are freedom, emancipation or shinningly triumphant heroism. Where Hollywood loves a hero who conquers the elements and the odds, Australian narratives have traditionally preferred the battler, the stoically surviving underdog who accepts his fate.<sup>2</sup> Do our narratives continue to prefer such protagonists, and if so, how do such laconic and unambitious characters fare in a rapidly and aggressively globalising culture? What kinds of authentic freedom or resistance are available to such characters, or indeed, to the nation itself as a character in an ongoing history; and to what kinds of incarceration or enslavement is this ‘imagined community’ particularly vulnerable?

As one of the dominant narrative arts of our time, cinema is a primary way in which people tell stories about themselves. As Wimal Dissanayake notes, cinema’s ‘...role in conjuring up the imagined community among both the literate and illiterate segments of the community is enormous.’<sup>3</sup> Nationalism, an ideology appealing to, in Benedict Anderson’s words, ‘a deep horizontal comradeship’,<sup>4</sup> finds in cinema a sympathetically democratic art form that transcends any easy dichotomy between highbrow culture and populist entertainment; an immediate

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup> This has been argued by many theorists and commentators, and is explored most extensively by Graeme Turner’s *National Fictions: literature, film and the construction of Australian narrative*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993. A further elucidation of this argument occurs in Chapter Three of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Wimal Dissanayake, ‘Introduction’, *Colonialism & Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. W. Dissanayake, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983, p. 16.



and sensual medium that, through the feature film form offers an imaginative ‘...model through which we articulate the world.’<sup>5</sup>

Australia’s nationalist cinema revival of the 1970s and 1980s produced films that seemed concerned with fostering such ‘deep horizontal comradeship’, and with explicitly representing ‘the nation’, its history, geography and distinctive social types. While these narratives may have lacked modernist optimism and zeal for improvement, they were nevertheless modernist in their attempts to delineate and unify a national culture, even if this meant telling ‘stories that unify us in defeat’.<sup>6</sup> The project of simultaneously representing and constructing any such unified identity seems anachronistic from the historical vantage point of 2002. As Turner argued in the middle of the 1990s, that decade was ‘...notable for a gradual dissociation of the industry, its legitimating discourses, and its products from any explicit participation in nation formation.’<sup>7</sup> The films of the 1990s were characterised by their diversity and by the multiplicity and fragmentation of identities they depicted, created with a variety of production strategies utilising combinations of private, public, national and international financing.

These changes in the Australian cinematic field elicit the question: do Australia’s contemporary cinematic narratives have any conception of an imagined community that is specifically *national*? If, as Anderson argues, ‘Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined’,<sup>8</sup> then what kind of communities are being imagined in this body of films, and what relationship do these communities have to the nation proper?

Building on a critical theory that sees narrative as continuing to play an active and fundamental role in the way cultures (national or otherwise) make meaning and locate themselves in an historical present and orient themselves towards a projected future, this thesis will add the dimension of seeing cinematic narratives as products of semi-autonomous mediating cultural fields that are themselves

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<sup>5</sup> G. Turner, ‘Introduction’, *National Fictions*, op.cit., p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Dermody & Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a National Cinema*, Volume 2, Currency Press, Sydney, 1988, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> G. Turner, ‘The End of the National Project? Australian Cinema in the 1990s’, *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, p. 202.

<sup>8</sup> B. Anderson, op.cit., p. 15.



contained within the larger national field. Structuring the argument around the broad ideas of freedom and autonomy, I will show ways in which globalisation, those processes by which the world becomes one place,<sup>9</sup> can be read as a kind of story in itself, a dominant narrative, or set of narratives, impinging upon the autonomy of all cultures and all stories.

In the Australian context this breakdown of the autonomy of various fields, cinematic and otherwise, takes particular forms. I argue that the kinds of stories we tell in the face of this hegemonic discourse draw on historical preferences for tales that present the individual as disempowered or exiled. If the narratives that come out of Australian culture have traditionally articulated a model of the world in which, in Graeme Turner's words, '...survival is all, resistance is futile and ideals are to be tempered by contingency',<sup>10</sup> then it is important to question whether, in our newly diverse and hybridised cinema, we *continue* to represent and understand ourselves in and around such themes.

As Tom O'Regan has stated, 'National cinema writers have no choice: they must deploy hybrid forms of analysis.'<sup>11</sup> Such an approach, sometimes unwieldy yet constantly demanded by the subject matter, has been deployed in this dissertation. A textual analysis of ten diverse Australian films made and released in the 1990s, will explore the contemporary development of these ways of seeing ourselves as both free and imprisoned. The films in some cases extend these preferred ways of seeing into the present context, adapting them to fit in with the challenges of contemporary urban life, finding new ways for the Australian hero to survive through a submission to 'reality'. In other instances, however, these recent films argue and react against such preferred ways of seeing, providing instead some original and imaginative models of freedom and resistance that may or may not have much to do with living in Australia and being Australian.

These particular films, presented as linked and contrasting pairs, have been chosen not only because their narratives can be read as significant attempts to wrestle with contemporary issues of personal or national freedom, but also

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<sup>9</sup> This definition of globalisation comes from Anthony D. King, 'The Global, the Urban and the World,' in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King, Macmillan, London, 1991, pp. 150-153.

<sup>10</sup> G. Turner, *National Fictions*, op.cit., p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 4.



because the films and the filmmakers illustrate important positions within the field. In addition to the focus on the narratives, it will be demonstrated, through use of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological models of cultural fields, how globalisation might be understood as affecting the ways in which our national film *industry* is free – or not free – to operate as an autonomous story-telling field. Using interviews with the directors of the films studied, in combination with a broad map of the financial and symbolic relations that make up the field, I will show how this field relies, for its very existence, upon the threatened belief in the importance of 'nation', and 'national identity'.

## **An Overview**

In **Chapter One** I discuss the importance of narrative as a way of making sense of the world and one's place within it, enabling the processes of individual and collective identity formation which are shown to occur through an ongoing dialectic of recognition between self and other. Using the concept of the multi-voiced Polyphonic Narrative, it is shown how national narratives and national identities have the potential to be open rather than closed. The protection of this diversity is only enabled, however, through an autonomous national field, understood through Bourdieu's definition of cultural fields. This national field interprets universal values and crystallizes them in the local context. A globalisation which is formed largely around the principles of neo-liberal economics is shown to be a Grand Narrative that undermines the autonomy of nation-states, and therefore the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Australian nationalism, as a story that posits resistance as largely useless, is presented as an inadequate response to these challenges.

In **Chapter Two**, I further outline Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields with their relative levels of autonomy, specific forms of capital, and *habitus*. The field of Australian cinema is revealed to be inextricably entwined with the field of the nation itself.

**Chapter Three**, 'Australian National Cinema: an act of will', presents the national film industry as the product of deliberate nation-creating impulses. This industry continues to exist largely through official support. The effect of this dependence upon the autonomy of the field is questioned. I conclude that though



this may not always result in great ‘art’, the autonomy of large-scale fields of media production is more likely to be protected when contained within a national field that recognises and supports the imperatives of creative autonomy, enshrining it, at least in part, in legislation that is open to public scrutiny.

The second part of this chapter shows the fluid and evolving potential of the category of nation in underpinning filmmaking in this country. As a backdrop to the future discussion of individual films from the 1990s, I trace the broad trajectory of the last thirty years of Australian feature filmmaking. This is characterised as a trajectory, moving from the initially explicit concerns of nation-building and unitary definitions of identity, towards the current situation, with its diversity of representations, and its preference for the categories of the ‘universal’ and the ‘local’. Despite this move within the narratives themselves, I argue that the invocation of the national continues to operate in the discourse surrounding these films, and in the ways in which the field defends itself.

**Chapter Four**, ‘Slave Morality and Australian Culture’, builds upon the idea that Australian narratives prefer to posit the individual as powerless in the face of nature or society. The themes of alienation, imprisonment and the politics of survival are examined in relation to two popular Australian films, *Head On* (1998, Ana Kokkinos) and *Praise* (1999, John Curran). Making use of Nietzsche and Scheler’s theory of *ressentiment*, these films are revealed to be emerging from a uniquely *ressentiment*-inducing culture. Despite their nihilistic tendencies, the texts are revealed to be bleakly poetic articulations of a truth that may give birth to a search for freedom.

Complementing this textual analysis, the films are discussed as manifestations of the Australian cinematic field at a particular instant, and the film directors, Kokkinos and Curran are profiled, with an attempt to position them within the field. Using a combination of data (interviews conducted by myself, interviews published in other sources, critical reviews, budgetary information and box office statistics) I attempt to sketch out the beginnings of a theory of what autonomy might look like within this field, and of the nature of the *habitus* that has developed in conjunction with this.



**Chapter Five**, ‘Aboriginality, Recognition and Australian Great Narrative’, argues that in order to fully understand the persistent themes of exile, alienation and imprisonment in Australian stories, we must take into account the dispossession of the country’s Indigenous population. The struggle of these people to gain recognition is shown to be legally and symbolically tied to the global struggles of other displaced Indigenous populations. The continuing dilemmas of this struggle, and the role they play in the national imaginary, is discussed in relation to *Vacant Possession* (1996, Margot Nash) and *Dead Heart* (1996, Nicholas Parsons), each of which deals with issues of guilt, entitlement, ownership and law.

The marginalised position of these texts within the Australian cinematic field is discussed in relation to the perception that Aboriginal stories are ‘box office poison’. The fact that these films gained critical acclaim, and that Aboriginal filmmaking continues to be supported by official policies is suggestive of a field whose logic is strongly influenced by the pursuit of symbolic capital. Directors Nash and Parsons are situated within the field, adding to the formulation of an understanding of *habitus*.

**Chapter Six**, ‘Globalisation and the Indigenisation of Hollywood Genres’, argues that because of its peripheral position in the world cinematic field, Australian genre films must always be seen as a response, an off-centre reaction, to the world’s most popular films. The genre of Romantic Comedy, with its particularly un-Australian preoccupation with successful romantic love, is taken as a focus. *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996, Emma Kate Croghan) and *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (1997, Cherie Nowlan) are studied as self-conscious, reflexive and hybridised voices in a conversation with Hollywood films’ presentations of love, marriage and romance.

These films are shown to be suggestive of important new trajectories in the Australian cinematic field. Filmmakers Croghan and Nowlan are examined, again with the intention of further elaborating the *habitus* of the field, and the ways in which autonomy can and must be negotiated within this field of large scale production.



**Chapter Seven**, ‘Globalisation, Myths and Universal Narratives’, argues that one response to the historical context of globalised filmmaking is for a local filmmaker to consciously activate certain universal myths or motifs while partially or completely erasing local or national markers. *Babe* (1995, Chris Noonan) and *Bad Boy Bubby* (1994, Rolf de Heer) are studied as very different reworkings of the coming of age narrative, each stressing transcendence, the importance of the individual, and the primacy of ‘becoming’ over ‘being’. These stories are quite opposed to a model of the world where resistance is useless, yet they have questionable status as national narratives.

Attempting to position these films within the Australian cinematic field it becomes necessary to situate them instead in a broader context – *Babe*, as an unusual mainstream blockbuster, *Bad Boy Bubby* as a transnational text in the European arthouse tradition. The idiosyncratic approaches of directors Noonan and de Heer, are discussed in relation to creative autonomy, with Noonan’s experience of working with the US studio, Universal Pictures, illustrative of the limits and opportunities for independence within the global cinematic field.

In **Chapter Eight**, ‘Home-making in the Global Era’, I argue that associated with globalisation is a persistent preoccupation with feeling ‘at home’, or in David Harvey’s words, ‘the search for secure moorings in a shifting world.’<sup>12</sup> Australian national cinema itself, since its 1970s renaissance, can be seen as a project of home-making. A discussion of the films *The Castle* (1997, Working Dog) and *Floating Life* (1996, Clara Law), reveals that the notions of dispossession, homelessness and exile continue to be evident in our cinema. These films, however, open up new ways for re-valuing the suburban experience and therefore protecting it; and for re-valuing Australia as a safe place in which certain privileged migrants might create new homes while retaining fertile connections with their cultures of origin.

Working Dog and Clara Law are discussed as examples of significant new autonomous position-takings within the field of Australian film; the former as a ‘cottage industry collective working in the mass media’,<sup>13</sup> and the latter as a

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<sup>12</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p. 302.

<sup>13</sup> Lorraine Mortimer, ‘The Castle, the garbage bin and the high voltage tower: home truths in the suburban grotesque’, *Meanjin*, vol.57, no.1, 1998.



transnational migrant story-teller in search of hospitality and a favourable working environment.

**Chapter Nine**, 'Threats to the Autonomy of the Australian Cinematic Field', outlines some of the ways in which the erosion of the national field is thereby threatening the autonomy of the cinematic field. I examine the current free trade legislation in which protection of local industry, even cultural industries, is constantly attacked by key players. The dominance of Hollywood distributors and the monopoly of exhibition environments is discussed as an additional threat, together with the move of the US studios into the local environment. The overt government policies of protecting the local culture are questioned in relation to a number of undermining factors: the de-funding of key infrastructure and supporting industries, such as the ABC and the AFI research and information service; the constant need for the industry to lobby for support and to submit to 'reviews' and 'restructuring'; the loosening of local content definitions and regulations. In conjunction with this is the prevailing critical disposition, with its resistance to the idea of a national cinema.

**Chapter Ten** offers some final conclusions. What will become apparent is that just at this historical moment when Australian cinematic stories might be evolving new ways that set free the national imagination, the very conditions for this to continue, the flawed and fragile foundations of autonomous cultural industry, are threatened by forces with interests that lie in refusing to recognise or respect these constitutive boundaries.



## Identity, Nation and Narrative

*...telling a story...is the most permanent act of societies.  
In telling their own stories, cultures create themselves. –  
Paul Ricoeur<sup>14</sup>*

A narrative can be defined as an account of events occurring over time, time understood in human terms.<sup>15</sup> Narrative recounting may or may not take the specific and physical forms of literature, film or written history, but they aspire, in various degrees, to truth, coherence and aesthetic pleasingness. Sucking in the material of life – intentions, beliefs, events, settings and temporality – narratives organise it into complex systems of meaning that integrate past, present and future into a cohesive whole. As psychologist Jerome Bruner has argued, ‘...we organise our experience and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on.’<sup>16</sup>

Advocating an approach in the human sciences that focuses on meaning-construction, Bruner criticises the direction in which many social sciences are moving, towards the analysis of ‘information processing’. In doing so, argues Bruner, they have failed to fully appreciate the social and linguistic mechanisms through which humans come to understand the world and construct their own identities within it.<sup>17</sup>

Theorists like David Carr, Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur argue that human life itself has a pre-narrative quality,<sup>18</sup> and that stories in a sense ‘exist’ in the very nature of human experience, whether that be in individual consciousness or in the shared consciousness of the group or organisation. This perspective, privileging stories as the mode by which humans and cultures ‘become’, is voiced again by Donald Polkinghorne in his writings about the formation of identity in individuals. He characterises the progressive and processual nature of identity formation thus:

*We achieve our personal identities and self-concept*

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Le Monde* Interview, Paris, February 7, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, 18, Autumn 1981, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> J. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p.137.

<sup>18</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol.1, Ch.3, University of Chicago Press, 1984/5. See also P. Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of a Narrative’, *On Paul Ricoeur: narrative and interpretation*, ed. D. Wood, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 27.



*through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives.*<sup>19</sup>

Philosopher, literary theorist and hermeneutist, Paul Ricoeur extends this notion of the self as being a character in an ongoing and unfinished story, offering a theory that explicates the central role of narrative in the dialectical formation of identity. At the basis of his theory is the idea, drawn from Aristotle, that mimesis, or representation, occurs only where there is human action or production and that ‘...far from producing a weakened image of pre-existing things, mimesis brings about augmentation in the field of action which is its privileged field.’<sup>20</sup>

For Ricoeur, narratives are not merely an eternally imperfect attempt to recreate the world, nor are they just a useful set of ordering tools by which humans build mental structures to protect themselves from chaotic contingency. Instead, Ricoeur sees narratives as the key to the reinvigoration and remaking of the world, allowing as they do for ‘semantic innovation’ – the creation of new meanings. Referring both to the world of action and back to the speaker, narratives have the ability to ‘...ceaselessly make and remake our world of action.’<sup>21</sup> Extending beyond the sphere of the individual, Ricoeur’s theory presents narrative as an active and integral way in which individuals and societies engage in an hermeneutic circle in which they interpret, reinterpret and projectively imagine their place in the world.

## **Identity and the dialectic of recognition**

According to Ricoeur the identity of a ‘character’ is inextricably entwined with the development of a plot. Characters themselves are, in fact, plots, existing over time as subjects in relation to events.<sup>22</sup> It is through the recounting, the emplotting, that ‘...the character preserves throughout the story an identity

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<sup>19</sup> Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, SUNY press, Albany, 1988, p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> P. Ricoeur, ‘Mimesis and Representation’, *A Ricoeur Reader: reflection and imagination*, ed. Mario J Valdes, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1991, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.150.

<sup>22</sup> P. Ricoeur, ‘The Self and Narrative Identity’, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blarney, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1994, p. 143.



correlative of the story itself.’<sup>23</sup> The dialectic here is between sameness and difference, the unified nature of the character over time, together with the contingency of events that require of the character actions that contribute to the ongoing constitution of identity. Ricoeur characterises this process of narratively constituted selfhood as a continuing backwards and forwards dialogue of ‘Who am I?’ and the answering ‘Here I am, this is me’,<sup>24</sup> a process of self-recognition that is dynamic, non-reductive and essentially ongoing.

The significance of ‘recognition’ in the way humans come to understand themselves is explored at length by philosopher Axel Honneth. Drawing on the early work of Hegel and the pragmatist social psychology of Mead, Honneth argues that both these thinkers concur that:

*...the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee.*<sup>25</sup>

There is more to this notion of selfhood, this ‘practical relation to self’, than the mere acknowledgment of essential intersubjectivity in becoming an individual; more to be considered than the act of seeing oneself from an outside point of view.

Honneth argues that there are three ‘relations to self’ necessary in the formation of identity: basic self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem.<sup>26</sup> Acquired only through relationships of mutual recognition, these three kinds of self-regard correspond to particular types of relationships, each with their own precarious balance of dependence and autonomy. Self-confidence grows out of relations of love and friendship; self-respect develops through legally instated relations of universal respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons; self-esteem develops

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>25</sup> Axel Honneth, ‘Patterns of Intersubjective Recognition: Love, Rights, and Solidarity’, *The Struggle for Recognition; the moral grammar of social conflicts*, translated by Joel Anderson, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996. p. 92

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 129.



out of solidarity with a group within which one's unique and individual contribution is evaluatively recognised.<sup>27</sup>

These three forms of recognition – love, rights, and solidarity – expand ever-outwards, through an imperative for mutual recognition that compels individuals to express increased claims to the recognition of their individuality. Thus Honneth argues that ‘...the species-historical process of individualization presupposes an expansion of the relations of mutual recognition’,<sup>28</sup> in which subjects become simultaneously more ‘singular’ as well as increasing their connectedness and their ability to recognise the claims of others.

Post-traditional morality recognises the universal qualities of ‘persons’ as free and equal beings capable of autonomous rational decision-making. Modern legal systems therefore attempt to indiscriminately ascribe to all persons a fundamental equality of rights and obligations, a recognition and respect that is horizontal and universal, allowing the subject to experience the dignity of being a person of no more or less value than any other person, able to make claims to recognition based upon these shared qualities. We find this species of recognition embedded in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.’<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to this universalised nature of self-respect, Honneth argues that self-esteem is based upon the recognition of the particularity and difference of persons and their relative possession of socially valued qualities or attributes. He argues that:

*The cultural self-understanding of a society provides the criteria that orient the social esteem of persons, because their abilities and achievements are judged intersubjectively according to the degree to which they can help to realize culturally defined values. This form of mutual recognition is thus also tied to the presupposition of a context of social life, whose members, through their*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> Article 1, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, Switzerland.



*orientation towards shared conceptions of their goals,  
form a community of value.*<sup>30</sup>

Unlike traditional societies, where the notion of ‘honour’ was ascribed to certain classes or positions, modern societies, with their particular forms of social esteem, ‘prestige’ or ‘social standing’ are subject to permanent struggles *about* what is valuable. Because there are so few universally recognised systems of value in modern societies, judgements about the worth of particular traits ‘...must always be made concrete through supplemental cultural interpretations before they can be applied in the sphere of recognition.’<sup>31</sup> These culturally interpretive systems of evaluation are themselves sites of struggle in which ‘...different groups attempt, by means of symbolic force and with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life.’<sup>32</sup>

The obvious example of a group’s struggle for recognition in the Australian context would be that of the Aboriginal people, whose struggle for recognition involves an appeal to human rights, an assertion of the value of traditional ways of life, and a claim to prior occupancy of the country. This struggle for recognition is dependent upon the culturally interpretive systems of, among others, the Australian law and international human rights charters, which themselves derive from aspirations to the universal notion of justice.

Identity can therefore be seen as emerging from a complex intersection of different kinds of recognition, different forms of Ricoeur’s dialectic of sameness and difference. The question ‘who am I?’ can only be answered through a process of seeing oneself in and through relationship. As an individual person, I learn as a child to trust myself as being someone capable of expressing needs, and of being the location of those needs, through a process of ‘symbiosis refracted by mutual individuation’ occurring with close family members or care-givers.<sup>33</sup> Later, in the broader social sphere I learn that I am the bearer of rights and obligations, a person, no more or less deserving of respect and justice than other persons, whose perspective I am able to take as ‘the generalised other’.<sup>34</sup> Secure in these relations-

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<sup>30</sup> A. Honneth, op.cit., p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 108-9.



to-self of love and rights, I then carve out ways of building a life in which my unique qualities and abilities are able to contribute to projects greater than myself, projects whose value is determined and mediated by the particular society in which I participate. Thus my self-esteem is enabled to develop both out of that which I share with others, my solidarity with broader goals and conceptions of the good, the beautiful and the true; and also out of the ways I am, in my particularity, able to contribute or fulfil them.

### **National Identity as Polyphonic Narrative**

This process of identity formation, with its reference to love, rights and solidarity, can also, by extension, be applied to nations as subjects in relationship with themselves and with other nations. In previous work I have used the term ‘Great Narrative’ to speak about the national narratives associated with a particular nation, as opposed to Grand Narratives which purport to relate to humanity as a whole.<sup>35</sup> A nation’s Great Narrative can be described as that general story told by the people about their country’s history, dominant traits, purpose and future, a loosely interwoven fabric made up of the intersection of the smaller, more specific stories contained in the culture. For reasons to be later elaborated, a ‘national cinema’ contributes to and articulates a nation’s Great Narrative in privileged and highly self-conscious ways, which are enabled by State support, both symbolic and economic.

If a country’s Great Narrative stifles diversity or dissent, or if it presents the nation as a dominating and usurping entity with the goal of extending itself at the expense of other nations, then this Great Narrative can be termed, in Mikhael Bakhtin’s language, Monologic – it ‘...pretends to be the ultimate word.’<sup>36</sup> Such single-voiced national narratives give rise to the kinds of destructive, regressive and chauvinistic nationalism with which Nazism, Fascism and the many various kinds of cultural imperialism are associated.

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<sup>35</sup> Rochelle Siemienowicz, *Australian Cinema: Narratives of the Nineties*, Honours Thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 1994, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Carly Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1984, p. 292.



By contrast, nations with a *Polyphonic* Great Narrative will allow for a high degree of diversity within their overall unifying structure. Philosopher Arran Gare writes that polyphonic narratives:

*...give place to a diversity of voices and perspectives, and these construe all people as conscious, active subjects. The world is construed as not just one process, but a multiplicity of processes, contesting each other, clashing, combining, overcoming or being overcome, forming or breaking up.*<sup>37</sup>

Nations with identities constituted through polyphonic Great Narratives would have as a defining goal the protection of diversity, but never at the expense of the very nation itself, whose integrity protects, defends and perpetuates the possibilities for such diversity. This totalising perspective, the ‘overall unifying structure’ within which the strands of diversity would co-exist (and necessarily clash) would give coherence and clarity. Such a perspective would assist societies to reach collective goals (for example, education and health for all citizens) or confront common dilemmas, such as the problems associated with environmental degradation. Such totalising perspectives would, however, in Gare's words, ‘...only be accepted provisionally, [accepting that they have] rivals and that it is possible that in the future some better alternative might be developed.’<sup>38</sup>

While most contemporary proponents of liberal democratic models embrace the notions of tolerance and the protection of diversity, what is not so readily understood or acknowledged is the balancing role that solidarity must play in order for these liberal democratic societies to endure. As Wolfe and Klausen argue, ‘...diversity does require solidarity because, without a common agreement on morality, no principle, including the principle of diversity itself, can ever be safe.’<sup>39</sup> They write that:

*A sense of solidarity creates a readiness to share with strangers, which in turn underpins a thriving welfare state. But it is easier to feel solidarity with those who broadly share your values and way of life.*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Arran Gare, ‘Narratives and the Ethics and Politics of Environmentalism: the transformative power of stories’, *Theory and Science*, Vol.2, No.1, Spring 2000.

<sup>38</sup> A. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 141.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Alan Wolfe and Jytte Klausen, ‘Other People’, *Prospect*, December 2000, p.1.



Likewise, Honneth's idea of solidarity cannot exist outside of communities, which by their very definition are constituted by some common evaluative and ethical framework.<sup>41</sup>

Polyphonically constituted nations would not be trapped by the myths and beliefs of their past, but neither would they be ignorant or disdainful of these traditions. They would be able to embody the core doctrines of nationalism as proposed by Anthony Smith, fusing three ideals: collective self-determination; the expression of national character and individuality; and the division of the world into unique nations each contributing 'their special genius of humanity.'<sup>42</sup>

The intersubjective recognition by nations of one another is therefore integral in their own identity development. A polyphonic Great Narrative would recognise this interdependence and its essential role in the expression of national freedom and autonomy, and would realise that the expression of individuality by its citizens need not be viewed as a threat to national sovereignty. At the same time, such a nation's true internationalism, an awareness of itself as one valuable and unique entity amongst others, would allow for the protection of itself from threats to its sovereignty by nations or groups whose monologic narratives do not offer adequate recognition of others.

The nation with a polyphonic Great Narrative would encourage a civic nationalism rather than an ethnic one. As Greenfeld argues, the ethnic community or nation '...presupposes the uniformity and antiquity of its origins' and therefore sees its grouping as 'natural', with an automatic tendency towards exclusion and a return to an imagined tradition. In contrast, the identity of the civically constituted national community is based on collectively held ideals, and may be applied even where there is great ethnic diversity among a population, as is seen in the United States.<sup>43</sup> Civic nationalism does not necessarily equate with a polyphonic Great narrative, but it is, at the very least, open to this possibility. Civic nationalism embodies an awareness of the ongoing historical process and constructed nature of nation building, and therefore its narratives would be viewed as always

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<sup>41</sup> A. Honneth, op.cit., p. 122-9.

<sup>42</sup> Anthony Smith, *Theories of Nationalism*, Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., London, 1971, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: five roads to modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 12-13.



provisional, open to reworking in the light of new knowledge or changing circumstances.

## **National Fields**

Returning to Honneth's ideas about recognition and its role in self-respect and self-esteem among individuals, it is necessary to explain how these ideas can be applied to the nation as a subject of identity.

In its most idealistic form (by no means fully realised), the global international community embodies a post-traditional morality which aspires to recognise the universal qualities of nations as free and equal bodies capable of autonomous decision-making. Modern nations are entitled to self-respect in that they share, with all other recognised nations, a fundamental equality of rights and obligations, a recognition and respect that is horizontal and universal.

The self-esteem of nations, their 'prestige' or 'standing', however, is predicated upon the recognition of their individuality and particularity and their relative possession of globally valued qualities or attributes. The self-esteem of one nation can therefore be greater or lesser than that of another nation. For example, if the global community recognises material wealth as a highly valued attribute, then the claim to self-esteem of a wealthy nation will be greater than that of a poor or developing one. Such forms of esteem are subject to permanent struggles about their value, and these judgements must be made concrete through fields of cultural interpretation (such as the international conventions of accountancy) before they can be applied as criteria for recognition.

It is here that Bourdieu's theory of fields can be utilised. He proposes that a field is a separate social space with its own operational logic that structures the relations and positions within it.<sup>44</sup> Nations can therefore be understood as separate social spheres, fields that crystallise the rights (self-respect) of their citizens on a horizontal basis that aspires to universality. The nature of this universality, and its particular embodiment in laws and regulations is always at stake, a subject of struggle and conflict within the national field, and increasingly, outside the nation in the international field. The particular ways in which nations express their

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<sup>44</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'Some Properties of Fields', *Sociology in Question*, translated by Richard Nice, Sage Publications, London, 1993, p. 72.



understanding of universal ideals such as justice, truth or beauty, will of course determine the character of the nation and its particular way of allowing for self-respect among its citizens.

For Bourdieu the nature of fields, these separate social universes, at any moment in time, is constituted by ‘...a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions.’<sup>45</sup> The agents occupying these positions compete, often unconsciously, for possession of ‘...the specific profits that are at stake in the field,’<sup>46</sup> the nature of which is determined by the field in question; for each field deals in particular forms of capital and has different ways of measuring profit or success. As David Swartz has noted, ‘By speaking of fields rather than of populations, groups, organisations, or institutions, Bourdieu wants to draw attention to the latent patterns of interest and struggle that shape the existence of these empirical realities.’<sup>47</sup> The dynamic relational aspects of social spheres are therefore emphasised through this heuristic device.

The degree of autonomy possessed by a field determines its ability to act as a mediating force between its own agents and external social, economic and political conditions. The degree of autonomy of a field will also be expressed by the degree to which agents within it are able to critique these external social, economic and political conditions without significant repercussion or retaliation. The field can be likened, in this instance, to a prism that refracts and reflects external conditions by imposing its own specific logic and structure upon them.

The autonomy of national fields, and thus their ability to restructure external influences in their own terms ‘...varies considerably from one period and one national tradition to another...’<sup>48</sup> A national field with a high degree of autonomy will be able to strongly mediate between external political and economic forces and the specific logic of the nation. France, for example, could be seen as a national field with a high degree of autonomy in its defiance of many of the

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<sup>45</sup> P. Bourdieu in P. Bourdieu & Loic J.D. Wacquant, ‘The Logic of Fields’, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (The Chicago Workshop), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 97.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p. 119.

<sup>48</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: essays on art and literature*, edited and introduced by Randal Johnson, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 40.



cultural clauses in the Multilateral Agreement on Trade, and its defiant move to regulated shorter (35-hour) weekly working hours. This national field, structured strongly around pride in a way of life and a tradition of highly valued cultural creation, is able to refract the logic of global trade, reconfiguring its imperatives so as to protect the nation's wealth and lifestyle, and the autonomy of the various sub-fields within it. Whilst asserting its sovereignty this national field must continue to appeal to its own particular version of the universal values of freedom, citizenship and cultural self-determination.

### **Globalisation and the Autonomy of Nations**

*...the desire for ethnic or cultural autonomy is universal; the political means to satisfy that desire within an integrated world market economy is not. Many, perhaps most, societies have to be content with the mere appearance of autonomy, with a façade of statehood. – Susan Strange<sup>49</sup>*

As the above quotation suggests, the very idea of a nation implies a desire for some kind of sovereignty; an individuality that relies on recognition by similarly autonomous entities. The desire for this kind of recognition, and the autonomy that supposedly goes with it, can be seen behind the multiple and proliferating emergent nations of the last century, ‘...the explosion of nationalisms in this late millennium’.<sup>50</sup> Yet those processes associated with the world becoming one place dramatically reduce the operation of nations as autonomous fields. Susan Strange, in her comprehensive study of *The Retreat of the State*, has convincingly argued that the technological and financial changes associated with integration into one single market economy, has caused all States, large and small, strong and weak, to decline in authority and autonomy.<sup>51</sup> Manuel Castells concurs, arguing that:

*The instrumental capacity of the nation-state is decisively undermined by globalization of core economic activities, by globalization of the media and electronic communication, and by globalization of crime.<sup>52</sup>*

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The diffusion of power in the world economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, The information age: economy, society and culture, volume II, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 1997, p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> S. Strange, op.cit., pp. 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> M. Castells, op.cit., p. 244.



Castells goes so far as to describe the relationship between globalisation and the state as being the most significant political issue of the age, particularly as it unfolds in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>53</sup>

Yet the remaining façade of statehood means that the nation is persistently recognised (or misrecognised) as being the foremost political and cultural body. Its sovereignty is respected, up to a point, in symbolic ways such that ‘States remain the principal (and, indeed, the only legal) decision-makers in the anarchic international order’.<sup>54</sup> Yet significantly, this national independence seems to be respected more in terms of a nation’s rights to apply its own environmental and human rights standards, however low they may be; whereas a nation’s ability to retain its economic independence, through tariffs and support of local industries, even cultural industries, is constantly challenged by the powerful advocates of global integration.

It is no surprise that the recent protracted (and as yet unresolved) international negotiations on the Multilateral Agreement on Investment foundered upon the issues of national protection of cultural industries, for these areas reveal themselves most clearly to be the sites of the battle between the ideals of national sovereignty and regional self-determination against the ideals of free capital. The cultural fields, such as the Australian cinematic field, rely on the integrity of the national field for their very existence. Reciprocally, the national field requires its domains of symbolic production to create and reinforce the belief in the imagined community of which it consists.

In terms of narrative, this translates as a monumental clash between the stories of individual nations, the very story of what it is to be a nation, and the Grand Narrative of globalisation. This overarching story is one of liberation and freedom, not, predominantly, for the communities and individuals who live upon the earth; but for the flows of abstracted capital which transverse the globe in pursuit of ever more (apparently) unfettered conditions to perpetuate its multiplication.

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<sup>53</sup> M. Castells, *End of Millenium*, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume III, Blackwell Publishers Inc, Massachusetts, 1998, p. 329.

<sup>54</sup> Geoffrey R.D. Underhill, ‘Introduction: Conceptualizing the Changing Global Order’, *Political Economy and the Changing Global Order*, eds Richard Stubbs and Geoffrey R.D. Underhill, second edition, Oxford University Press, Ontario, 2000, p. 5.



## Globalisation as Grand Narrative

What exactly is Globalisation? Up to this point it has been referred to fairly loosely, as in Anthony King's definition, as 'The processes by which the world becomes a single place' or 'the consciousness of the globe as such'.<sup>55</sup> References have also been made to the relationship between globalisation, the structural changes involved in the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, and the decline in authority and autonomy of the nation state. It is now necessary to further articulate my use and understanding of this overused, underspecified term which seems to be applied as a lazy catch-phrase explanation for almost every development in contemporary life.

It is necessary to acknowledge the many-layered, non-uniform and unsynchronised strands of integration, disintegration, international homogenisation and local or regional resistance that can be seen as symptomatic of 'globalisation'. Different spheres experience multiple and often contradictory patterns of change. Appadurai's theory, for example, proposes a framework for understanding the complex global situation in which there are disjunctures between economy, politics and culture. This framework allows an examination of the relationships between different 'dimensions of cultural flow', which he terms: Ethnoscapes, Mediascapes, Technoscapes, Finanscapes, and Ideoscapes, each of which is governed by its own set of circumstances, while naturally being influenced by the other dimensions.<sup>56</sup> What must be added to this theory, however, is an understanding of the ways in which changes in the nature of financial and political power (in Bourdieu's terms, the global 'field of power') tend towards the undermining of all separateness between principles of operation of these various scapes.

In future chapters I will elaborate some of the cultural and social dimensions of globalisation, for instance, the ways in which some Australian filmmakers adopt narrative and production strategies that emphasise hybridity or that capitalise on the niche networks for distribution of 'localised' arthouse cinema. At this point, however, I wish to emphasise that the dominant strand, and therefore the defining

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<sup>55</sup> Anthony D. King, 'The Global, the Urban and the World,' op.cit.

<sup>56</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Global Culture, Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Sage, London, 1990, pp. 297-9.



process among the many processes of globalisation, is that of the ‘unfettering of world-market forces and the removal of economic power from the state’. As Manuel Castells has written:

*After the demise of statism as a system, in less than a decade capitalism thrives throughout the world, and it deepens its penetration of countries, cultures, and domains of life. In spite of a highly diversified social and cultural landscape, for the first time in history, the whole planet is organized around a largely common set of economic rules.*<sup>57</sup>

It is this largely common set of rules which I believe structures the Grand Narrative of globalisation, determining most powerfully the ways in which nations, communities and individuals are constrained or enabled to make sense of the world and their place within it.

In his famous characterisation of the postmodern condition as ‘...an incredulity towards metanarratives’,<sup>58</sup> Lyotard is referring to the Grand Narratives of modernism, those stories and theories presuming to relate to humanity as a whole, like those of Emancipation, Progress or Christian redemption, and presumably to such big explanatory frameworks as Marxism and its updated theories of American Cultural Imperialism.

Our current location in a postmodern moment causes us to be suitably, and perhaps overly, suspicious of such Grand narratives, as we must be of the sepia-tinged Great Narratives of nations and nationalism. Yet before we dismiss Grand Narratives as dead and buried in the deliciously diverse modern world, it is becomingly increasingly evident that globalisation, and its dominant ideology of capital expansion, is the grandest and most monologic story of all time. Presenting itself as inevitable, inexorable and the culmination of history, this narrative promises emancipation from the chains of nation, emancipation for ideas, and most importantly, the freedom of capital to move around the globe at will, increasing itself in accordance with economic laws and one-dimensional measurements of ‘efficiency’. Arran Gare has argued this, writing that:

*Despite the incredulity towards all grand narratives, the*

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<sup>57</sup> M. Castells, *End of Millennium*, op.cit., p. 358.

<sup>58</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated from the French by Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984, p. xxiv.



*grand narrative of economic progress as defined by economists has retained its dominating influences as a guide for political action by default.*<sup>59</sup>

What this Grand Narrative appears, on the whole, to be creating, is a world in which the principles of democracy play no large part.<sup>60</sup> Instead of the idealised 'ever-outwards expansion of mutual recognition' hoped for by Honneth, this narrative promotes an ever-inwards shrinkage of the principles upon which individual and collective life forms are recognised and valued.

In their powerful bestseller, *The Global Trap*, German journalists Martin and Schuman have documented the passive ways in which nation states, and the world leaders that supposedly represent them, have acquiesced to a vision of the future in which large groups are excluded, kept passive by entertainment, while a minority of wealthy and technologically advantaged people reap the benefits of integration.<sup>61</sup> Martin and Schumann write that:

*...the contradiction between market and democracy has been regaining its explosive force in the tormented 1990s. The tendency has long been apparent to anyone with the eyes to see it. The wave of xenophobia among the European and American population is an unmistakable sign that politics has for years had to take into account. Refugees and immigrants have had their human rights considerably curtailed through ever harsher laws and surveillance in nearly every European country as well as the United States...The Next round of exclusions is directed against economically weak groups in society: receivers of income support, the jobless and disabled, the young. These people experience more and more the withdrawal of support or fellow-feeling on the part of those who are still 'winners'."*<sup>62</sup>

Zygmunt Bauman has also intimately described this world where the rapid emancipation of capital from the limits of the local is presented as an inevitable and unstoppable process. He writes that, 'The creation of wealth is on the way to finally emancipating itself from its perennial – constraining and vexing –

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<sup>59</sup> A. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 25.

<sup>60</sup> James H. Mittelman asks, 'To whom are elected officials responsible? Whereas in theory, democracy means accountability to the governed, in practice, leaders are held accountable to such market forces as debt structures, structural adjustment programs, and credit rating agencies.' J.H. Mittelman, *The Globalization Syndrome: transformation and resistance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> See Chapter 1 of Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann, *The Global Trap: Globalization and the assault on prosperity and democracy*, translated by Patrick Camiller, Zed Books Ltd, London, 1997.



connections with making things, processing materials, creating jobs and managing people.’<sup>63</sup> The result of this, according to Bauman, is that whereas the rich people of previous eras needed the poor to support their wealth, ‘The new rich do not need the poor any more’.<sup>64</sup>

With its built-in acceptance of inequality, and its promise of an inevitable grimly dystopic future for the majority, but a paradise of eternal mobility for the favoured few, this Grand Narrative finds peculiar expression within the Australian context.

### **Australian Great Narrative and the Grand Narrative of Globalisation**

In a nation like Australia, with its cultural tendency to believe that ‘resistance is futile’ and exile inevitable, the peculiar logic of the market rolls right over any of our undeveloped sense of ‘self-respect’ (rights) and ‘self-esteem’ (solidarity). As Michael Pusey has argued, a number of combined factors have made Australia particularly vulnerable to the ideology of globalisation, as expressed through economic rationalism.<sup>65</sup> These factors, Pusey writes, include a pragmatic anti-intellectualism that is, on some levels, in harmony with the simple pragmatics of ‘market logic’; a singular secularism that rejects the spiritual, cultural or even civic notions of nationhood and therefore leans towards an equation of the nation with the national economy; and the cultural cringe inferiority complex by which Australian people are more likely to endorse political or economic practices if they have originated from ‘over there’.<sup>66</sup>

If there are doubts that a neoliberal economic form of globalisation is an officially endorsed ideology within Australia, one need only look at a recent speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, who declares that ‘You are either a globaphobe or a globaphile’.<sup>67</sup> Aside from the philosophical problems of this statement – why must one either love or hate globalisation, presuming one

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>63</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 72

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Pusey, ‘Chapter 6: Integrity Under Stress’, *Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation Building State Changes its Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander Downer MP, ‘Globalisation or Globophobia: Does Australia have a choice?’ Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the National Press Club, Canberra, 1 December 1997.



even knows what the term means? – there is an astonishingly evangelistic tone to Downer's speech, a tone that allows for no resistance. He continues:

*...whether people fear globalisation or not, they cannot escape it...If we succumb to the forces of globaphobia we will be left economically, strategically and socially isolated – cut off in every sense from the world around us...Let me put this clearly – globalisation is an irreversible trend. It is happening. And it is good for all Australians, the region and the world.<sup>68</sup>*

There is no space for polyphony in the current Australian government's articulation of our Great narrative, and other factors peculiar to our particular tradition of nationalism make it difficult to resist the monologic inevitability of economic globalisation. And economic globalisation, resting as it does upon neoclassical economics, is a decidedly monologic narrative. Pusey describes it well:

*At the global level the leading 'idea' and Leitmotif of neoclassical economics and of its economic rationalism is the 'world image' of a 'world economy' reduced to a 'world market' and invested with the status of a universal 'idea' as a common denominator, for all that is local, particular and national. This image conjures up an idealised world of freely cooperating producers and consumers and thus of a world that transcends all 'historical', ethnic and national boundaries. If markets are not yet 'perfect', they are heading that way...<sup>69</sup>*

A number of factors unite to undermine Australian nationalism: an embarrassing penal colony past; a traditionally easy-going attitude; a lack of united history resulting from a diverse ethnic mix; a lack of any real struggle against its coloniser resulting in an incomplete break with the British Empire; a later ambivalence about the right to be occupying this land, having dispossessed the Aborigines; a shared use of the English language with Britain and America; a postmodern suspiciousness of patriotism or collectivism. All these things conspire to suggest that Australian nationalism should be a curiously confused, mangy and toothless creature with a cringing and insecure fear of freedom. In many respects this is, in fact, the case.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> M. Pusey, op.cit., pp. 225-6.



Yet from its origins as a beleaguered British penal colony to the current decade, with its limply realised preoccupation with republicanism, there have always been individuals and groups who have seen themselves as visionary nation builders, pioneers in creating a modern 'model' nation.<sup>70</sup> The style in which these visionaries have envisioned the nation varies radically however, ranging from the early Federationists who wanted to create a society based on egalitarian values and freedom from repressive traditions,<sup>71</sup> to the economic reformers of the 1980s and 90s, Prime Ministers Hawke, Keating and Howard, who have largely conceived of this nation as an economic entity, the success of which depends upon its ability to be integrated into the world economy.

Early Australian nationalism has been characterised by Noel McLachlan as having three major facets: an extreme inferiority complex derived from the 'stain' of a convict past; the revolutionary impulse, stimulated by the French and American Revolutions, and the exportation of militant Irish rebels to the Australian colonies; and finally, a laissez-faire attitude towards defense and invasion, derived from Australia's remoteness and its assurance of protection from the Royal Navy, which had world dominance until 1870,<sup>72</sup> and a later confidence in US military ties. Historian Russell Ward has doubted '...whether any nation ever had so few really intractable problems to cope with or has been left so long, yet so protected from outside interference, while feeling its way forward to its own identity.'<sup>73</sup>

This unusual and somewhat paradoxical combination of anti-authoritarian militancy, cultural cringe and apathetic response to threat has been regularly noted by historians, and might still be seen to exist residually in our contemporary nationalist movements, most recently in the confused vote to retain the Monarchy while the majority of the population are, in principle, supportive of a Republic.

According to sociologist Robert Birrell, Australia's revisionist leftist historians have undermined the past nationalist movements, dismissing their importance in

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<sup>70</sup> Indeed, even the first governor and commander in chief, Arthur Philip, has been attributed with having such foresight and imagination, Russell Ward, *Australia: A Short History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Ure Smith publisher, Sydney, 1975, p. 25.

<sup>71</sup> R. Birrell, 'Introduction', *A Nation of Our Own*, Longman Australia Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Noel McLachlan, *Waiting for the Revolution: A History of Australian Nationalism*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd., Ringwood, 1989, pp. 7-8.

<sup>73</sup> R. Ward, *op.cit.*, p. vii.



creating citizenship, focusing instead on these nationalists' exclusionary racist tendencies and their attachments to the British monarchy. He writes:

*The emphasis on cosmopolitan and universalistic ideas has led to a distaste for nationalism because of the priority it puts on parochial interests. Also, contemporary liberal thinking emphasises ideals of personal autonomy and freedom, and thus chafes against an ideology involving constraints and duties in the interest of the national community. This is particularly the case for groups like feminists, Aborigines and some migrants, since these groups believe their aspirations were restricted in the past by a national community reflecting their oppressors' interests.*<sup>74</sup>

These advocates of diversity, criticised by Birrell, fail to understand their debts to solidarity and the protections it offers. The accelerated forces of globalisation, particularly those with an economic focus, might be seen to be capitalising upon these other social factors in such a way as to exacerbate this condition of forgetfulness of the nation's past sovereignty or its potentially progressive national ideals.

Writing in 1991 Alomes and Jones sum up the recent predicament of Australian nationalism:

*Australians have become intoxicated with self-conscious social and cultural nationalism associated with sport, celebrations and advertising. Political and economic nationalism are weak; Australians find it hard to abandon the old deference to great powers in foreign affairs and they accept increasing overseas control of the economy. Now the 'wide brown land' and the 'sunburnt country' are found most often on TV advertising for cars made by Japanese and American owned companies.*<sup>75</sup>

In his book *Making it National: nationalism and Australian popular culture*, Graeme Turner has extensively explored such ways in which nationalism has been misused and appropriated for causes other than, and often in conflict with, the national interest.<sup>76</sup> Birrell too identifies contemporary Australian nationalism as being politically and economically weak, the consequence being, he argues, of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen Alomes & Catherine Jones, *Australian Nationalism: a documentary history*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, 1991, p. 454.

<sup>76</sup> G. Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian popular culture*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994.



disturbing significance, particularly in terms of ideals such as egalitarianism, national autonomy and environmental preservation.<sup>77</sup>

As Australians grope towards making sense within their rapidly changing physical, social and political environment, with its unstable finance markets, rising inequality between the wealthy and the poor and shifting regional relationships, there seems to be a profound need for a nationalism that extends beyond the mere cosmetics of the culture and advertising industries, a sophisticated polyphonic national narrative that is able to creatively adapt to the challenges – and opportunities – presented by the increased integration of globalism.

What perhaps blocks even a glimpse of this path to utopia is our national preference for stories that encourage a passive acceptance of our situation, and a nationalism that is either shallow, inarticulate or apathetic about the bureaucratic necessities inherent in true democracy. Paradoxically, it must also be the disappearing qualities of our taciturn national heroes that provide a way forward – stoic realism, a healthy scepticism, a streak of anti-authoritarianism, and an *authentic* articulation of the ‘fair go’ – however corrupted this concept has become through overuse by our politicians and entrepreneurs. As we shall see in the following discussion of contemporary Australian cinematic narrative, multiple and diverse representations of Australian life and national identity are appearing on the screen. For such stories to continue to emerge, however, the cultural fields which produce and disseminate such stories must continue to operate with some degree of autonomy. While analysing these specific stories, identifying their continuities and discontinuities with the Australian narrative tradition, this thesis seeks to understand how one of our most potent story-telling fields, the cinematic field, was established and has continued, up until now, to operate as autonomous, and the threats which impact upon this operation.

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<sup>77</sup> R. Birrell, op.cit., p. 276.



## Chapter 2: Autonomy and Cultural Fields

### Cultural Fields

In the previous chapter it was argued that citizens within modern national fields are considered equal under the law, and are therefore universally entitled to self-respect or ‘human dignity’. Their access to self-esteem, however – the valuing of their particular talents, abilities and achievements – is governed by their participation within the numerous semi-autonomous sub-fields *within* the national field. Constituted by conflict and competition for possession of specific kinds of capital, these semi-autonomous systems of value exist as expressions of expanded claims to recognition. This recognition is not only achievable by the individuals participating within them, but by extension, is available to the nation itself, as a ‘character’ capable of achieving value in the eyes of the world. The Australian cinematic field is one such domain.

I have argued that Bourdieu’s concept of a field and its relative levels of autonomy reveal ‘nation’ to be a threatened category under the progression of a predominantly economic globalisation. Australia, in particular, has been a nation quick to succumb to the monologic imperatives of neo-liberal economics – or economic rationalism, while being slow to adopt the more progressive ideals of an integrated world, such as exacting human rights standards, freedom of information, or the support of a vigorously internationalist research and technological culture.

What then of cultural fields within the nation, particularly when those cultural fields are heavily dependent upon the integrity of national fields? Bourdieu’s definition of a cultural field as ‘...a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force *independent of those of politics and economy*’,<sup>78</sup> does not mean that cultural fields exist in a world of their own, but that they have their own determining logic through which the effects of the outer world are mediated and transmuted. I will argue that as the autonomy of the Australian nation is undermined, so too will be the traditional support, financial and otherwise, underlying the existence of the national film industry. First, however, we must understand some of the properties and operations of cultural

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<sup>78</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 162. (my emphasis added).



fields, and the manner in which the Australian cinematic field was established as a deliberate act of national cultural assertion, and continues to rely on the operation of an autonomous national field for its continuance.

For a field to be deserving of inclusion under the broad title of Cultural Field, it must be characterised by the primary pursuit of *cultural* and *symbolic* capital, rather than the explicit pursuit of political or financial capital.<sup>79</sup> Cultural capital has been described by Bourdieu as ‘informational capital in its many forms’,<sup>80</sup> a particular form of knowledge, ‘...an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations or cultural artifacts.’<sup>81</sup> Such capital can be understood as a form of competence in dealing with cultural products, products that require knowledge and understanding. Cultural capital can exist in three states – *embodied* (for example, through a subtle inculcation in childhood: for example, by being brought up in a household in which art, literature, cinema and music are discussed and valued), *objectified* (existing in objects such as books, scientific or musical instruments, artwork) and *institutionalized* (as represented through formal educational qualifications and credentials).<sup>82</sup>

Inextricably related to the recognition and valuing of cultural capital is symbolic capital. William Earle has written that symbolic capital ‘...should not be thought of as a kind of capital, but as a way of emphasising certain relational features of capital in general.’<sup>83</sup> Resulting from a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*),<sup>84</sup> symbolic capital is accumulated through successful use of the other forms of capital (economic, social, political, cultural) and is dependent upon ‘...the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity,

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<sup>79</sup> Randal Johnson, ‘Introduction’, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> P. Bourdieu in conversation with Loic J.D. Wacquant, *The Chicago Workshop*, op.cit, p. 119.

<sup>81</sup> R. Johnson, loc.cit.

<sup>82</sup> David Swartz, Chapter 4, ‘Bourdieu’s Political Economy of Symbolic Power’, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, p. 76.

<sup>83</sup> William Earle, ‘Bourdieu Nouveau’, *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Schusterman, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999, p. 183.

<sup>84</sup> R. Johnson, op.cit.



consecration or honour.’<sup>85</sup> Symbolic capital legitimises power relations and other forms of capital, ‘...mask[ing] their material and interested basis.’<sup>86</sup>

Bourdieu refers to the field of cultural production as ‘...an economy of symbolic goods...’, a ‘...trade in things that have no price...’<sup>87</sup>. He argues that the products of the cultural field, such as art, literature, music and film, are symbolic products whose greatest value is attained when the arbitrary nature by which they gain recognition and consecration is misrecognised as pre-existent or inherent in the art itself.<sup>88</sup>

It is through this concept of symbolic capital that we understand Bourdieu’s deep distrust of the idea of the ‘charismatic artist’, the creative genius whose literature or art possesses greatness independent of the field of agents, galleries, readers, critics and the rest of the culture that contributes to the success or failure of any particular artist or work. Bourdieu argues that the value of a work of art is almost entirely constituted by ‘...the *belief* in the value of the work’<sup>89</sup>, and that ‘...works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such’.<sup>90</sup>

For Bourdieu, the philosophy of ‘art for art’s sake’, the disinterested attitude towards explicit financial, political or social goals, is essentially a ‘disavowal’, a necessary denial of the realities of power relations within the field, in order to sustain the symbolic power of cultural goods.<sup>91</sup> Although cultural and symbolic capital can be transferred and transformed into other forms of capital (in particular economic capital), their value generally resides in their difference and autonomy from the field of economics and politics. For example, an artist should only be seen to derive financial reward (and in particular, extreme wealth) as an *indirect* result of his or her endeavours; for to admit that one is creating art with the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> D. Swartz, op.cit., p. 92.

<sup>87</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 74.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-81.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 37. (my emphasis).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 75.



primary goal of financial rewards is to deprive one's work of all its symbolic legitimacy. Thus we have within our culture the ideal of the 'starving artist' who creates art merely for its own sake and is prepared to 'suffer for his art'.<sup>92</sup>

It is within the context of such ideals that Bourdieu argues that, at its most autonomous, the cultural field can be likened to '...a generalized game of "loser wins"'.<sup>93</sup> At its most autonomous, the cultural field shuns not only the more obvious 'contaminations' of economic and political capital, but even rejects the accolades and honours of the rest of the field:

*Thus, at least in the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production, where the only audience aimed at is other producers (as with symbolist poetry), the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of 'loser wins', on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honours and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue.)<sup>94</sup>*

While this is a description of symbolic capital operating at the most autonomous edges of the field of cultural production, it is this 'pole' of the field that sets its tenor and expresses its values in their most undiluted terms. It explains Bourdieu's description of the field of cultural production as 'the economic world reversed'<sup>95</sup>. It is such an attitude that would lead French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard to express disdain for movie audiences at large, describing them as the 'enemy' and adding, 'I think that films are made for one, or maybe two people.'<sup>96</sup> Woody Allen also expresses such an attitude when he declares that he considers his best

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<sup>92</sup> There are exceptions to this, where 'artists' have explicitly challenged this assumption through a 'production line' approach to art. The most famous example is that of Andy Warhol whose studio was known as 'The Factory'. Despite postmodern reflexivity and a more cynical attitude towards the sacred creative process, such artists are still viewed with suspicion, and exist in a marginal position in the field, while the cult of the charismatic artist appears to be alive and well.

<sup>93</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 39.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>96</sup> Jean Luc Godard, interview in French newspaper *Liberation*, quoted in David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War: the struggle for control of the world's film industry*, Harper Collins, London, 1997, paperback edition, p. 302.



film to be *Stardust Memories* (1980): 'It was my least popular film. That may automatically mean it was my best film.'<sup>97</sup>

### **Autonomy of the Field**

The legitimacy of the cultural field, derived from cultural and symbolic capital, is directly related to the degree to which the field itself and its participating agents are able to maintain an autonomy from the fields of politics and economics,<sup>98</sup> which Bourdieu groups together under the term 'field of power'.<sup>99</sup> He has sometimes described this field of power as a kind of 'meta-field', which has emerged along with the development of the bureaucratic state.<sup>100</sup> This meta-field has its own capital, a result of the concentration of economic, cultural, military, juridical and more generally symbolic capital within such a state apparatus.<sup>101</sup> This meta-capital is '...capable of exercising a power over other species of power, and particularly over their rate of exchange...'<sup>102</sup> It is within such a field that the field of cultural production exists, and it is against such a field that cultural producers must define themselves and the boundaries of their field. The rapid integration of global finance, together with the decline in autonomy of the nation-state obviously makes significant changes to the nature of this 'field of power'.

The cultural field is placed by Bourdieu within the sphere of the field of power, due to its wealth in terms of symbolic capital, yet its position is a dominated one at the negative pole of the sphere, owing to the relatively low amounts of financial and political capital possessed.<sup>103</sup> This is illustrated below in Figure 2.1.

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<sup>97</sup> Woody Allen, quoted by Maurice Yacowar, *Loser Take All: the comic art of Woody Allen*, new expanded edition, Continuum, New York, 1991, p. 228.

<sup>98</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 37-38.

<sup>99</sup> L. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, op.cit., p. 18, n. 32.

<sup>100</sup> P. Bourdieu, 'The Chicago Workshop', op.cit., p. 114.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 37-38.



**Figure 2.1. The Literary and Artistic Field within the Field of Power.<sup>104</sup>**

The cultural field can thus be said to occupy a subordinate position within the field of power, a case of being the ‘dominated dominant’. A perpetual tension results from this situation of being a separate field, yet existing within a larger field, a tension which results in constant interplay between the logic of the cultural field, which generally strives for artistic integrity and symbolic recognition, and the logic of the field of power, which pursues success in terms of financial profit, sales and professional advancement. Bourdieu thus describes the cultural field as the site of a struggle between two principles of hierarchisation, the autonomous principle, which advocates the independence of the artist, and the heteronomous principle, which favours those who succeed politically and/or economically.<sup>105</sup> This struggle continually defines and redefines the values and boundaries of the cultural field, and the level of autonomy which the field can be said to have, an autonomy that is only ever a relative or apparent one.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> This is a modified version of Bourdieu’s diagram, Figure 1, Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>105</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 40.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 52.



## Playing the Field/Playing the Game

Bourdieu cautiously uses the analogy of a ‘game’ to describe the nature of a field.<sup>107</sup> Like the players in a game, agents within a field have certain interests at stake, and are competing against one another in order to maximise their positions. As with a game, the player’s belief in the game itself is assumed and collusive. Bourdieu writes:

*Players agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a ‘contract’, that the game is worth playing, that it is ‘worth the candle’, and this collusion is the basis of their competition. We also have trump cards whose force varies depending on the game: just as the relative value of cards changes with each game, the hierarchy of the different species of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) varies across the various fields.*<sup>108</sup>

In the literal domain of card games, different cards hold different values depending on whether one is playing Poker, Solitaire or Snap; and the possession of certain skills will make a player a champion in one game, yet a loser in another. This metaphor proves illuminating in its ability to explain the nature of positions and position-takings, and the manner in which different species of capital hold differing values depending upon the nature of the ‘game’ or field. Unlike a game, however, a field is not a product of deliberate creation and its rules and regularities are not explicit and codified.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, it is a ‘serious’ competition in which the participants are ‘playing for keeps’.

## Habitus

As with a game, the players’ belief in the value of the activity is assumed and collusive. Bourdieu argues that it is through the *habitus* that a commonsense world is built and maintained around a field, a practical sense which is second nature to the players, of what is acceptable, desirable and possible within that field, a ‘feel for the game’ or ‘second sense’.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., pp. 98-99.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> P. Bourdieu, ‘Structures, *Habitus*, Practices’, *The Logic of Practice*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 56.



The *habitus* is therefore a set of ‘structuring structures’ which influence and shape the behaviour of agents, while by no means being reducible to the constraining determinism of structuralism.<sup>111</sup> Bourdieu describes it thus:

*The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices...in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.*<sup>112</sup>

The concept of *habitus* overcomes the limitations of structuralism and subjectivism, allowing for a certain degree of agency and improvisation, for an individual’s particular style of ‘playing the game’, while acknowledging the often implicit and embodied norms and values which constrain behaviour and create collective practices.

Bourdieu in fact stresses the unconscious quality of the *habitus*, emphasising that its ways of classifying and organising experience ‘...owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will.’<sup>113</sup> While this conception of the *habitus* is essential for bringing into light the subtleties of motivation and inclination, there must be the possibility within this theory for the agent to attempt reflexivity, to look back upon their own conditions of becoming and therefore transcend or transform them. However difficult this might be, and however rarely it might occur, such radical breaks and such self-awareness must be allowed for within the field. Our conception of narrative and tradition and their roles in identity formation insist that this is so, and a close reading of Bourdieu reveals that he explicitly allows for this possibility.

Bourdieu acknowledges that he has often been misinterpreted as ‘hyperdeterminist’,<sup>114</sup> and admits that he conceives of *habitus*, by its very nature,

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 54

<sup>113</sup> Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, translated by Peter Collier, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1984.

<sup>114</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Chicago Workshop*, op.cit., p. 135-6.



as likely to be the dominant determinant of behaviour within a given field.<sup>115</sup> Shusterman argues that the unconscious nature of habitus is a key problem in Bourdieu's work:

*By making habitus's essential logic unreflective, Bourdieu denies the ability of practicing agents to critique, reinterpret, and thereby revise their practical logic and behavior, thus compelling them to sustain the social domination incorporated in the habitus that allegedly directs their practical action*<sup>116</sup>.

Yet Bourdieu is emphatic that it *is* possible for people to consciously and reflexively question this 'first inclination', to bring into consciousness that which operates most fully 'with the complicity of the unconscious'.<sup>117</sup> He writes of the role which 'explicit clarification' may take in 'the management of one's dispositions', and that 'agents' only really become true 'subjects' 'to the extent that they consciously master the relation they entertain with their dispositions'.<sup>118</sup> This possibility, I propose, is most likely to be actualised through narrative.

The 'semantic innovations' made by storytellers must be in keeping with the possibilities entailed in particular stories (a combination of past and present circumstances), and also take into account the ways these have been dealt with in previous stories. Semantic innovations must occur in the context of a grammar (*habitus*) that is already established yet can be played with, worked against, once it has been deliberately brought into conscious examination.

It can be seen how this situation is one in which agents' actions are simultaneously governed by free choice, and yet constrained by certain limits, limits that Bourdieu would explain in terms of position-takings. He writes that:

*There is nothing mechanical about the relationship between the field and the habitus. The space of available positions does indeed help to determine the properties expected and even demanded of possible candidates, and therefore the categories of agents they can attract and above all retain; but the perception of the space of possible positions and trajectories and the appreciation of*

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>116</sup> Richard Schusterman, 'Introduction: Bourdieu as Philosopher' in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. R. Schusterman, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 1999, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 137.



*the value each of them derives from its location in the space depend on these dispositions.*<sup>119</sup>

The *habitus* therefore evolves in relation to the narrative of the field, a set of structuring structures which can be said to be determined by the kind of story to which individuals see themselves contributing. The actions they choose must be selected from the narrative options they perceive, or in Bourdieu's terms, their '...perception of the space of possible positions'.

If, as Ricoeur argues, metaphor is not just a rhetorical device, but a '...momentous creation of language, a semantic innovation',<sup>120</sup> which creates the possibility for seeing things anew, then it is important that Bourdieu's rather confined game/field metaphor be improved upon and supplemented. His rigorous theory of power relations and the social structures that perpetuate domination must be enriched by language that also acknowledges the inherently creative and generative nature of social life, and allows for the possibilities of generous motives and transcendent ideals that coincide with inevitable self-interestedness and ambition.

An illuminating metaphor, particularly for agents within cultural fields explicitly devoted to national storytelling, is one which conceptualises them as trying to contribute their narratives to the greater narrative of the cinematic field, and of the national field, rather than as merely 'playing a game' to win. The game itself can be reconstrued as a kind of story, an ordered form imposed upon chaos, allowing the 'players' to make sense of themselves and their place within their field. Suppose, for example, that the agents within a field imagine themselves as characters within an ongoing story, a story which is the history of that field. Their actions can be characterised not just, as Bourdieu would have it, as a simple (or complicated!) determination to maximise their position and acquire increasing amounts of symbolic capital, but as creative acts undertaken as contributions to a story. Existing in time, the field has a history, is more than just the configuration of a set of particular agents and institutions at any given time. Thus, any particular agent or position within the field occurs in relation to what has gone before, just

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<sup>119</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 65.

<sup>120</sup> P. Ricoeur, 'Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics' in *A Ricoeur Reader*, op.cit., p. 311.



as in a story the logic of a particular character or event is only realised through its relation to what has gone before and what is yet to come.

This ongoing story is one that includes the history of the field, taking into account the present condition of the field, and a desirable and feasible future. For example, an Australian filmmaker's choice of project will take into account, amongst other factors and however implicitly, the films that have been made before, the current state of the cinema industry, and the filmmaker's vision of the kind of cinematic field he or she would like to see developed in the future. Obviously, each of these three aspects of the narrative of a field – past, present and future – is subject to constant and conflicting redefinition, yet for the field to exist, a certain degree of consensus must exist between these agents who are all taking part in the living of that story, the tradition which is that field. While there may be ongoing debates and heated conflicts, the field exists when the players agree upon what it is that they are arguing *about*.

### **Building on Bourdieu**

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of fields is extremely useful, particularly in its provision of a structured set of questions which assist in describing power relationships and situating the individual artist within a broader social context. As a framework for understanding the complexities of autonomy, it is an essential tool to map out some of the inherent dangers of globalisation – a fact which is borne out by his status as one of the few academics who has successfully straddled academe and the public arena in his scathing analysis of neoliberal economics.<sup>121</sup>

For my purposes, however, there are certain inadequacies with this theory and its almost mechanical descriptions of positions, position-takings and species of capital. Bourdieu does not deny that his theory is essentially '...a general theory of the economics of practice',<sup>122</sup> and it is in describing such an economy that he is perhaps strongest and most easily quoted. Though his ideas are emphatically opposed to a mechanical interpretation of the social world, the language in which

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<sup>121</sup> Bourdieu's most explicit attacks on neoliberalism are collected in a work aimed at a general audience: *Acts of Resistance: against the tyranny of the market*, translated from the French by Richard Nice, The New Press, New York, 1998.



they are expressed can often seem to have a jarringly clinical and detached tone, a legacy perhaps of his earlier objectivist structuralism.<sup>123</sup> As Scott Lash observes, the use of this ‘economic heuristic’ is responsible not only for the brilliant insights Bourdieu gives to a study of the ‘cultural economy’, its ‘...coherence and its unusual breadth’,<sup>124</sup> but is also to blame for its ‘vices’, its ‘...tendencies towards idealism and elitism and insufficient epistemological and ethical universalism.’<sup>125</sup>

Also problematic is Bourdieu’s tendency to describe every action within a field as being undertaken in the pursuit of power, recognition, or whatever other specific capital operates within a given field. The use of an economic metaphor might lead to an approach that attempts to describe the national field and within it, the national cinematic field, through a method of questioning so reductive and self-fulfilling that it renders its conclusions worthless.

Bourdieu’s central premise, that ‘...art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences’,<sup>126</sup> is difficult to reconcile with my previous discussion privileging narrative and its formative and transformative functions in culture, and in the ways in which individuals and groups are able to reflexively story themselves. The ‘social differences’ which cultural production and consumption help to legitimate are, for Bourdieu, differences to do with the social climbing of class stratification. However, if we take this notion of social difference to apply to other kinds of identities (national, aboriginal, feminist, etc.) then we can agree with Bourdieu that these identities do implicitly demand recognition for their social differences in their cultural consumption and production.

The field of cultural production is, essentially, the site at which a culture’s narratives are most overtly and expertly formulated and disseminated. If this site

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<sup>122</sup>P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977, p. 183.

<sup>123</sup> James Bohmann notes Bourdieu’s continued use of the vocabulary of ‘laws, markets and determinations’ in ‘Practical Reason and Cultural Constraint’, *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. R. Schusterman, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 1999, p. 135.

<sup>124</sup> Scott Lash, ‘Pierre Bourdieu: Cultural Economy and Social Change’, *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma & Moishe Postone, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p. 194.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, transl. R. Nice, Routledge, London, 1986, p. 7.



is, as Bourdieu could be interpreted as suggesting, primarily a place for elitist, self-deceptive and elaborate power play, then the narratives which arise here can only be taken seriously in terms of their ability to further the power positioning within various fields. Therefore while it is necessary to acknowledge that, for example, the fields of literature and film are constituted by different positions competing for specific forms of capital and power, it is also important to remember that the 'agents' within these fields are people, narratively-constructed individuals, trying to tell their stories, and sometimes displaying extraordinary dedication with little promise of reward – symbolic or financial. The desire to tell stories that come 'from here', stories that contribute to the Great narrative of our nation and are then projected outwards into the world, cannot be wholly reduced to the desire to accumulate capital or to garner elite recognition.

Bourdieu's recent impassioned defence of the worlds of cultural production as '...the most precious cultural gains of humanity',<sup>127</sup> would certainly suggest that he rejects any simplistic economistic view of the creative traditions. He seems torn between two impulses. On the one hand, he has built his career out of the sociological dissection and demystification of cultural fields, critically analysing and uncovering their hidden structures of power and capital. On the other hand, he sees the objects of his analyses, the cultural fields, being ruthlessly dismantled, undermined and leveled out by a monological neo-liberal economics which refuses to recognise the achievements of these fields and their status as markers of the development of civilisation. It is in the last half decade or so that Bourdieu has seen fit to defend these fields, their rights to exist and their contribution to 'civilised' society. He is worth quoting at length:

*...at the present time [there] is the destruction of the economic and social bases of the most precious cultural gains of humanity. The autonomy of the worlds of cultural production with respect to the market, which had grown steadily through the battles and sacrifices of writers, artists and scientists, is increasingly threatened. The reign of 'commerce' and the 'commercial' bears down more strongly every day on literature, particularly through the concentration of publishing, which is more and more subject to the constraints of immediate profit; on literary and artistic criticism, which has been handed over to the*

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<sup>127</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the New Myths of Our Time*, op.cit., p. 37.



*most opportunistic of the servants of the publishers - or of their accomplices, with favour traded for favour; and especially on the cinema (one wonders what will be left in ten years' time of European experimental cinema if nothing is done to provide avant-garde directors with the means of production and perhaps more importantly distribution).*<sup>128</sup>

This criticism, that the single logic of the market is colonising and eroding the autonomy of all the various fields, could be supported by any cursory study of the current state of fields like journalism, science, medicine, higher education, and the civil services, which for all their faults and inconsistencies, have, through their particular dialectically constituted traditions developed unique and nuanced systems of valuation, professionalism and ethical conduct. By comparison, the crude measures of 'efficiency', 'profitability' and 'flexibility' are flattening and homogenising devices by which all goods and services are delivered in an ostensibly 'value-free' way in order to maximise short-term financial goals.

In the case of Australian filmmaking we shall see that the current struggles between autonomy and heteronomy take particular forms. Bourdieu's statement that the nature of the field is always at stake, its relative autonomy always the subject of struggle, is starkly illustrated in the Australian film industry. Here the rationale for a national film industry, the functions it should be performing, the role which should be played by the state or by commercial interests, are always up for heated debate and policy review.

Future research could fruitfully apply Bourdieu's methodology to a complete sociological study of the Australian cinematic field, its *habitus*, the competing positions and power-relations and the way these have changed in response to globalisation. Such a study would be fascinating and useful, a worthwhile but enormous undertaking. What is most immediately called for, however, and what this dissertation will outline here, are the important ways in which the Australian cinematic field operates around an increasingly precarious autonomy. The following chapter will discuss the ways in which this field has been deliberately established, with overt nation-building motives, as an autonomous cultural field, producing narratives with particular nationalist functions. The final chapter, following the discussions of the individual films, I will describe some of the ways

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



in which this field's very existence is threatened, and its fragile, permeable autonomy undermined, through the undermining of the national field itself.



## Chapter 3: Australian National Cinema: an act of will

*'I saw the encouragement of the film industry as essential to the rekindling of Australian national pride and self-confidence...Despite a superficial prosperity, the nation was in need of a new direction, a new spirit.'*  
– **Gough Whitlam**<sup>129</sup>

After a promising start during cinema's first decade, as '...the largest film producing country in the world',<sup>130</sup> Australian filmmaking dribbled to a post-World War II halt. Devastated by the effects of the Depression, the advent of cinema sound, and the increasing dominance of British and American films, only a handful of local films were made between 1930 and 1960.<sup>131</sup> Then, during the 1960s nationalist cultural resurgence, the need was perceived for the state to initiate and support local film production.<sup>132</sup>

As Tom O'Regan has noted, throughout the 60s a small group of filmmakers and critics had individually and collectively used their influence in the journals and newspapers of the day to argue the need for a national cinema.<sup>133</sup> This 'agitational discourse' utilised various and sometimes contradictory arguments, suggesting simultaneously that state support of a film industry would foster both high art and popular culture, that it would foster national identity, provide community benefits, and that it would be commercially beneficial.<sup>134</sup>

This conjunction of the commercial and the cultural is illustrated by the way in which in 1969, on the advice of Phillip Adams, Barry Jones and Peter Coleman, the then Prime Minister, John Gorton, established a fund to subsidise local film production.<sup>135</sup> Philip Adams argues that the Liberal Gorton was open to this

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<sup>129</sup> E.G. Whitlam, 'Introduction', *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray, Australian Film Commission and Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1994, p. 3.

<sup>130</sup> 'An Introduction to Australian Film and Television', *Australian Film Commission Resources Online*, <<http://www.afc.gov.au/resources/online/general/overview/afto3.html>> ([20/04/02])

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> T. O'Regan, 'Chapter Three: Putting the case [for a feature film industry]', *The Politics of Representation: an analysis of the Australian film revival*, PhD Griffith University, Nathan, Qld, 1985.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Phillip Adams, 'Ch.3: A Cultural Revolution', *Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray, op.cit., p. 62.



suggestion of state patronage of film art primarily because of his economic nationalism, and his concern over foreign ownership of Australia's agriculture and industry.<sup>136</sup> Thus, according to Adams, '...it was a simple matter to direct this anxiety into what we described as "the American ownership of our imagination"'.<sup>137</sup>

What is being argued here is relatively uncontroversial: that the impetus for the project arose from ideas of nation, nationalism and national cinema in response to perceived external domination. The desire to 'see our own landscapes, hear our own voices and dream our own dreams',<sup>138</sup> is an expression of the national quest for self-recognition, and for the self-esteem that comes from being recognised by others.

Tom O'Regan writes of national cinemas, that 'They carve a space locally and internationally for themselves in the face of the dominant international cinema, Hollywood', and 'partake of a broader conversation with Hollywood and other national cinemas'.<sup>139</sup> National cinemas therefore come into being, and are perpetuated, through this recognition of the intersubjective nature of identity formation, and through an acknowledgment that this will not occur without direct assertive action in response to the loudest and most strident voices in an unequal 'conversation'.

This unequal conversation is represented by the fact that audiences around the world consume Hollywood movies as the staple ingredient of their film diet. Though there is much talk about the eclectic and local trends in international cinema, with perfunctory references often including the breakout success of a small UK film like *The Full Monty* (1997) or the proliferation of films made in India's 'Bollywood', the fact remains that in most countries around the world, US studio films dwarf local content.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Phillip Adams, 'Introduction', *A Century of Australian Cinema*, ed. James Sabine, Australian Film Institute & Reed Books, Port Melbourne, 1995, p. ix.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 1.

<sup>140</sup> For further reading on this global dominance, see: Roy Armes, *Third World Cinema and the West*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987; Richard J. Barnet, & J. Cavanaugh, *Global Dreams: Imperial corporations and the new world order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1994; Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: economy, society and culture, Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwell



Closely related to this box office dominance is the fact that the average budget of a US studio film is A\$81 million, while the average for an Australian film is around A\$3 million.<sup>141</sup> This 'David and Goliath' scenario, mirrored closely in the film industries of France, New Zealand, Canada and the UK, sees local films competing on their home territories against blockbusters that have huge internationally amortised publicity budgets and globally orchestrated hype following their release in the US market.<sup>142</sup>

This situation within the field of cinema mirrors the unequal power relations of the cultural field at large. As Ulf Hannerz has written:

*This... is no egalitarian global village. What we see now is quite firmly structured as an asymmetry of centre and periphery. With regard to cultural flow, the periphery, out there in a distant territory, is more the taker than the giver of meaning and meaningful form. Much as we feel called upon to make note of any examples of counterflow, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at least as things stand now, the relationship is lopsided.*<sup>143</sup>

A state-subsided national cinema like Australia's is an explicit acknowledgment of this lopsidedness, and an attempt to go some way towards redressing it.

## **Autonomy and Direct Government Support**

The years following Gorton's initial resolution saw the establishment of a broad network of funding bodies, film schools, investment schemes and policy directives. The film industry as it now exists has over 2000 businesses producing film and videos in Australia, which are responsible, on average, for a yearly slate of 28 feature films, 10 mini-series, 9 telemovies and 18 series or serials, in addition to numerous short films, documentaries and television commercials.<sup>144</sup> Despite numerous attempts at making this field commercially viable, and therefore more independent of official financial support, the local industry in

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Publishers, Malden, 1996; *Mass Media and Free Trade: Nafta and the Cultural Industries*, eds. E.G. McAnany & T.K. Wilkinson, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1997.

<sup>141</sup> 'Australian Films - 1999 Box Office Share', *Australian Film Commission*, press release 21/2/2000.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ulf Hannerz, 'Scenarios for Peripheral Cultures', *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, ed. A.D. King, op.cit., p. 107.

<sup>144</sup> 'Average production for the period 1990/91 to 1997/98', AFC Resources: Industry Overview, <<http://www.afc.gov.au/resources/online/general/overview/afto4.html>> ([20/04/02]).



general still runs at a huge loss.<sup>145</sup> It remains the case that the Commonwealth and state government agencies ‘...dominate the industry and its economic prospects.’<sup>146</sup> Recent figures state that government funds were the principal source of finance for around 50% of feature films and 40% of Australian TV drama.<sup>147</sup>

It remains a dearly held but unfulfilled dream that Australian audiences might go to see Australian films in such numbers as to sustain the local industry. Box office results offer a stark reality check: In 1999, US films took 84% of the total national box office, while Australian films took just 3%,<sup>148</sup> an eight year low point, down from a 1994 peak of 10%.<sup>149</sup> In the last five years or so, the kinds of films that have grossed more than \$20 million in Australian cinemas have been large-scale action extravaganzas in the style of *Independence Day* (1996, Roland Emmerich, A\$29m), *Men in Black* (1997, Barry Sonnenfeld, A\$22m), *Titanic* (1997, James Cameron, A\$57m) and *Star Wars: Phantom Menace* (1999, George Lucas, A\$38m), with *Babe* (1995, Chris Noonan, A\$36m) being the Australian exception to the rule.<sup>150</sup> Even the recent figures, suggesting that Australian films gained around 8 per cent of local box office in 2000,<sup>151</sup> emphasise the relative weakness of local production. The success of 2000 came from a handful of successful titles like *Looking for Alibrandi* (Kate Woods, A\$8m), *Wogboy* (Aleksi Vellis, A\$11m), *Chopper* (Andrew Dominic, A\$5m) and *The Dish* (Rob Sitch, A\$16m).

If the autonomy of a cultural field is related to its ability to practice its own logic independent of the influences of economics and politics, what can be made of the Australian film industry’s heavy reliance upon government funding and institutional support? Does this not constitute a threat to the autonomy of the field?

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<sup>145</sup> For example, the industry recorded an operating loss of \$67 million for the 1996/97 financial year. Source: ‘An Overview of the Production Industry’, *Get The Picture*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, AFC, 1998, p. 60.

<sup>146</sup> ‘Overview Government Funding - Profiles of the Organisations – AFC’, *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Production - Independent Drama - Sources of Finance’, *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>148</sup> ‘Australian Films - 1999 Box Office Share’, *Australian Film Commission*, press release, 21/2/2000.

<sup>149</sup> Mary Anne Reid, ‘Distributing Australian Films: A Survey of Current Market Conditions and Distributors’ Perceptions’, *Report to the Marketing Branch of the AFC*, 31/8/99.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Top 50 Films at the Australian Box Office’, *Get the Picture Online*, Australian Film Commission. <<http://www.afc.gov.au/GTP/wctopalltime.html>> ([20/04/02]), Annual updating.



Christian Vermehren has suggested that Bourdieu's concept of autonomy needs to be reworked when applied to fields of large scale production, '...those cultural fields most interlocked with the economic system.'<sup>152</sup> He argues that 'Bourdieu's dichotomy of autonomy versus heteronomy must be refined and developed if we want to fully understand what is going on in the worlds of media production.'<sup>153</sup> Film production, by its very nature, is 'large scale' and heavily implicated by economic factors. Of the narrative arts, cinema is by far the most expensive; to make even the most modest feature film you will generally require several million dollars. The high level of financial capital required to produce, distribute and promote a film dictates that the cinematic field has a markedly different economic relationship to the field of power than do other artistic fields, such as the literary field or the fields of live performance arts.

Bourdieu argues that when agents in one field become chiefly motivated by the laws of another, the field's autonomy is undermined and its position as symbolically rich within the *field of power* is weakened.<sup>154</sup> In any of the artistic fields there will always be some agents who are motivated by the laws of other fields, especially those imperatives of the financial field. However, for a cultural field to retain its autonomy, the balance must be in favour of agents who are motivated by the specific values of the artistic field.

The incredibly expensive nature of filmmaking, requiring complex financial and artistic collaboration, means that the cinematic field, perhaps more than any other artistic domain, is susceptible to domination from outside influences, leading to the general perception of movie-making as a 'business' or an 'industry'. Even filmmakers with the most 'disinterested' artistic values must be necessarily concerned with reaching a certain minimum audience in order to make back the significant initial investment which they themselves, or their sponsor, has had to raise to complete the project.

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<sup>151</sup> 'Australian Films' Share of the Australian Box Office', Ibid., <<http://www.afc.gov.au/GTP/wcboshare.html>> ([20/04/02]), Annual updating.

<sup>152</sup> Christian Vermehren, 'Bourdieu and Media Studies', *Pierre Bourdieu: Language, Culture and Education*, eds. Michael Grenfell & Michael Kelly, Peter Lang publishers, Bern, 1999, p. 194.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 39.



What then of the influence exerted upon the field by government bodies, and the more general rationale that requires films to reflect and contribute to the idea of 'the nation'? Does this make a national cinema doubly 'heteronomous', with its dominant logic skewed by both economics *and* politics? In the Australian case, I believe not. What has evolved since the 1970s revival is a small to medium-sized cinematic field which is structured in such a way as to significantly favour autonomous production, while cautiously striving to keep open the opportunities for justification in terms of profitability and employment.

O'Regan has argued that the continuing and now institutionalised use of these multiple conflicting rationales (economic and cultural) for a national film industry have been surprisingly effective in creating and defending a culture industry that endures, despite being ridden with contradictions:

*The irony here was that despite the fact that a market good – a commercial industry – was (to be) established, the feature film nonetheless was part and parcel of a program that was antithetical to the market place. This goes some way to explaining the establishment of an industry in an obviously precarious market and of the continuation of the Australian film industry into the eighties. Promoted as a prime instance of a government's and a culture's interest in non-material values, the form the film existed in, its material value, was to be within the film market place. It was this oscillation between the commercial and the non-commercial, that helped ensure the Australian feature film's place amongst conservatives and liberals alike and helped ensure, by the same token, that commercial considerations and cultural considerations would be firmly wedded together in a meaningful relation.*<sup>155</sup>

It is this 'meaningful relation' that must be explored if we are to judge the relative autonomy of the field, a field which has been described by Dermody and Jacka as 'a doubled industry developed among the conflicting influences of culture, commerce and nationalism'.<sup>156</sup> Clearly there is little scope in such a national cinema for the support of films that like Goddard's declaration, desire the ultimate autonomy of making films for 'one or maybe two people'. A nation with a national cinema is constantly questioning that cinema, evaluating it, and asking it

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<sup>155</sup> T. O'Regan, *The Politics of Representation*, op.cit., loc.cit.

<sup>156</sup> S. Dermody & E. Jacka, *The Screening of Australia*, Volume 2, op.cit., p. 15.



to account for itself. The fact that films must be answerable at all suggests a limiting of perfect autonomy within the field. Yet if they are required to justify themselves primarily in terms *other* than their financial profitability, and are judged in terms specified by other members of the national and international aesthetic force field (critics, festival judges etc), then this suggests some important autonomy.

The institutions supporting and underwriting a national cinema must also pose some limits to perfect autonomy. Yet if we examine the two chief funding bodies in the Australian industry, the Australian Film Commission, and the Film Finance Corporation, we see that in their very charters they have crystallised some important principles of autonomy.

### **The Australian Film Commission**

As the ‘...primary development agency for the film industry in Australia’,<sup>157</sup> the AFC occupies a significant and powerful position within the field. Established in 1975, the AFC is a federal statutory authority under the 1975 Australian Film Commission Act. This document, reproduced in current annual reports for the organisation, states that the primary function of the AFC is to: ‘...encourage, whether by the provision of financial assistance or otherwise, the making, promotion, distribution and broadcasting of Australian programs.’<sup>158</sup> Other functions include the collecting and archiving of Australian recordings,<sup>159</sup> and the collection of statistics relating to film and television.<sup>160</sup>

The Act States that the AFC should give special encouragement to ‘...the making of experimental programs and programs of a high degree of creativeness’, and to ‘...the making and appreciation of Australian programs and other programs as an art form.’<sup>161</sup> Such directives suggest that the AFC, at least in theory, exists primarily for the pursuit of cultural and symbolic capital; that its concerns are to foster aesthetic accomplishment.

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<sup>157</sup> *Australian Film Commission Annual Report*, 1998/99, p. 4.

<sup>158</sup> Section 5(1)(a) of *The Australian Film Commission Act 1975*, reproduced in *ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, Section 5(1)(d).

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*.



The AFC is protected from partisan political interference under Section 8 of the Act, which states that ‘The Minister [for the Arts] may...give direction to the Commission with respect to the exercise of its powers or the performance of its functions but shall not give such a direction with respect to a particular project.’<sup>162</sup> The document goes on to say that such directions must be tabled with both houses of parliament, and each AFC annual report notes whether the Minister exercised these powers within the reporting period.<sup>163</sup>

The autonomy of the AFC must be affected by a *habitus* formed from the continual need to justify its spending and to lobby for its continuation and increased funding. Its position as a public body certainly entails certain constraints to autonomy, including the need to conform to principles of transparency and public accountability. Yet these constraints themselves can be seen as enabling. By wedding the organisation to its legislated origins, the public or State nature of the AFC allows it to adhere to its basic principles of ‘...developing projects, developing people and developing the industry’.<sup>164</sup> This works to enshrine and protect a certain independence, implicitly recognising the need for the Commission to operate within its own logic, and to apply its own values to the projects it pursues.<sup>165</sup>

## **The Film Finance Corporation**

As Ina Bertrand writes, ‘...encouraging private investment...is the much-vaunted intention of all government support schemes.’<sup>166</sup> Embodying the more commercial imperatives of Australian government funded film, the Australian

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., Section 8.

<sup>163</sup> It is highly unusual for the Minister to exercise his powers under section 8. In the period from 1990 to 2001, this has occurred once, when in the 1995/96 financial year the AFC was given the extra responsibility of administering the Commercial Television Production Fund from 1 July 1995 to 30 June 1998.

<sup>164</sup> Kim Dalton, Executive Overview, *Australian Film Commission Annual Report 2000/01*, p. 12.

<sup>165</sup> The AFC’s method of approving funding for projects is based upon the principle that: ‘assessment processes should be equitable, accountable and result in the funding of a diverse range of projects.’ ‘Assessment of applications to most funding programs is now handled in rounds with published closing dates scheduled to spread program funds equally throughout the year. All applications to a round are assessed by teams of two project managers, with the composition of the teams changing from round to round and across the range of funding programs.’ These assessors, together with any external consultants, and their decisions, are disclosed within the annual report. *AFC Annual Report 2000/01*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>166</sup> Ina Bertrand, ‘Finance’, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, eds. Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer & Ina Bertrand, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1999, p. 159.



Film Finance Corporation (FFC) is a current incarnation of the former Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC).

Formally established in 1988, the FFC was to act effectively as an investment bank to the film industry, supporting projects with a predominantly commercial orientation, '...productions judged by market interest, rather than by quality-assessment panels, to have commercial potential'.<sup>167</sup> If a certain amount of funding could be raised independently (initially about 30%), then the FFC could be applied to for financing the remainder. As Scott Murray has noted, while the FFC has declared that its decisions were 'deal driven and did not take into account aesthetic or personnel considerations', the funding body has ultimately functioned as a mix of 'hard' and 'soft' investment decisions, including a number of Film Funds that purported to give money to films on considerations other than purely financial ones.<sup>168</sup>

The FFC states in its 98/99 annual report that its objectives are to 'finance a diverse slate of culturally relevant feature films, TV dramas and documentaries', to 'maintain high levels of private sector participation', to 'maximise exhibition opportunities' and provide 'marketing intelligence'.<sup>169</sup> Even within this most finance-oriented body, the 'cultural relevance' agenda is again raised, acknowledging that Australian film can never be assessed or supported purely as a business venture. The debate between the two poles of the field presents itself yet again in this position, which justifies itself in both symbolic terms ('to entertain and inform Australian audiences') and financial ones – to 'underpin employment' and 'generate an acceptable level of recoupment for reinvestment so as to enhance the value of the production slate'.<sup>170</sup>

An examination of this rationale and of the stated objectives of the various Commonwealth and state film agencies suggests that the criteria which will be used to either support or reject a cinematic project are: whether it will be economically profitable; whether it will contribute to Australian cultural heritage and identity; and whether it will promote tourism in Australia. But is this really

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Scott Murray, 'Ch.4: Australian Cinema and the 1970s and 1980s', *Australian Cinema*, op.cit., pp. 96-7.

<sup>169</sup> *Australian Film Finance Corporation Ltd Annual Report 1998/99*, p. 6.

<sup>170</sup> *Australian Film Finance Corporation Ltd Annual Report 1998/99*, p. 8.



the case? Are such explicit economic and political motives actually imposed upon prospective filmmakers and their projects?

Some commentators argue that this is exactly what has happened in the past. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka have termed the disproportionate collection of historical dramas made in the revival period of the 1970s and early 80s 'AFC genre' films, arguing that to be eligible for AFC funding a film had to comply with the nationalist and essentially conservative agenda of the government,<sup>171</sup> or display, as then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam so neatly phrased it '...a certain wholesomeness, a certain decency, [and] a fundamental seriousness of purpose.'<sup>172</sup> Films like *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975, Ken Hannam) and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975, Peter Weir) are held to be examples of this 'AFC genre', with their concentration on outback landscape, Australian history, and subdued, often pessimistic narrative form.

Scott Murray disagrees, however, with this notion that the AFC had any such dictatorial policy, observing that '...this view remains, despite three books, unproven and relies in part on the notion of directors as wimps unable to stand up to overpowering State forces'.<sup>173</sup> Murray argues that even if the AFC did favour such topics (for which there is no proof), dedicated directors will always find ways of making the films they want to, irrespective of government policy, and that the film-makers themselves should be questioned as to why they wished to depict the past rather than focusing on the present.<sup>174</sup> In one important example, Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* (1979), often included in this genre, was made without the support of the AFC, who refused to back the project.<sup>175</sup> The fact that the director was so determined to make this historical (yet arguably subversive and feminist) film, which occupied two years of her life, for a minimal sum of money, suggests strong motivations outside appealing to any film funding body.

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<sup>171</sup> S. Dermody & E. Jacka, *The Imaginary Industry: Australian film in the late 80s*, AFTRS, North Ryde, 1988, p. 44.

<sup>172</sup> E.G. Whitlam, loc.cit.

<sup>173</sup> S. Murray, 'Ch.4: Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s' in *Australian Cinema*, op.cit., p. 92.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> David Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation*, Pan Macmillan Publishers Australia, Sydney, 1990, pp. 2-3.



Both arguments for and against an ‘AFC genre’ can be reconciled and illuminated through a use of Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, that ‘feel for the game’ which influences and shapes the behaviour of agents within a given field.<sup>176</sup> The collection of films which have been termed ‘AFC genre’ possibly share their similar qualities due to a shared *habitus* of the film-makers, shared ‘...schemes of perception, thought and action, [which] tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.’<sup>177</sup> It is possible that these filmmakers were consciously trying to maximise their position in the field by proposing projects they thought might be more favourably received by the AFC. What is more likely however, is that a collection of factors combined to produce a *habitus*, an ‘...active presence of past experiences’<sup>178</sup> which formed their perceptions of what was acceptable, desirable and possible within the Australian cinematic field at that time. This *habitus* would no doubt have been itself influenced by the larger Australian cultural field and the nationalist mood that sought to reclaim Australian history and thereby make a start at defining national identity. The combination of such cultural preoccupations together with a commonsense ‘feel for the game’ may have produced a *habitus* in which filmmakers unconsciously vied to maximise their position in the field by proposing historic nationalist projects in their applications to the AFC.

This hypothetical explanation is difficult to prove or disprove, but it points to the importance of understanding how agents within a field can share perceptions and implicit norms, while exercising a degree of agency in terms of their artistic decisions. The government’s representation within the field, and indeed its importance in terms of the financial continuation of the field, impacts upon the possible positions agents can take, and the ways in which they can maximise their positions within the field. This understanding of *habitus* also suggests the way in which government support of an artistic field might influence the ‘practical sense’ of agents within that field, without directly exerting its force upon creative decision-making.

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<sup>176</sup> P. Bourdieu, ‘Structures, *Habitus*, Practices’, *The Logic of Practice*, op.cit. p. 53.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.



## Autonomy and Indirect Government Support

In the case of the Australian cinematic field, direct government support would appear to have been less detrimental to the field's quality of productions and autonomy than the government's attempts at indirect support in the 1980s. This indirect support took the form of extremely generous tax concession regulations for investment in Australian films through legislation introduced in 1980, and known as 10BA.<sup>179</sup> 150 per cent tax concessions could be claimed on the initial investment, and a further 50 per cent could be claimed on any profit up to the amount initially invested.<sup>180</sup> The result of this concession was a massive injection of money into the film industry, and the involvement in the cinematic field of vast numbers of lawyers, accountants and investment companies whose primary interest was in providing tax concessions for their investors.<sup>181</sup> The corresponding increase in film production was so great that 'bunching' became a problem – so many films were being made that there was a crucial shortage of film-crews and actors.<sup>182</sup>

The 10BA era has been credited by some as an enormous step forward for the Australian film industry, crucial in '...changing the industry from being an old boys' club led by the AFC into a wider-based industry that developed new talents and infrastructures.'<sup>183</sup> Most commentators agree, however, that this indirect government support led to an enormous waste of money, and the production of a great many bad films, a number of which were never even shown in cinemas.<sup>184</sup>

Philip Adams writes:

*Instead of being a small, dedicated group of film-makers following some sort of Scandinavian model, we became an overactive, overgreedy enclave of people making too many films too quickly for too much money, with too much of an eye on overseas markets. The result was a catastrophe, a shambles, which led to politicians and audiences alike*

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<sup>179</sup> D. Stratton, *The Avocado Plantation*, op.cit., Chapter 1.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>183</sup> Bob Weiss, a key producer of the 1980s, quoted in Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>184</sup> D. Stratton, Ibid., p. 5.



*losing enthusiasm for our efforts.*<sup>185</sup>

In purely economic terms, the scheme was a disaster, leading to the establishment of the Film Finance Corporation in 1988, intended as a replacement means of funding.<sup>186</sup> In artistic terms, though a number of highly regarded films were produced, a great many films of poor quality were made, bringing the national film industry as a whole into disrepute.<sup>187</sup> As Lisa French has noted, the scheme resulted in a proliferation of films targeting the 'exploitation' and 'direct to video' markets.<sup>188</sup>

It could be argued then, that the kinds of pressures which were brought to bear upon filmmakers in the 10BA period of indirect government support were more detrimental to their artistic freedom than those pressures associated with the direct support of government film agencies. Using the theory of the field, it could be argued that direct support comes via film bodies which act as mediators between the government and filmmakers, projecting the goals and objectives of the State through the prism of the logic of the cinematic field. Many of the bureaucrats in such government agencies have a history of participation in filmmaking and are therefore sensitive to the logic of the field, the fact that it deals in symbolic products whose value cannot be calculated merely in dollars. Where the lawyers and accountants who became involved in film-making in the 10BA era tried to impose the logic of high finance and taxation avoidance upon the cinematic field, in contrast those decision-makers in government agencies at least had some understanding and interest in maintaining the integrity of the films themselves.

The example of the 10BA films also illuminates the position of symbolic products in the field of power. Because such products derive their status from their ability to communicate and to influence social consciousness, within the dominated sector of the field of power, the breakdown of their autonomy from the economic field can eventually lead to the extreme case where they cease to exist or function as symbolic products at all. This can be seen in the case of the 10BA films that

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<sup>185</sup> P. Adams, 'A Cultural Revolution' in *Australian Cinema*, op.cit. p. 67.

<sup>186</sup> D. Stratton, op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>188</sup> Lisa French, 'Patterns of Production and Policy: The Australian Film Industry in the 1990s', *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, ed. Ian Craven, Frank Cass, London, 2001, p. 20.



were never seen by an audience, and were funded by people to whom their value consisted merely in their ability to provide an escape from taxes. If such a scenario takes place on a large enough scale, then the cinematic field as a field of cultural production declines in influence within the field of power.

Clearly the autonomy of the Australian cinematic field is dependent upon state support mechanisms, without which it would cease to exist in any recognisable form. Despite affiliation with the political field in the form of funding and legislation, the evidence suggests that the national cinematic field emerging in the last forty years has been one which has been able to operate under its own logic, and has been able to stand outside the field of power and criticise it. The *habitus* of the agents within the field, which I will attempt to go some way towards describing in further chapters, appears to recognise within its schemes of perception, thought and action, the need for autonomy, and the ways in which state support undergirds it. The justification for this, repeatedly articulated and phrased simply as ‘telling our own stories’, implicitly acknowledges ideas of national uniqueness, while distancing the discourse from any prescriptive or exclusive representation of national identity.

The support for a local film industry is built upon the ideal of an autonomous national field (Australia), and depends, philosophically, upon the recognition of that nation as having a separate and culturally unique tradition and destiny. This destiny (as a polyphonic Great narrative) must necessarily be tied up with ideas of international openness, the exchange of money, goods and ideas, and a healthy cultural interpenetration. It would, however, be foolhardy heresy for any agent within the national cinematic field to suggest that an unregulated liberalisation would naturally result in a healthy local film field, for unregulated liberalisation does not understand or recognise, except in the crudest forms, the logic of cultural fields or their need to maintain autonomy.

The national cinematic field, in continuing to justify its existence, must draw upon and appeal to a distinctly polyphonic construction of nationalism and national identity. The relative success of the field in maintaining itself and its autonomy over the previous thirty years owes much to such a renovation and mobilisation of the idea of nation. In the following summary of the movement of Australian cinematic narratives from a (relative) unity to a diversity of representations, I will



show the fluid and positive potential of the evolving category of nation in underpinning a vibrant, yet vulnerable cultural field. The potential shadow-side of such a complex and subtle relationship will also be evident. For what happens when the national field of power, already weakened by its multiple surrenders of sovereignty, finds that the film industry not only fails to perform in commercial terms, but, established in the name of 'representing the nation' has also moved away from producing stories which fulfil such ideals in any traditional, simple or obvious ways?

### **Australian Feature Films: From Unity to Diversity**

As stated earlier, the last 30 years of Australian feature filmmaking is characterised by a definite trajectory: travelling initially from the explicit concerns of nation-building and unitary national identity, towards the current situation, with its diversity of representations, and its preference for the categories of the 'universal' and the 'local' rather than the 'national'. A broad sketch of this arc will allow us to see where the concept and category of national identity currently resides in relationship to the arena of Australian film.

The 'AFC Genre' and its offshoots, whether emerging through direct state intervention or, as previously suggested, through a more subtle *habitus*, nevertheless drew on a somewhat limited repertoire of styles, themes, preoccupations and characters. These films can be broadly characterised as being concerned with the 'big picture' of Australia, its landscape, history and social types. Often derived from literary sources, with historical themes, outback locations and tasteful art direction, these films had a backward-looking approach that seemed to be searching the past for the origins of 'authentic' Australia. Writing in 1977, Tim Burstall argued that even those films which were not 'period' conveyed '...very little sense of the present'.<sup>189</sup> Oft-cited examples of this genre include: *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *My Brilliant Career*, *Breaker Morant* (1980, Bruce Beresford), *Gallipoli* (1981, Peter Weir) and *The Man From Snowy River* (1982, George Miller).<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Tim Burstall, 'Twelve Genres of Australian Film', (1977) reproduced in *An Australian Film Reader*, eds. Albert Moran & Tom O'Regan, Currency Press, 1985, p. 220.

<sup>190</sup> For an extended discussion of the 'AFC Genre' and the other dominant groupings of the period, see Dermody & Jacka, 'Ch.2: The Aesthetic Force Field', op.cit., Vol. 2.



Other groupings from this period include: the Ocker Comedies like *Stork* (1971, Tim Burstall), *Alvin Purple* (1973, Bruce Beresford), *Don's Party* (1976, Bruce Beresford) and *Peterson* (1974, Tim Burstall); Social Realist films like *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975, Ken Hannam), *Backroads* (1977, Phil Noyce) and *Stir* (1980, Stephen Wallace); and eccentric groupings like the Australian Gothic films exemplified by *Wake in Fright* (1971, Ted Kotcheff), *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972, Bruce Beresford) and *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974, Peter Weir).

Without ignoring the diverse output of the period, and without discounting the vast differences between these specifically mentioned films, it is possible, as Dermody and Jacka have done, to trace a kind of 'aesthetic force field' structured around certain narrative patterns and particular commercial practices. They argue that this aesthetic force field was organised around the 'desire to speak Australianness',<sup>191</sup> usually in the broadest possible terms. Turner concurs with Dermody and Jacka that this period was one in which films 'did set out to make "Australianness" explicit, one way or another', doing this specifically by harking back to the radical nationalist tradition of the 1890s.<sup>192</sup> Thus many of these films displayed an out-dated preoccupation with the bush and the outback, a valorisation of mateship, and a tendency to present the importance of accepting hardship and defeat. Through open-ended narratives, the individual was often submerged within his (and it usually was 'his') social and historical grouping.

This was a strange and paradoxical version of the modernist national narrative. Australia, in asserting its freedom from European and American domination, simultaneously presented itself, through its history, as unable to reach modernist goals of positive achievement, or to achieve success in terms of any self-determined goals. Still, stoicism, collectivism and toughness seemed to be the virtues that had enabled the nation to endure into the present, and the very articulation of these values on film, by Australians themselves, was an act of celebration.

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

<sup>192</sup> Graeme Turner, 'Whatever Happened to National Identity: Film and the nation in the 1990s', *Metro*, No.100, Summer 1994/95, p. 32.



From the middle of the 1980s there was a gradual but discernible movement away from making films that dealt so specifically with grand articulations of 'Australianness'. There was a more conscious use of popular genres (thrillers, for example, like Phil Noyce's *Dead Calm* (1989) or road movies such as the *Mad Max* series), and a more playful approach to Australian stereotypes, as found in Yahoo Serious' *Young Einstein* (1988) and Peter Faiman's *Crocodile Dundee* (1986).<sup>193</sup>

By the mid 1990s it was possible for Turner to argue that:

...the current crop [of films] are notable for their lack of self-consciousness about their national origins, their refusal of the official responsibilities of a culturally significant artform, their range of styles and subjects, their disrespect for the generic markers of 'art film', and their equally disrespectful indigenisation of mainstream commercial genres.<sup>194</sup>

Films such as *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994, Stephen Elliott), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992, Baz Luhrmann), *Romper Stomper* (1992, Geoffrey Wright), *The Sum of Us* (1994, Kevin Dowling & Geoff Burton), *Idiot Box* (1997, David Caesar) and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998, Richard Flanagan) foregrounded marginal identities, often played out within the urban and suburban context of contemporary Australia. As Romy Feingold argued in 1996, the ethnic and cultural diversity of Australian society began to be reflected in a national cinema that was characterised by its very hybridity, plurality and eclecticism.<sup>195</sup> This break with traditional themes and iconic imagery was not, of course, a violent or complete one, but a clearly identifiable change nonetheless.

This movement during the 1990s away from explicit preoccupations with the national, towards an almost complete focus on the local and the marginal can be read through the exception of the film *Reckless Kelly* (1993, Yahoo Serious). With its zany and irreverent approach to the myths and icons of traditional

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<sup>193</sup> For a more detailed account of this period, see Scott Murray, 'Ch.4: Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s', *Australian Cinema*, op.cit.

<sup>194</sup> G. Turner, 'Whatever Happened to National Identity?' op.cit., p. 33.

<sup>195</sup> Romy Feingold, *Mongrels: Representations of Australian Identity in Australian Films of the Nineties*, Honours Thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 1996.



Australian identity, *Reckless Kelly* might at first seem to conform with the prevailing cynicism towards singular notions of identity. The historical Kelly Gang is revamped in accordance with multiculturalism – the ‘tribe’ includes Kellys who are Chinese, Japanese, French, Aboriginal and Irish. Yet for all the diversity of their backgrounds, these characters are united by being Australian, and by being ‘Kellys’.

It is this unity, signposted again and again throughout the film, through images of ‘Australia’ as an island home threatened by multinational banks, and by Hollywood corruption, which makes *Reckless Kelly* seem anachronistic within the context of the 1990s. Here is a film that is explicitly ‘about the nation’. While sending up the larrikin spirit, the country pub, and the national fauna, the film engaged in a project that was specifically national, and specifically about national autonomy from Britain and America. Even as it parodied and interrogated the myths and icons of the national tradition, *Reckless Kelly* attempted to re-energise them into currency, to activate, through humour, the anti-authoritarian spirit of ‘Australia’ against those other nations that might undermine its sovereignty.

*Reckless Kelly* was an exception to the dominant filmmaking preoccupations of the 1990s because it cared to articulate nation and national identity; its multiple and diverse representations were always contained by and ultimately subordinated to the unity of the film’s larger ‘national’ story. While such approaches were not dominant in the period, they nevertheless persisted in significant ways.

The 1990s films to which this thesis gives particular focus convey the broad spectrum of narrative approaches towards ‘articulating the nation’ which can be found in the films of that decade. At one end of this spectrum are the films with Aboriginal themes, *Dead Heart* and *Vacant Possession*, which, in this sense like *Reckless Kelly*, are passionate attempts to interrogate and expand the national (his)story. At the other end of the spectrum is a film like *Babe*, which through its overt universality seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with Australia or its culture. Located in between these extremes are films focusing on marginal identities (*Head On*, *Floating Life*) or those which are best described as local variants of international genres (*Bad Boy Bubby* as art-house, *Love and Other Catastrophes* as low-budget romantic comedy.)



Through an analysis of these films and their directors, it will become clear that while issues of 'nation' are variously present or absent within the narratives themselves, such preoccupations are central to the discourses that surround and support them. The Australian cinematic field, as it is presently constituted, will always ask, 'How are these films Australian?' and 'Do they contribute to the charter of "telling our stories" to ourselves, and to the rest of the world?'

More is required of these discourses when the films themselves are less distinctly national. The nature of a national cinematic field is such that filmmakers, commentators and bureaucratic bodies must actively function to reveal the connections between the films and the nation, between the individual narrative representations of identity and its larger national construction, especially when these connections are less than obvious in the work itself.

In the following chapters, the central ideas of freedom and imprisonment will inform our analysis of the narratives themselves, and the structures that enable them to exist. By positioning these texts, and their directors, within the national cinematic field we will begin to see the many complex ways in which the field itself continues to operate around the idea of nation in order to negotiate its ongoing autonomy.



## Chapter 4A: Slave Morality and Australian Culture

*...a futile heart within a fair periphery;  
The people are hard-eyed, kindly, with nothing inside  
them,  
The men are independent but you could not call them free.*

*And I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body,  
I know its contractions, waste, and sprawling indolence;  
They are in me and its triumphs are my own,  
Hard-won in the thin and bitter years without pretence.  
– James McAuley<sup>196</sup>*

Picture an inner city world of concrete and back street alleys, of public transport and seedy late night dance clubs. The inhabitants are young, cynical and unemployed. Boredom is their scourge and they are prepared to try anything to escape it – violence, kinky impersonal sex, and the roller-coaster ride of drugs and alcohol. This is the world of Australian youth depicted in so many of the films and books of the 1990s. Roughly slotted within the genre of dirty realism, these have been films such as *Romper Stomper* (1992, Geoffrey Wright), *Metal Skin* (1994, Geoffrey Wright) and *Only The Brave* (1994, Ana Kokkinos) and books like Leonie Stevens' *Nature Strip*,<sup>197</sup> Edward Berridge's *The Lives of the Saints*,<sup>198</sup> and Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia*.<sup>199</sup>

Produced by young Australians, these texts are, on the whole, strongly autobiographical; the novels often giving birth to films that tell similarly disturbing, yet uniquely cinematic tales of hopelessness, apathy and anger. These are current images of modern urban Australia, yet the stories, with their themes of alienation, exile and impotent anger, carry on a tradition dating back to the beginning of white Australia, with its tales of convicts and embattled settlers,

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<sup>196</sup> From the poem 'Envoi' printed in *James McAuley: poetry, essays and personal commentary*, edited by Leonie Kramer, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988, p. 65.

<sup>197</sup> Leonie Stevens, *Nature Strip*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, 1994.

<sup>198</sup> Edward Berridge, *The Lives of the Saints*, UQP Fiction, St Lucia, 1995.

<sup>199</sup> Justine Ettler, *The River Ophelia*, Picador Australia, Sydney, 1995.



expressing a slave morality that fights for a freedom that is elusive, and when accomplished, terrifyingly double-edged.

## **Imprisonment and Exile**

Up to this point I have suggested that Australian narratives, including the narrative of Australian nationalism, have a problematic relationship with the concepts of freedom and transcendence. Numerous accounts have noted the prevalence in Australian film and fiction of themes and imagery associated with imprisonment and exile. One strand of this historical analysis and literary criticism has been dubbed 'The Gloom Thesis' by John Docker. Expositors of this Gloom Thesis, according to Docker, concentrate on those aspects of Australian culture which put a '...stress on terror, alienation, doubt, suffering, and misery...a kind of ideological superstructure...' <sup>200</sup> This dark alternative view of the Australian cultural tradition, (dark in contrast to sunnier accounts of utopian idealism and egalitarian nation-building) is found by Docker in the work of historian Manning Clark, and the writings of literary theorists H.P. Heseltine and Leon Cantrell. <sup>201</sup> Docker is critical of this tendency among the intelligentsia to discount as truly authentic any Australian narratives that stray from the dreary pattern. Yet, as Graeme Turner has convincingly argued, there *is* some validity to the view that Australian culture does appear to prefer narratives that posit the individual as powerless in the face of nature or society. Australian stories do abound in characters that are imprisoned, alienated or dispossessed. <sup>202</sup>

Turner argues that though these themes are not native to Australian fiction, having been significantly present in world literature, fiction and philosophy since the beginning of the twentieth century, they are nevertheless uniquely and persistently expressed within the Australian context, finding particular expression here in a society formed as a penal colony and later developed as a distant cultural satellite to England. The stark contrast is made between this, and the American situation:

*America's society was established to escape from the perceived iniquities of life in Europe, while Australia was a prison established to contain some of those guilty of*

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<sup>200</sup> John Docker, *In a Critical Condition*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1984, p. 140.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>202</sup> G. Turner, *National Fictions*, op.cit., pp. 54-86.



*perpetrating the iniquities of Europe. To simplify further, the America's was a mission of hope, while ours was the ordeal of exile. Therefore, both excluded and disaffected, and totally without a supporting mythology to convert the predicament into either quest or revolt, the central character in our narratives is firmly trapped. It should hardly surprise us, then, that our most enduring literary and mythic image is one of imprisonment, its result death and suicide.*<sup>203</sup>

Turner finds these themes and images in Australian film and fiction as diverse as Marcus Clarke's *For The Term of His Natural Life*, Peter Carey's *Bliss*, the prison drama *Stir* (1980, Stephen Wallace), *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978, Fred Schepisi), *Don's Party* (1976, Bruce Beresford) and *The Winter of Our Dreams* (1981, John Duigan).<sup>204</sup> In these films the individual may be literally imprisoned by a cruel penal system, or they may be trapped in the harshness of a faceless and alien natural environment. They may be alienated by an impersonal society, or a senseless political system. There is little room for action, rebellion or growth, but a kind of limited transcendence may be achieved through the stoic acceptance of one's limitations.

The ideological functioning of such narratives, with their depictions of individuals constrained and impotent, is such that, according to Turner, it naturalises a condition of powerlessness and a belief in the futility of individual action. For him it dramatizes '...the way in which a politics of survival and of acceptance manages to win the assent of the culture – posing as the “natural” structure of existence within an Australian context.'<sup>205</sup>

This argument, made several decades ago, in relation to texts that exist in a relatively long ago cultural moment, nevertheless holds explanatory power even when applied to the up-to-the-minute youth films being made by a new generation of Australian filmmakers. These are stories about a new kind of prisoner, young, self-aware and articulate, yet imprisoned all the same by a culture that appears to offer few roads to freedom. That this culture claims to be egalitarian and democratic, with a politics of equal recognition for all citizens, makes for a unique

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p. 84.



kind of emotional response as people come to experience an increasing discrepancy between this rhetoric and the realities of life in this society.

While usually a troublesome and tumultuous time of life, youth has nevertheless traditionally been the period when a person is most likely to exhibit vitality, rebellion, idealism and action; the desire for freedom and the courage to fight for it. Yet since the 1950s suicide among adolescents and young adults has become one of the most alarming public health trends in affluent countries.<sup>206</sup> Young people around the globe are killing themselves in staggering numbers,<sup>207</sup> and Australia in particular has a youth suicide rate among the highest in the industrial world.<sup>208</sup> While suicide may certainly be interpreted as an act of rebellion, it is the ultimate denial of vitality or idealism; the denial of the value of life itself. The factors contributing to this phenomenon are perplexing and wide-ranging and cannot be reduced to social or cultural factors – neither can the forms of youth hopelessness discussed in these narratives be reduced to suicidal longings. Yet the characters in these narratives do display a disturbing ambivalence about the value of individual action or individual life.

Building on the understanding of the Australian narrative tradition as one which prefers stories that deal in imprisonment and exile, the concept of *ressentiment* will be outlined in this chapter as a way of intimately describing the morality and psychology of a certain kind of slave, free yet emotionally imprisoned. A term given to an emotion which essentially ‘says “no” to life’,<sup>209</sup> *Ressentiment* can be briefly defined as ‘...a self-poisoning form of self-hatred which arises from the systematic repression of certain emotions, including envy, pride, anger, and the desire for revenge and self-conquest.’<sup>210</sup> This chapter will examine two Australian films – John Curran’s *Praise* (1999) and Ana Kokkinos’ *Head On* (1998). Both

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<sup>206</sup> Lewis L. Judd, ‘Forward’, *Suicide Over the Life Cycle*, eds, Susan J. Blumenthal, David J. Kupfer, American Psychiatric Press, 1990.

<sup>207</sup> *Here for Life: A national plan for youth in distress*, Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>208</sup> *Youth Suicide in Australia: a background monograph*, second edition, Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services, 1997, p. 21.

<sup>209</sup> Robert C. Solomon, ‘Nietzsche Ad Hominem: Perspectivism, Personality and *Ressentiment*’, *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 182.

<sup>210</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema*, Sage Publications, London, 1991, p. 54.



are films adapted from novels by young Australian men,<sup>211</sup> and both depict, in differing ways, characters exhibiting signs of this self-poisoning and self-enslaving emotion.

I will identify ways in which these films depict Australian society as a uniquely *ressentiment*-inducing one, materialist in the extreme and becoming more so with the nation's almost complete submission to the accelerating logic of globalised capitalism. This enslavement has been accepted by a culture that has only been able to resist weakly, with an essentially empty and ultimately nihilist means of metaphysical escape. The films themselves offer scant advice about possible roads to freedom, yet, as I will argue, their bleakly poetic articulations offer a first step towards a realisation of the situation, a kind of recognition that can give birth to a search for change. At the very least, the representations of this emotion, through narrative configuration, allows the storytellers and the audience some temporary relief and possible insight.

### ***Ressentiment* – A Dominant Postmodern Emotion**

The French word *ressentiment*, roughly translates as the English 'resentment', but embodies so much more richness of meaning that the original theorists of the concept, first Nietzsche and later, Scheler, retained its original form. Nietzsche can be said to be the father of the theory of *ressentiment*, and for him it was associated with slave morality, in which the slave riles against his enslavement, yet is impotent to vent his hatred and rage against his master, or to express the desire for freedom.<sup>212</sup> For the weak, as Nietzsche saw it, this frustrated 'will to power' results in a turning inwards of destructive emotion and a transformation of the slave's moral system into an inverted one which rejects those ideals held by the master. Though Nietzsche describes *ressentiment* as a characteristic of slaves, he extends the concept to include all those groups and individuals who are weak and cannot properly express the universal desire for personal power. For example, Nietzsche, controversially, identifies Christianity as a religion growing out of *ressentiment*, a religion idealising meekness, poverty, self-denial – qualities he

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<sup>211</sup> The film *Praise* is based on A. McGahan's novel *Praise*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1992. The film *Head On* is based on C. Tsohkas' novel *Loaded*, Random House Australia, Milson's Point, 1995.

<sup>212</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, transl. W. Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale, ed. W. Kaufmann, Vintage, 1968, p.174.



sees as life-defying – and therefore a religion attractive to the weak and the poor who are able to use the religious philosophy to elevate their deficiencies into virtues.<sup>213</sup>

Max Scheler, the German philosopher and author of the book *Ressentiment*,<sup>214</sup> derives from Nietzsche many of his ideas of the concept, extending it, however, to a more sociological dimension; identifying *ressentiment* as a negative emotional state most likely to affect individuals or groups who resent the sting of authority and experience injury as destiny, while feeling that they are rightfully entitled to a better life.<sup>215</sup> Scheler argues that the liberal humanist values of modern societies, such as the principle of the equality of all humans, are ideals not usually transferred from theory into practice, and that it is this contradiction that gives rise to *ressentiment*. He writes that it is in fact a sociological law that ‘...this psychological dynamite [*ressentiment*] will spread with the discrepancy between the political, constitutional or traditional status of a group and its factual power.’<sup>216</sup>

It should be noted here that both Nietzsche and Scheler see hierarchy as an integral and fundamental social constant. They are ‘deeply aristocratic’ in their outlook,<sup>217</sup> and therefore see *ressentiment* as the result of a mistaken attempt to establish equality for all. Scheler, for example, thought that the principle of inequality was eternally true, and saw the positing of the equality of man as the ‘...chief aberration of the modern age.’<sup>218</sup> Neither Nietzsche nor Scheler criticise the social system for failing to deliver, identifying instead the democratic society with its humanist values as inherently flawed.

For modern liberal thinkers, with a belief in the values of democracy and the basic equality of all human beings, this attitude is highly problematic, verging upon repugnant. Nietzsche in particular, might be accused of victim-blaming in his derision of the weak and powerless for their inability to pull themselves up out of

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> M. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, transl. W. Holdheim, Schocken Books, New York, 1972.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Lewis A. Coser, Introduction to *Ressentiment*, op.cit., p. 14.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.



degradation, to become the strong and powerful supermen who are the pinnacle of human being. The concept remains useful, however, precisely because of its origins in theories of social hierarchy. Even if we argue against Nietzsche and Scheler, and claim that the proper basis for a just society is founded upon the equal rights, recognition and dignity of all human beings, we cannot argue with their descriptions of the outrage and value inversion that result from the failure of modern democratic societies to live up to their rhetorical commitments. An understanding of *ressentiment* is a powerful and sophisticated psychological tool for understanding the emotional state and ideological position of certain dominated classes and groups; in this case, the young, unemployed and disenfranchised, who, arguably, live by world standards, in relative luxury.

*Ressentiment* has most recently been utilised by social and cultural theorist Norman K. Denzin, who has identified it as the dominant postmodern emotion,<sup>219</sup> resulting from the failure of late capitalism to fulfill its promises to various groups of people, among these, the young and unemployed. Writing with a critical humanist agenda, Denzin identifies *ressentiment* as an emotion that is produced and amplified by the cultural logics of late capitalism, with its incessant media images stressing commodified fantasies of wealth, beauty, happiness and successful love relationships, and the accompanying reality that for many individuals and groups, such states are quite unattainable and will be for various reasons, always denied.<sup>220</sup> This combination of democratic rhetoric, continual media images of desirable but unattainable ideals, and the realities of the constraints and problems of contemporary Western societies, produces, for some groups and individuals, in the words of Scheler ‘...the tormenting conflict between desire and impotence.’<sup>221</sup> Denzin writes that these conditions produce ‘...existential anxiety, fear and hatred...’, and that the result of this is ‘...violence towards self and other’.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> N. K. Denzin, p. 55.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> M. Scheler, op.cit., p. 75.

<sup>222</sup> N. K. Denzin, op.cit., p. 55.



## **Falsification of Values**

According to Scheler, the result of this frustration and inability to achieve the goals proposed as desirable by a particular society, is a ‘falsification of the value tablets’ – groups or individuals who feel they cannot attain the values upheld by society actually begin to reject those values and invert them.<sup>223</sup> This occurs at a deep and unconscious level, replacing what was previously seen as a good thing with the valuing of it as a bad or worthless thing. For example, Scheler argues that certain sectors of the poor transvaluate their ideas about wealth, seeing wealthy people as inherently corrupt and vulgar, and seeing poverty as a kind of virtue. Only impressions that serve to reinforce and ‘prove’ this instinctive attitude will be admitted to consciousness.<sup>224</sup>

Using ideas derived from the theory of *ressentiment*, this chapter will demonstrate that these two films about self-destructive politically impotent young people, *Praise* and *Head On*, contain characters who express a transvaluation of values. This can be seen in their attitudes towards work, property ownership and love relationships, and in their manifest self-loathing. Much more complex than mere laziness, apathy or depression (though incorporating these) the psychological states of these characters emanate from problems that are deeply rooted in the heart of contemporary Australian society. This is a society that has replaced its own vague and imperfect maps of the ways to freedom with something much worse: crude and imitative directives that promise commodified fantasies of endless consumption to those who are prepared to sacrifice their dignity. Little wonder then that some smart young Australians see through these hollow promises, and refuse to chain themselves to the wheels of industry. Their alternative, however, may be a miserable and impoverished kind of freedom.

## ***Head On***

In her debut feature film, *Head On*, Ana Kokkinos paints a dark portrait of inner city Melbourne as an urban landscape seething with racial and intergenerational tensions. The film depicts twenty-four hours in the life of Ari (Alex Dimitriades) an unemployed Greek boy in his late teens. Ari’s aggressively rebellious

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<sup>223</sup> M. Scheler, op.cit., pp. 77-8.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 74.



behaviour is combined with an infuriating passivity as he struggles to reconcile his independent sexual life as a drug-taking gay man with his financial and emotional dependence upon a traditional migrant family.

We first meet Ari at a Greek wedding amid loud music, laughter and dancing. A large circle of people, young and old, surround the bridal couple, kissing and hugging them and pinning money to their clothes. Ari stands a little way back, hovering between joining in the festivities and rejecting them entirely. He blows a kiss to the couple yet his face wears an ambivalent grimace. In a voice-over, he explains:

*'They tell you that God is dead, but man, they still want you to have a purpose. They say, "look at your parents, hard-working migrants, work two jobs, struggle all your life, buy your kids a house." Yeah, that's purpose. They tell you to be a doctor, teacher, be creative, do something, believe in something; believe in family, future, save the world, believe in love. Fuck it. I'm no scholar. I'm no worker. I'm no poet.'*

Here we have Ari's bitter summary of the 'cultural logics of late capitalism' as expressed within his own milieu.

Denzin writes of *ressentiment* as an emotion that is produced and amplified by the culture's upholding of unrealistic goals – commodified fantasies of wealth, beauty, happiness and successful love relationships.<sup>225</sup> There is a particular version of this fantasy for the migrant working classes and their children: to work hard, gain educational qualifications (and therefore security and prestige) own a house, marry and have children to whom you can pass on your accumulated wealth. Ari's rejection of these ideals is a typical *ressentiment* attitude towards the unattainable, for there are a number of reasons why each of these goals is far beyond his reach.

### ***Ressentiment and Unemployment***

To be unemployed in the modern capitalist society is to be shut out from the good things that such societies can offer – endless consumer choices and the freedoms that come with property ownership and enhanced mobility. Perhaps most distressing of all is the feeling that one has no social identity, for in such societies,

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<sup>225</sup> N. K. Denzin, op. cit., pp. 54-5.



perhaps more than in any other, the value of the individual, their respectability and acceptability is determined by the kind of work they do and the amount of financial remuneration they receive for doing it.

In his introduction to Scheler's book on the topic, Lewis Coser explains how *ressentiment* results from this competitive method of determining identity:

*In societies in which fixed orders of rank prevail, the member of a stratum achieves his identity by reference to other members of his social circle or to symbolic representatives of it...[whereas] in the modern competitive world where orders of social rank have broken down, self-images and identities tend to be achieved through comparison with all those who are similarly striving for success. Identity is tied to competitive success or failure. Those strata, then, whose peculiar location in the structure minimizes their chances for competitive success and limits their access to active counter-values that legitimate rebellion, are particularly apt to engage in behavior motivated by resentment.*<sup>226</sup>

The culture of the Greek and Italian migrant has a particular interpretation of work as a means to gain respectability. As Ari suggests in his opening monologue, hard work and 'working two jobs' are seen as the conduit to social and economic mobility, and to having any kind of 'purpose' in the new country. Migrants, by their very decision to change countries, have implied their aspiration to improve their lives and the lives of their children; they have stated their belief that the new country offers greater opportunities for a 'better' life.<sup>227</sup> Gainful and paid employment is central to this dream, and within such a context unemployment has a very specific meaning, for to be unemployed is to be excluded from the dream. The child of hard-working migrants who cannot or will not find employment is a direct rebuke to their ideals, a denial of their core values.

In a recent essay, writer Alexandra Pitsis reflects on second generation Greek migrant identity.<sup>228</sup> She notes the statistics that indicate children of migrants are comparatively high achievers, excelling across many professional fields. Pitsis then describes a video made by Greek artist John Conomos, and notes with

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<sup>226</sup> L. A. Coser, op.cit., pp. 30-31.

<sup>227</sup> For example, see *For a Better Life We Came*, Brunswick Oral History Project, Brunswick City Council, 1985.

<sup>228</sup> Alexandra Pitsis, 'Their Image Masked', *RealTime/Onscreen*, December 1998-January 1999, p. 27.



interest the character of ‘Uncle Manolis’ a man who is ‘the antithesis of this well-honed work ethic.’ Uncle Manolis is described by the video as an eccentric and lazy man who likes to play cards. ‘He would have been a terrifying figure to haunt the second generation child’, writes Pitsis. ‘The terrifying aspect is not the Uncle himself, who emerges as a poetic soul, but all the aspirations and emotional and psychic investments migrants make and instil in their children.’<sup>229</sup>

Such psychic investments – and their failure to make dividends – are evidenced by the remark of Ari’s mother: ‘I’ve given birth to animals! I’ve worked hard all my life for you kids and you have all let me down.’ When her daughter rebukes her for living her life through her children, she becomes enraged and sweeps the contents of the dinner table onto the floor. The daughter’s remark is a rebuke of everything the mother believes about the role of children, that one’s children, and their levels of success, *are* the point of life; the only valid way to meaningfully continue living into the future.

It is significant to note, then, that Ari’s unemployment seems to be of concern to his entire community, who view it as an insult to the whole group. Almost every one of his social encounters (as opposed to his many anonymous sexual encounters) contains a verbal inquiry as to his employment status. In a Greek tavern, Ari purchases drugs from the kitchen hand who informs him that his father is in the next room, ‘still trying to convince the comrades that Marx predicted the shit-fights in the Balkans.’ The kitchen-hand mockingly turns and says, ‘What about you Ari? Still surplus labour?’

Later, Ari sits in the suburban kitchen of his aunt, getting her to read his fortune from the ground remnants in a coffee cup. She tells him that someone is going to offer him a job. His cousin Joe, who has recently been promoted at work, looks over her shoulder disdainfully at Ari, and says, ‘What’s the job, Mum? Garbage collector?’ Saying this he doubles over in laughter that clearly angers Ari, who nevertheless endures the teasing in bitter silence.

Moving on to the apartment of his best friend Johnny, Ari has an affectionate encounter with Johnny’s father Vasili, an alcoholic who is also unemployed:

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.



Vasili:	You got a job yet?
Ari:	No. You?
Vasili:	(laughing uproariously and slapping Ari on the back) No job. Fucked-up country, Ari!

Such is the solidarity of two outsiders, who overtly blame the ‘fucked-up country’ for their unemployment. We suspect that they also believe themselves to be ‘fucked up’ and therefore unemployable.

Upon arriving back at home, Ari is again put on the defensive. In an argument with his overbearing father Ari tells him, ‘I’ve got the right to do what I want!’ His father replies, ‘No. You have no rights. You earn your rights through work and study.’

This is a recurring refrain in Ari’s meetings with friends and relatives as they insist on highlighting his shameful employment status. It is not surprising then, that when Joe tells Ari to ‘grow up and get a job’, Ari taunts him with the darker side of being an employee. Leering at Joe in an over-lit toilet cubicle, Ari mimics the servile employee. ‘Yes sir, no sir, can I have a raise sir? Can I have a day off sir? My wife’s having a baby sir!’ In this mockery is contained an awareness by Ari that his only real freedom lies in the fact that he has empty time to fill, without an employer to consult. He throws this in Joe’s face, transvaluing his own enslavement (inability to participate in society) by highlighting, quite reasonably, the enslavement of working for a living and having no ‘free’ time.

### ***Ressentiment and Gay Identity***

While Ari cannot imagine ever joining the paid workforce, there is at least a possibility that he will do so, for he is young, intelligent and good-looking. Less likely, however, is the possibility that homosexual Ari will ever be able to fulfil his parents’ expectations regarding heterosexual love, marriage and child-rearing. He looks on, excluded, as his father, usually so surly and tight with money, offers hugs and kisses to the newly engaged couple, Joe and Tina, giving them a fifty dollar note and telling them to ‘go out and enjoy yourselves’. As if to kick the point home, Ari’s father brushes past him without looking at him, turning to kiss and hug his mother with flaunted heterosexual ardour. Heterosexual victory is being paraded before the outsider, for, as a gay man, Ari can never expect to be



similarly congratulated for his lifestyle choices. Little wonder then, that like many homosexual people, he exhibits a cynical disdain for the institution of marriage and the very idea of procreation.

Oppressed for their sexual preferences, and constantly confronted with unattainable media images of heterosexual bliss, homosexual attitudes towards the straight community can sometimes be seen to express *ressentiment*. The gay terminology for straight couples – ‘breeders’ – has nastily humorous connotations. It conjures images of social engineering, where privileged and superior groups (homosexuals) are excused from the odiously biological tasks of procreation.

Coser writes that:

*Any appearance, gesture, dress, or way of speaking which is symptomatic of a ‘class’ suffices to stir up revenge and hatred, or in other cases fear, anxiety, and respect. When the repression is complete, the result is a general negativism – a sudden, violent, seemingly unsystematic and unfounded rejection of things, situations, or natural objects whose loose connection with the original cause of the hatred can only be discovered by a complicated analysis.*<sup>230</sup>

In this case the ‘class’ against which such general negativism is directed is the heterosexual couple, who represent everything Ari cannot have – respectability, a brick house in the suburbs, acceptance in the Greek community and a kind of independence from parental authority. In the film’s opening wedding scene, Ari’s refusal to dive for the bridal garter is echoed in his gesture as he walks away from the wedding, ripping off the carnation in his lapel and throwing it into the gutter. Ari’s taunt to the newly engaged Joe is significant: ‘They’ve offered you a house haven’t they? A big fat juicy deposit haven’t they? Marriage all arranged is it?’ In this comment is revealed the conflation of Ari’s idea of marriage with bribery and hypocrisy, the succumbing to parental expectation. In Ari’s eyes, Joe has ‘given in’, surrendering his integrity and giving up his chance for freedom. He is no longer an ally with Ari in his resistance to control, and has become yet another symbol of heterosexual dominance.

The feelings of oppression experienced by gay people may lead them to disdain not only the heterosexual values of marriage and child-rearing, but also to refuse

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<sup>230</sup> L. A. Coser, op.cit., p. 70.



any kind of commitment or romantic intimacy; to flee any sign of ‘settling down’, even when this is between same-sex partners. Ari’s *ressentiment* in this regard exhibits itself in his rejection of Sean, a secretly gay ‘Anglo’ uni student whom he befriends. There is an obvious sexual attraction between them, but also the beginnings of friendship and a true connection as they share coffee and discuss music, films and life philosophies. Later in the evening they meet up at a Melbourne gay dance club, Three Faces. Ari tries to usher Sean into one of the private booths where they can have hurried sex, but Sean resists this scenario, saying ‘not here’. Instead they go home to Sean’s flat, and as they begin to kiss and undress each other, it appears that, for once, Ari may manage a sexual encounter that is both emotional and physical.

The hopefulness of this moment is shattered when Sean tells Ari that he thinks he is falling in love with him. This comment, though undoubtedly premature and awkward, seems to trigger off a disproportionate response in Ari, a repulsion that propels him to a violent misuse of his friend for sexual gratification, nearly choking him in the process. It seems that Ari is determined to wrest the encounter away from any kind of romance, to force the relationship back to a level that is purely physical, and not necessarily consensual. Sean, shocked and appalled at Ari’s sudden violence, fights back, punching and yelling, and throwing Ari, naked, outside into the corridor, where he sobs and cowers in self-pity and regret.

### ***Ressentiment and Race***

With *ressentiment*’s associations with ‘slave morality’, it is understandable that U.S. cultural theorists like Denzin have spoken of it in relation to the situation of the American Blacks and the racial tensions in that society. But what are the particular manifestations of *ressentiment* within Australian society, a society that is, by many standards, relatively tolerant and peaceful, and a society that proudly professes its multiculturalism?

As has been mentioned before, the likelihood of *ressentiment* developing is greater in a society where identity is gained through competition with others who are similarly striving, than it is in a society in which ‘fixed orders of rank prevail’.<sup>231</sup> While a society in which ‘fixed orders of rank prevail’ may be in

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.



many ways an egalitarian's nightmare, it should also be acknowledged that a multicultural society opens itself up to a plethora of new competitions and conflicts for identity preservation and recognition.

Australian society is one that would like to see itself (and the rhetoric confirms this) as tolerant and multicultural, with a proud tradition of egalitarianism. There is a certain romance to the discussions of 'embracing difference', of learning from each other's cultures and, in particular, of sampling each other's cuisine. There are enormous discrepancies, however, between these ideals and the realities of persistent racism, a history of mistreatment of the indigenous peoples, perceived favouritism of some ethnic minorities, and the imported tensions, often ancient, between certain racial groups (for example the Serbs and Croats.) These discrepancies between the glossy tourist-brochure blurb and the gritty realities of living in crowded melting-pot cities nurture *ressentiment*.

The *ressentiment* of the multicultural society can reveal itself in many different ways. In some cases it is exhibited by violence towards self and others, while in others, it reveals itself through an inversion of values, a bitter hatred of one's own racial group. Conversely, it can be seen in the time-frozen preservation of ethnic culture through construction of barriers against the rest of the modern world.

*Head On* is a film that bravely shows these conflicts as arguments that are both lived out and explicitly verbally debated. Predominantly concerned with Greek characters, there are also characters who are Lebanese, Turkish, Asian and 'Anglo', each of whom represent certain sides in the racial debate. In terms of expressing *ressentiment*, however, the primary protagonist of interest is Ari, for in him we can identify someone who is relating to his 'Greekness' in a way that is fast becoming the inward-turning hatred of *ressentiment* man.

### *Racial Self-hatred & Racial Ghettoism*

Ari is both Greek and Australian, occupying that liminal ethnic position in which so many of us now find ourselves, of fitting imperfectly into any categorisation; he belongs nowhere. In this difficult position Ari has opportunity and reason to hate both his Greekness and his non-Greekness. From his vantage-point as an Australian youth he can see, with outsider's eyes, the senselessness of many of the materialist Greek values. As a Greek youth he can see the cultural



impoverishment of Australia, and can appreciate the beauty of the traditions, the warmth of extended family and tight blood bonds that are evident within his Greek community.

Ari's appreciation of his parents' culture is most apparent in his love of traditional dancing. When he dances, we see him, as at no other time, participating freely and unselfconsciously in life. It is only when he dances that we see him making fragile yet authentic connections with his mother and father. These are tenuous graspings at intimacy that quickly transform themselves into reminders of his ethnic inadequacy, for Ari, like so many children of migrants from many different countries,<sup>232</sup> is never able to be the preserver of tradition that his parents need him to be.

This is demonstrated in the scene in which Ari dances with his mother and sister in their suburban kitchen. The radio is playing an American 60s rock 'n' roll tune. Ari's mother says, 'I remember when this song came out'. Her children laugh at her as she shares a cigarette with them and takes a slug of whiskey. The three of them start dancing the traditional Tsifiteli dance to the popular western music. It is a moment when the generation gap collapses and the two cultures melt effortlessly into each other. Ari's father walks in on this scene, interrupting the party atmosphere. Angrily he turns the radio off and says, 'If you're going to *dance* a Tsifiteli, *play* a Tsifiteli.' He puts a Greek record on the stereo, and indicates to Ari that he wants to dance with him. Ari joins him, reluctant at first, but quickly entering into the spirit of the dance. Arms around each other they sing in Greek.

Sitting down afterwards, his father tells him, 'You're not a bad dancer. Not like me of course. I learnt the proper way.' Ari responds with half-resentful half-admiring interest, 'The good old days with Vasili hey?' This becomes a heated argument as to why Ari still maintains contact with the drunken outcast Vasili and his transvestite son Johnny. It is an exchange that demonstrates the dilemma facing Ari, for no matter how much he embraces his culture, (and there is only a limited sense in which he even *wants* to do this) he will never be living it in the

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<sup>232</sup> For example, Arundhati Parmar, writes that 'The problems that first generation Indian-Australians face are primarily the result of an overwhelming need, felt by the parent generation, to maintain their indigenous culture in a foreign country.' A. Parmar, 'Juggling Identities: The Dilemma of First-Generation Asian-Australians', *Amida* magazine, Vol 5 no 3, June/July 1999, p. 15.



‘proper’ or authentic way. He will always be an awkward creature, a slave of his hybridity, expressing *ressentiment* towards both his Greekness and his Australianness.

Ari’s ambivalence about his Greek identity is illustrated in his answer to the question, ‘Aren’t you proud of your Greek heritage?’ ‘Proud?’ he answers, ‘I had nothing to do with it!’ Such ambivalence expresses itself in the various ways he uses the abusive term ‘Wog’. Driving past a group of Greek youths he angrily yells out the window at them, ‘Fuckin Wogs!’ The manner in which he says this is both playful and aggressive, containing the hatred of the outsider towards the Greek, as well as the more affectionate self-mocking appropriation of the Greek using the term towards himself.

On another occasion, Ari has just heard that his cousin Joe has become engaged to Tina. He gives the couple a disgusted look and begins an argument about the choice of CD on the stereo. Tina comes and stands aggressively close to him, saying, ‘You think I’m a dumb-shit wog don’t you?’ To this Ari replies, ‘Yeah, you’re a wog. So what?’ Tina looks at him and, in the accent of Greek Australian performer ‘Effie’, says “Oh m’god! How embarrassment!” At this they both laugh and the tension dissipates.

Effie, the creation of Melbourne comic Mary Coustos is a crass, big-haired, lipstick wearing, gum-chewing Greek girl. Through the appropriation of Effie’s trademark accent and phraseology, Tina expresses the ambivalence towards her own Greekness, acknowledging the ‘embarrassment’ of being a ‘wog’, yet embracing and transcending the stereotype through its conscious appropriation. To be a wog is a matter of pride *and* shame; it is both laughable and serious.

It is with similarly mixed intentions that many other abusive names are thrown around by Ari and his friends. Johnny and Ari direct Greek insults at each other, using the Greek words for gays, sluts and prostitutes. They laugh. This is a game between them of neutralising the insults they receive outside their comfortable friendship. In another exchange, Betty and Ari (after an abortive attempt at heterosexual sex) are in her bedroom together. She sits astride Ari and hits him, calling him a poofter. He throws this back at her – ‘Dyke’. Her anger dissipates and she tells him again that he is a ‘faggot’. Ari responds, ‘I’m a man, and I take it



up the arse.’ Betty looks at him, and without pausing says, ‘Of course you do. You’re Greek. We all do.’ It is a clever response, encompassing several racial stereotypes. Firstly, there is the acknowledgement of the preconception that sex ‘the Greek way’ is anal sex. Secondly there is the expression of feelings of racial persecution, that being Greek means being ‘done over’, being ‘shafted’, being abused.

Though Betty appears to be laughing when she cracks this joke, immediately after making it she breaks down in frustration and anger. ‘Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I hate this fucking life!’ As she sobs Ari looks on helplessly. The implication is that her hatred of ‘this fucking life’ has a lot to do with her Greekness, and the constraints it entails. Scheler writes that ‘...revenge tends to be transformed into *ressentiment* the more it is directed against lasting situation which are felt to be “injurious” but beyond one’s control – in other words, the more the injury is experienced as destiny.’<sup>233</sup> In this case, both Betty and Ari feel that they are injured by their Greekness, imprisoned by it, and destined to remain so.

### *Racial Hatred Projected Against the Other*

Perhaps the most straightforward expression of racial *ressentiment* is that which is directed towards the other. The ‘existential anxiety, fear and hatred’ of which Denzin speaks, here manifests itself in latent or actual violence towards those people outside one’s particular racial or ethnic grouping.<sup>234</sup> *Head On* presents the various arguments surrounding such racism in a scene where a group of people at a Greek dancing club discuss race and national identity. They sit around the table, a mixed group, mainly Greek uni students, but also some Anglo ones and some older Greek men. The following exchange takes place:

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|------------|---|
| Student 1: | The idea of the nation state is a thing of the past.                                      |
| Student 2: | But immigration should be cut back. It’s an ecological argument.                          |
| Student 1: | That bullshit feeds into racism.  |
| Student 3: | It’s too late, they’ve already let us in. The barbarians are inside the gates! (laughter) |

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<sup>233</sup> M. Scheler, op.cit., p. 50.

<sup>234</sup> N.K. Denzin, op.cit., p. 55.



Old man: But they're not like us. The Vietnamese spit in the street. They give them houses and jobs but we had to struggle for everything.

Ariadne: That's what's wrong with this country. Everyone hates everyone. The Skips hate the Wogs, the Wogs hate the Asians. And everyone hates the Blacks.

Ari: You've never even met a Koori!

Ariadne: So what?

Ari: (To Ariadne) Fuck politics. Let's dance!

Within this friendly debate are contained many currents – the old man's resentment of the new generation of 'privileged' immigrants; the multiculturalism of the students who have studied the history of the indigenous peoples but are yet to actually meet an Aborigine; the concerns of environmentalists who perceive immigration to be a threat to Australia's physical environment; and lastly, Ari, who is justifiably cynical of all these positions, yet can offer no alternative but to ignore it all and just dance.

It is difficult to separate Ari's racial self-hatred from his abusive remarks to other racial groups. Ultimately Ari's own Greekness makes him an 'other' in his own eyes and he expresses *ressentiment* towards not only it, but towards all signs of other ethnic groups and their attempts to hold on to their identity. This is demonstrated in his drive-by shouting at all the ethnic groupings he sees on the city pavement. Driving through the city are Ari, Joe, Betty and Tina. It is a Saturday night and the camera flicks from sign to sign, telling us, in a quick and critical photo-essay that this is Melbourne. We see Flinders Street Station, the Crown Casino and various glass-fronted brightly-lit luxury hotels. A billboard sign flashes by: 'Melbourne's my town. The Herald Sun is my paper.' Speeding past are the faces of individuals and groups of many racial backgrounds. Ari winds down his window and screams at them:

*'Face it motherfuckers! You're not in Europe any more.  
This isn't Asia. This isn't Africa. Pray to God, pray to  
Allah, pray to Buddha, pray to anything you want.  
Nothin's going to save you kids!'*

His next comment – 'Fuckin wogs!' directed towards a group of Greeks – indicates that Ari's abuse is not of groups opposed or 'other' to his own ethnic group. Rather, it is directed at ethnicity per se, for as he sees it, all these groups



are lost and deluded to imagine that they have found a home in Australia. Ari's *ressentiment* seems to be a stifled protest directed at multiculturalism itself, and at Australia, the nation that professes it.

Scheler writes that 'The more a permanent social pressure is felt to be a "fatality", the less it can free forces for the practical transformation of these conditions, and the more it will lead to indiscriminate criticism without any positive aims.'<sup>235</sup> Ari's entire life seems to be such an indiscriminate criticism, of his own culture, of Australian society, of work, of marriage, and of multiculturalism. Yes, Ari will shout out the window, he will protest the lack of meaning in life and the injustices he perceives, but he will never act, and it is this lack of action which makes him such an exemplar of *ressentiment*.

It is interesting to note that so many of this film's scenes containing latent racial conflict tend to deflect violence through the use of humour. Even the previously mentioned scene in which Ari shouts abuse out the car window has a crazy harmless quality to it. The humour is even more explicit in another scene in which Ari and Johnny (here dressed in drag as 'Toula') take a cab and converse with the Turkish taxi-driver. This is a beautiful moment where culture's meet, negotiate tension and violence and then overcome it with laughter and a sharing of values.

Having established that the Taxi driver is Turkish, Johnny/Toula says to him, 'Your great-grandfather raped my great-grandmother.' There is a pause, a moment of tension when all three men look at each other suspiciously, aware of the violence that can erupt from such ancient aggro. Then, led by Johnny, they break out into raucous laughter. The cabbie pulls out a joint and they share it together. He puts a cassette into the player, and they discuss the historical struggle of the Greek students against a Fascist dictator.

Interrupting this pleasant exchange of drugs and philosophy is the intrusion of a police car that witnesses the taxi going through a red light. As Denzin argues, 'The oppressive structures of racism and sexism are still firmly in place. State structures continue to erode the divisions between public and private lives,'<sup>236</sup> and nowhere is this more obvious than in the treatment of the two Greek men by the

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<sup>235</sup> M. Scheler, op.cit., p. 51.

<sup>236</sup> N. K. Denzin, op.cit., p. 149.



policemen. Seeing that Ari and Johnny are in high spirits, the policemen arrest them and hold them for hours in a violently bright white cell. The senior sergeant is an Anglo-Australian, while his partner is a young Greek policeman. Ari and Johnny are made to undress, and then naked, they are humiliated and beaten. Tula, in her falsetto voice, inflames the anger of the policemen in her refusal to subordinate herself silently. The Greek policeman is embarrassed by his shared ethnicity with the two victims, and the Australian policeman encourages this embarrassment until, in a frenzy of hatred and loathing and shame, the young policeman attacks Tula on the floor, kicking her for what seems to be hours. Ari, naked also, silently watches. Yes, there is a gun to his head, but there seems to be an apathy in his response, a refusal to risk anything or to involve himself in his best friend's torture.

This disturbing scene reminds viewers that for all the humourous deflections of racial tension and homophobia that may occur in everyday life and in the media, the oppressive structures of racism and sexism are, indeed still firmly in place. For all that Australian city life has a very visible acceptance of gay culture and a philosophical commitment to cultural pluralism, the reality is that state structures do continue to erode the divisions between public and private lives. The discrepancy between the image and the reality provides ideal conditions for *ressentiment* to brew.

### **Global Youth Culture and *Ressentiment***

The images and stories by which young people live their lives today are less culturally specific than ever before. The languages of film, music, television, and global advertising are the universal language of the young. *Head On* illustrates this with its subtle but pervasive references. Ari's addiction to his Walkman provides him with a constant soundtrack of heavy dance music against which to live his life. His world is posterized with the icons of rebellious youth culture – Jim Morrison looms large as Ari shoots up some drugs. His abortive courtship with Sean is based upon a mutual love of *The Rolling Stones*, a discussion of Madonna, and the flirtatious suggestion that Ari looks like Hollywood actor John Cusack from the Stephen Frears movie, *The Grifters*. As Ari tentatively suggests his gayness with Betty in her bedroom, he flicks through a book of old Hollywood pictures – Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift, Debbie Reynolds in the film



*Singing in the Rain*. This is the international iconography of gay culture, and to place Ari next to it while he discusses his sexual orientation is to signify his identification with it, and his yearnings for its ideals of beauty and glamour.

Christos Tsolkias' book upon which the film is based, makes this connection with music and film much more overtly. In the concluding paragraphs Ari says:

*I like music, I like film. I'm going to have sex, listen to music and watch film for the rest of my life...my epitaph will read... 'he ran to escape history. That's his story.'*

Ari uses these cultural products as an escape from himself and the reality of his environment, and yet, it could be argued, it is these continual media images of desirable but unattainable ideals which fuel his *ressentiment* and rob him of the ability to act effectively to change his unhappy circumstances. They contribute to his 'tormenting conflict between desire and impotence.'<sup>237</sup>

The problems Ari faces are not unique to either his generation or his Australian situation. Chris Berry notes that the film ties in the current generation of teens with the GenX-ers of the late 80s and early 90s. Both groups share in a very particular kind of rebellion. Berry writes that:

*These are not children fighting to throw off the restrictions of conservative morality and an over disciplined society of mindless rules and regulations so that they can grasp the pleasures and promise of a liberated life. They have grown up into disappointment and narrowed horizons, where the political rhetoric of their parents' generation appears as just that: empty rhetoric.*<sup>238</sup>

Berry suggests that Ari's conflicts have relevance for young people both in Australia and in Western industrialised societies the world over:

*With the emphasis on unemployment and lack of prospects, they resonate more broadly across a whole generation and more of younger Australians. I am much older than Ari, but not quite old enough to make it into the baby boomer generation. I grew up in the UK watching anti-Vietnam war demonstrations on television and hearing the sexual revolution whispered about by my parents, but when I finished school I headed into economic depression, no jobs, AIDS, Ronald Reagan and*

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<sup>237</sup> M. Scheler, op.cit., p. 75.

<sup>238</sup> Chris Berry, 'Chris Berry takes a sidelong look at *Head On*', Metro Magazine, No. 118, 1999, p. 36.



*Margaret Thatcher. I am sure the same is true for just about everyone in Western societies of my age and younger. It is not necessarily that one blames the baby boomer generation for the change. But what is clear is that the models of liberation and mastery that structured their rites of passage and coming of age have had little to offer young people over the last couple of decades.*<sup>239</sup>

Ari's model of 'liberation and mastery' is of concern, being primarily the expression or *ressentiment* in every area of his life. The most disturbing component of his attitude, which is echoed in numerous texts of the genre, is not its resistance to consumer capitalist culture and its work ethic, but the fact that the resistance to these is not replaced by anything better. Ari's answer to the difficult questions of life seems to be composed merely of the lowering of expectations and the use of pop culture, drugs and alcohol to help pass the time and ease the pain of a meaningless existence.

### **Cowardice and *Ressentiment*: *Head On*'s Attitude towards its Subject**

The fact that *Head On* presents a central character exemplifying *ressentiment*, does not, of course, mean that the text itself supports such a socio-political orientation. What then is the film's attitude towards its subject? To what extent is it a criticism of Ari's philosophy and his way of dealing with the world?

Like Ari, who exhibits ambivalence about his ethnic, sexual and social identities, the film itself seems ambivalent towards its central character. At one moment he appears sympathetic and reasonable, at another he seems very much like the animal his mother declares him to be – crude, heartless and without humanity. In an interview, the director, Ana Kokkinos, was asked how she dealt with the fact that in the book on which the film is based, Ari is not a very sympathetic character. She responded that this 'was a central issue, and that the film stands or falls on it.'<sup>240</sup> Her method of dealing with this was to choose a 'compelling' actor with 'an extraordinary screen presence'.<sup>241</sup> The physical choice of Alex Dimitriades to play Ari adds a dimension to the character that the book cannot

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>240</sup> Ana Kokkinos, interviewed by Andrew L. Urban, 'Head On Interviews', *Cinema Papers*, No.125, June 1998, p. 28.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.



possibly express, for it gives us an Ari who is beautiful. This is a significant factor in the cinematic representation of *ressentiment*, tempering its ugliness and giving the destructive emotion a certain seedy glamour. For no matter how sweaty and dirty and depraved Ari appears, the fact remains that he is good to look at, a sweaty, dirty and depraved Greek God.

There are numerous scenes in which Ari is presented as a severely compromised character. Already described has been the scene in which Ari turns on Sean, transforming their sexual act into one of violence and coercion. There is no way in which the film could be seen to condone this. Neither does the film seem approving of Ari's behaviour when he remains silent while Johnny/Tula is being bashed by the policemen. Despite the fact that he has a gun pointed at him, the film seems intent on presenting him as a coward. As Johnny and Ari leave the police station, Ari says, 'You should've just kept quiet Johnny.' Johnny's response is startling. 'Haven't we always said that what we hate about the wogs is that they're gutless?' He pushes Ari down to the ground, saying, 'Get down. Every time you keep your mouth shut, every time you keep quiet, that's where you stay.' Ari replies rather limply, 'My truth is my own.' Johnny says, 'You have to stand up against all the shit and all the hypocrisy. It's the only way to make a difference.' Ari looks at him helplessly. 'What could I do?' Johnny walks away, refusing to share a taxi with Ari. The film seems to be saying, in sympathy with Johnny, that it is the *act* of demanding recognition, whether or not this recognition is ever given, that keeps a person's dignity and spirit alive.

In this exchange Ari appears weak and without conviction. His protestations of 'my truth is my own' and previously, 'some people talk freedom, some people live it,' seem flimsy and pathetic when contrasted with Johnny's unconventional heroism. Where Ari is confused and secretive about his identity, Johnny has been firm in his decision to fight secrecy and dishonesty. He has 'come out' to the Greek community, appearing in drag and dancing to a bemused audience, and he has willingly paid the price of defying social conventions. By contrast, Ari's secretiveness is indicative of his *ressentiment*. Script co-writer Andrew Bovell notes of Ari that he is '...all about not declaring himself, keeping secrets, living



life in the shadows, and legitimizing that as a choice.<sup>242</sup> Nietzsche's description of *ressentiment* man seems poetically fitting:

*...the man of ressentiment is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul squints...[the man of ressentiment] loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as his world, his security, his refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble.*<sup>243</sup>

The concluding scenes of *Head On* are puzzling, for they refuse to let the audience condemn or praise Ari. This is not a happy ending, but neither is it completely tragic. Ari stands alone on a dock, industrial skyscape reaching up behind him. With his Walkman earphones inserted, arms outstretched, he turns his face to the blue sky. In the distance we see the Westgate Bridge. He turns in circles and the camera cranes above him. As Chris Berry has noted, these visuals invoke '...all the liberatory imagery of rite of passage films.'<sup>244</sup> Yet Ari has not declared any faith in the future, he has not 'found himself' or 'come out' or overcome any of his confusions and problems. His voice-over confirms this:

*'I'm a whore, a dog and a cunt. My father's insults make me strong. I accept them all. I'm sliding towards the sewer. I'm not struggling. I can smell the shit, but I'm still breathing. I'm going to live my life. I'm not going to make a difference, I'm not going to change a thing. No one's going to remember me when I'm dead. I'm a sailor and a whore and I will be till the end of the world.'*

This is a dark self-loathing statement, and yet, as Berry notes, this is the film's virtue, it's '...refusal to shy away from the multiple ways in which Ari abuses himself and those around him.'<sup>245</sup> It is this unflinching honesty that makes the film powerfully disturbing. The liberation imagery softens the blow of the words, and, it could be argued, gives a false sense of freedom to them. But ultimately the words tell us that Ari has indeed begun to experience injury as his destiny, and has thus embraced the emotion of *ressentiment*. Yet for us, the audience, engaged

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<sup>242</sup> Andrew Bovell, interviewed by Andrew L. Urban, 'Head On Interviews', *Cinema Papers*, No. 125, June 1998, p. 72.

<sup>243</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Francis Golffing, Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, 1956, 'On the genealogy of morals, I, 10, ii.'

<sup>244</sup> C. Berry, op.cit., loc.cit.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., p. 37.



in the act of viewing this scene, of seeing Ari's anger and passion and energy, we are not convinced that he will be forever forgotten. The telling of this tale, with its explicit renderings of *ressentiment*, may be seen as allowing the viewer to transcend the hopelessness, to see some pattern in it and to skeptically challenge Ari's youthful nihilism.

There is another way of reading these concluding sequences, however, which seems more convincing: That Ari's subjectivity, his status as a character within the plot is as a kind of anti-identity, a cipher for the emptiness that is at the heart of the migrants' dream for their children. The dream is barren, fruitless, a bud shrivelled on the vine.

The beginning and ending sequences of *Head On* contain mock documentary footage of Greek migrants on a boat to Australia. In the last images, as Ari is talking about himself as a 'whore', we see him kneeling, presumably ready to perform sexual favours on another anonymous man. Intercut with this scene is the black and white footage of a young Greek mother with her baby, stepping off the boat and looking solemnly into the camera of new Australia. We recognise her as Toula, the now dead mother of transvestite Johnny, the woman who's identity he has theatrically assumed in his night life. Holding the baby boy in her arms, the real Toula looks tragic. The juxtaposition of this imagery seems to be making a sad declaration, 'look what has become of it all. So much for our dreams of a better life. What a pitiful waste. Where is the better life we wanted for our children?' The hopes of a promised land are denied yet again, in a well-traversed Australian narrative tradition.<sup>246</sup>

Turner, in his analysis of the Australian film *Sunday Too Far Away*, has noted that that film's documentary framing served to collapse the individual characters back into history, and back into their social grouping.<sup>247</sup> The final framing in *Head On* appears to be constructing Ari as another victim of history, of social forces larger than himself, individuated, like the shearers in *Sunday Too Far Away*, only by the things he weakly opposes. He is defined by what he is against – rampant materialism, employment, marriage, the suburbs, love and solidarity.

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<sup>246</sup> G. Turner, op.cit., p. 80.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., pp. 98-99.



Alternatively, the qualities that can be loosely associated with Ari's individuality, like drugs, sex and music, serve only to reinforce his anonymity, his complete lack of a set of values that transcends those he rejects. The freedom that he has available to him is of a limited and limiting kind. And here, perhaps incongruously, he finds himself in the company of many a cinematic Australian anti-hero.

### ***Praise* – A Love Story?**

Andrew McGahan's 1992 Vogel Award winning novel *Praise* is generally acknowledged to be among the first of a spate of grunge-lit semi-autobiographical Australian novels.<sup>248</sup> Using a deceptively transparent literary style it is shockingly frank and relentlessly confessional. Its central character, Gordon, is an unemployed, chain-smoking asthmatic in his early twenties. He embarks upon a disastrous love affair with Cynthia, an eczema-plagued nymphomaniac with a weakness for drugs and alcohol. Despite the many unsavoury details – drinking binges, heroin injections, abortions, premature ejaculations and an unpleasant bout of genital warts, to name but a few – the novel is compulsively readable and darkly funny. The film follows on, capturing perfectly the mood and tone of the book.

Gordon, the narrator of the novel *Praise*, is an unforgettably individual character, made so by his beautifully ironic sarcasm and dry-as-dust wit. His self-awareness takes this story to levels of extreme and singular humour that will not allow him to be collapsed back into any particular generation or social grouping. Yet there is much in this character that demonstrates the confined and impotent emotional and physical life of *ressentiment* being. While he may be emblematic of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century slacker generation, Gordon's particular attitudes to work, love, sex and fate have their roots firmly in the Australian narrative tradition of stoic endurance and individual powerlessness.

### ***Ressentiment*: dead end jobs and voluntary unemployment**

Directed by US expatriate John Curran, with a screenplay written by McGahan himself, the film of *Praise* conveys a similar energetic ugliness to that of the

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<sup>248</sup> For a journalistic analysis of the novels of this period see Murray Waldren, 'The Dirty Realists: a new kind of novelist excites a new generation', *The Australian Magazine*, June 24-25, 1995.



novel. The story begins as Gordon (Peter Fenton) decides to resign from his job as an attendant at a drive-in bottle-shop. He has been rostered to work four days straight and has no intention of labouring so long and hard. As a mozzie-zapper buzzes violently in the corner, Gordon stands behind the bottle-shop counter, watching an indecisive customer opening and shutting a fridge full of beer. In voice-over he expresses his disdain for the job:

*'To be merely competent at it – to refrain, say, from abusing forty or fifty per cent of your customers – often took a soul-destroying effort. To have enthusiasm demanded of you, that was more than the job was worth.'*

Back at his dingy Brisbane boarding house, Gordon sits naked on the toilet. The bathroom is squalid and mouldy and the camera lingers unsympathetically on his round shoulders and flabby body, a body that is prematurely decaying. As he sits clutching his roll of toilet paper, Gordon decides that he won't work for a while, that he might try going on the dole:

*'I didn't know what I was going to do with my time. I thought maybe I'd just sit around for a few months. It would be easy. You just have to keep your expectations under control.'*

Here the camera shifts to show that opposite Gordon, in the shower cubicle, a fat old man is masturbating and leering at him.

*'Expectations are the problem with everything.'*

Gordon shuts the door with resignation, a physical gesture he repeats throughout the film. He believes that a person's out-of-control expectations are responsible for making him discontented with the pittance meted out at the dole office and the long aimless hours spent staring at the ceiling. Therefore, if he expects nothing – shutting the door on both good and bad opportunities alike – he will be content.

Here we see the self-inflicted constriction of Gordon's horizon in response to what he perceives as a meaningless and unrewarding work environment. To work at all seems alien to his nature. Though he is an intelligent and capable person (we know this because he tells us of his good grades, his attempted novels and his partially completed university degree) Gordon is keenly aware of the costs of working and studying. More importantly, he is completely unconvinced that such exertion will necessarily bring rewards, or that these rewards are worthwhile pursuing. In a classic display of *ressentiment* logic, Gordon chooses to lower his



expectations rather than to fight his depressing and dead-end position in life. Like the slave who sees no way of escape and therefore starts to despise freedom itself, the unemployed, or under-employed, like Gordon, or Ari, may adopt a similar attitude towards work. With soaring levels of youth unemployment, good work is extremely difficult for young people to find. The inversion of values can lead them to view all work and all employers with suspicion and fatalism.

In another perfect illustration of transvaluation, we see Gordon presenting his decision to go on the dole as an heroic adventure. Though his chief aim seems to be to go through life doing as little as possible, Gordon is fearful of going on the dole and afraid of the surveillance this entails. In the book *Praise*, Gordon tells us about his fears of being controlled and harassed by social security:

*'No one bothered you if you were employed. But then no one bothered you if you were dead either. Employment was death. Safety was death. These things had to be understood.'*<sup>249</sup>

In a wry twist of reason Gordon has transvalued work, seeing it as a cowardly act, an acquiescence to the path of least resistance. He has jokingly reconfigured the act of deliberately being unemployed and going on the dole as an act of bravery and daring; the choice of life over death. The amusingly laconic tone of both the book and film suggest that Gordon has some awareness that his attitude is twisted. Nevertheless, there is a fatalistic conviction in the way he lives out and is complicit in his own defeatedness.

Australian fatalism has been explored at length by Turner, who writes that our dominant myths depend

*...heavily on notions of acceptance, upon the tolerance of frustration, and on the recognition of the leveling nature of Australian experience; and which also exposes the essential weakness and destructiveness of any resistance based upon assumptions of uniqueness, of superiority of class, of intelligence or destiny.'*<sup>250</sup>

The characters of such historic narratives are disappointed and humiliated. '...not dramatically by a malevolent, vindictive force – but inevitably by the continent's

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<sup>249</sup> A. McGahan, *Praise*, op.cit., p. 27.

<sup>250</sup> G. Turner, op.cit., p. 49.



callous indifference to their hopes.<sup>251</sup> Gordon seems to echo a modern homage to these sentiments when he muses about the game of scrabble, a pursuit to which he and Cynthia devote many beer-soaked hours:

*'Scrabble. Cynthia understood the truth about the game.  
Not many people I knew did. They sweated over the board,  
agonised, threw down any little word just to end the pain.  
The point was never to try too hard. If the letters weren't  
there, there was nothing you could do. Luck was all that  
mattered.'*

This seems to be the philosophy Gordon applies to the rest of his life. He has found his own version of '...the alibi that we need to accept the status quo in a society where there are strong physical, social and hegemonic reasons for doing so.'<sup>252</sup> His life's irritations, squalor and poverty are made bearable by the belief that luck will determine all outcomes. Effort, exertion and sweat are rendered pointless. Failure is excused, and laziness is logical.

### ***Ressentiment Love***

*Praise* is, ostensibly, a love story, yet the love we see is *ressentiment* love, and as becomes quickly obvious, this is a very warped kind of love indeed. Scheler writes that *ressentiment* love is:

*...inspired by self-hatred, by hatred of one's own  
weakness and misery. The mind is always on the point of  
departing for distant places. Afraid of seeing itself and its  
inferiority, it is driven to give itself to the other – not  
because of his worth, but merely for the sake of his  
'otherness' ...there is nothing but the urge to turn away  
from oneself and to lose oneself in other people's  
business.'*<sup>253</sup>

Gordon's love for Cynthia is, in many respects, a perfect illustration of such love. His initial meeting with her is borne out of boredom and *ennui*. On a dull rainy Brisbane afternoon he prowls his dingy flat, flicking from channel to channel on the television. There is nothing worth watching, nothing to do. Suddenly the phone rings. It is Cynthia. It could be anybody; the point is that the phone-call is a sweet release from his own empty company.

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., p.52.

<sup>253</sup> M. Scheler, op.cit., p. 95.



Cynthia's response to Gordon also seems to be impersonal. She displays a kind of frenzied desire to escape from herself, an impersonal desire that is expressed sexually. In one of her first conversations with Gordon she tells him why her parents threw her out of home when she was 14:

*'...I kept bringing home boys and fucking them. I've got this real thing about penises.'*

Both Cynthia and Gordon collude in creating the ultimate *ressentiment* love affair. They each want to be loved in their individuality; to be appreciated for their specific qualities. Yet this is more than they themselves can actually give. Their desire to escape themselves becomes a compulsive need for each other.

Scheler writes that the fake love of *ressentiment* man sees actual 'good' in sickness and poverty; *ressentiment* love does not spring from abundance, but is an escape from self; *ressentiment* love is a form of self-hatred.<sup>254</sup> Gordon's feelings towards women exemplify this form of love. He writes that women's bodies do nothing for him, and that he finds healthy well-conditioned women's bodies especially discomfiting, as they suggest, in his words, 'a dubious preoccupation with good living.'<sup>255</sup> Fitness is a curse, Gordon tells us, for '...there has to be room in a life for drinking too much and eating badly and lying around in front of the TV for days on end.'<sup>256</sup> Gordon's lack of lust for healthy women is an unusual illustration of the sexual expression of an inversion of values.

It is not only physical health that Gordon finds off-putting, but also emotional health. He says that he is excited and attracted by 'indulgent personalities, fucked-up personalities, ugliness, fear...the situation of fear.'<sup>257</sup> In the person of Cynthia, Gordon has found the ultimate 'fucked-up' personality, for not only is she a troubled addict with a constant craving for sex and drugs, she is also physically damaged, her allergies causing her skin to bleed and flake whenever she is touched. Gordon is drawn to Cynthia, not despite these problems, it seems, but *because* of them. His feelings for her are borne not out of a healthy respect or admiration, or even out of a wholesome physical attraction. Instead, his 'love'

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> A. McGahan, op.cit , p. 48.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., p.19.



grows out of a kind of horrified fascination that passively submits to the force of her domineering personality.

As Scheler notes, 'One cannot love anybody without turning away from oneself.'<sup>258</sup> The crucial question, he states, is '...whether the movement [away from oneself] is prompted by the desire toward a positive value, or whether the intention is a radical escape from oneself.'<sup>259</sup> The love Cynthia and Gordon show towards one another involves a large degree of forgetting themselves. This in itself is not the problem, for as Scheler admits, it is a component of healthy love. The dysfunctional element here is the fact that both Cynthia and Gordon crave a 'radical escape' from themselves, an escape that has nothing to do with desiring a positive value. They reveal this impulse to escape not only through the way they love, but in the way in which they attempt to bury their lives in drugs, television, scrabble, or even through the playing of suicidal games on dark country roads.

Cynthia and Gordon's ideas about love fit neatly with Scheler's description of *ressentiment* love as a destructive and loathsome emotion. In a revealing scene they lie in bed listening to the neighbouring couple having a loud and violent row. Suddenly there is silence. Then the following deadpan exchange takes place:

<i>Gordon:</i>	<i>There, he's killed her.</i>
<i>Cynthia:</i>	<i>It must be love.</i>
<i>Gordon:</i>	<i>I suppose that's why he did it.</i>
<i>Cynthia:</i>	<i>Love is a dangerous thing.</i>

Though this conversation occurs with a wry humour, the views of love expressed therein are consistent with the way in which this unusual couple conduct their affair. They inflict pain upon each other and they collude in each other's self-destruction. Gordon and Cynthia, with their particular version of love, will indeed find it to be a less than enlivening thing. When Gordon tells a member of his family that he might be in love with Cynthia, she overhears him and is triumphant. He replies that she shouldn't have heard it, and that she shouldn't believe it. 'I can't live up to it. It'll kill me', he says. Gordon is aware of his incapacity, and also aware that Cynthia's form of love is truly terrifying. In a spirit of love she 'wastes an erection', going down on him in front of the

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<sup>258</sup> M. Scheler, op.cit., p. 95

<sup>259</sup> Ibid.



television despite his protestations. On the TV screen he sees a cheesy horror film, with a wide-eyed girl desperately clawing at a car window, unable to escape. The identification is clear.

### ***Ressentiment, Impotence and Praise***

As was previously noted, Scheler has written of *ressentiment* as a ‘tormenting conflict between desire and impotence.’<sup>260</sup> In *Praise*, the association between *ressentiment* and sexual impotence is quite literal. Gordon tells us, in voice-over, that for him ‘something was always missing’ with sex. He is obsessed with his inadequacies, the fact that he has no rhythm, no grace and no particular attraction to women’s bodies. His small penis is a constant worry. On one occasion Cynthia tells him that it is ‘cute’. His response is sad, funny and revealing:

*‘I don’t want cute. I want something huge and purple and bulging with veins.’*

For all his protestations about ‘lowering expectations’ and accepting bad luck, the reality is that Gordon deeply resents his sexual powerlessness, that in the arena of sex he experiences precisely this ‘tormenting conflict between desire and impotence’. It could be interpreted that on one level, knowing he cannot compete, Gordon transvalues his thwarted desires into a lack of desire, a disinterest in sex, and through this disinterest, manifested in rejection of Cynthia, manages to prove his existence and exert his power.

A number of recent Australian films depict masculine impotence – sexual, social and political – as giving rise to violence towards others. Philip Butterss identifies that films such as *Romper Stomper*, *Blackrock* (1997, Steve Vidler), *Idiot Box* (1997, David Cesar) and most importantly, *The Boys* (1998, Rowan Woods) which show men who enact their frustrations upon those that are weaker than themselves – those who are gay, ethnic, or, in particular, female.<sup>261</sup> Butterss, drawing on the work of Bob Connell, identifies this phenomenon as ‘protest masculinity’ a form of masculinity which is ‘...a particular response to economic marginalisation’, and involves the exaggeration of aspects of hegemonic masculinity in order to reinforce the male position of power.<sup>262</sup> He identifies

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>261</sup> Philip Butterss, ‘When being a man is all you’ve got’, *Metro*, No. 117, 1998.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p. 41.



protest masculinity as a ‘politics without effect’ upon the system against which it is a response.<sup>263</sup> To call this a kind of ‘politics’ is to use the term only its loosest sense, as having to do with the desire for power. The concept of ‘slave morality’, associated with *ressentiment*, might better be used to describe the festering frustrations of marginalised men whose will to power becomes twisted and misguided.

Gordon, with his infuriatingly passive and seemingly gentle approach to life, is the antithesis of the aggressive masculinity displayed by the characters in films like *The Boys*. Nevertheless, he shares with them the cancerous combination of desire and impotence, and the tendency to hurt those who love him. While he does not physically abuse Cynthia, his perpetual rejection of her, together with his inability to properly terminate the relationship, constitute a kind of psychological abuse; for whether it is manifested as physical violence or torturous passivity, such behaviour can be encompassed by the idea of *ressentiment* and its inability to seek or desire true freedom.

### **Suicide: the desire for obliteration and annihilation**

Both *Praise* and *Head On* depict time as being something to lose, to pass through as painlessly as possible. While the rest of society may lament the way ‘time flies’, the young and unemployed have an excess of time to burn. Drugs feature prominently as a way of dealing with, or rather, *not* dealing with, the numerous empty hours. They provide a means to escape both time and the self. For example in *Praise*, the novel, Cynthia, says:

*‘Drugs like this are great, y’know. No matter what you take – smack or acid or ecstasy, once you’ve actually taken it you don’t have to worry about the day any more. The drug’ll handle it for you. You don’t have to make any effort. It’s like handing your life over to someone else for a while.’*<sup>264</sup>

To this Gordon replies, ‘sounds good to me. The less I have to do with this life, the better...’<sup>265</sup> Gordon continually evidences such reckless regard for life.

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> A. McGahan, *Praise*, op.cit., p. 126.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.



Though neither *Praise* nor *Head On* deals explicitly with the desire for the permanent obliteration of death, the characters, through their *ressentiment*, display only a tentative relationship to life, one based on pleasurable but ephemeral sensations. It is not difficult to imagine Ari, Gordon or Cynthia giving up on life completely, coming to a future decision that the pain and boredom of living outweigh its temporary pleasures. Gordon's final gesture in *Praise* is a demonstration, not only of the power of addiction, but of his lack of desire for life. A chronic asthmatic, he has just been released from hospital after a near-fatal attack, being warned by his doctor that unless he gives up smoking he will be lucky to live another fifteen years. He enters a store thinking 'Fifteen years!' and buys himself some cigarettes. The implication here is that fifteen years is far too long to live anyway, and that the sooner he dies, the better. Thus concludes the novel. It may take a long time, but Gordon will ultimately kill himself.

The film similarly concludes with Gordon reaching for a cigarette, though it eliminates the internal dialogue about fifteen years being far too long to live. Instead, the film shows that Gordon is well-intentioned and that he is struggling with temptation, having emptied ash-trays, cut his hair and put on a clean shirt. A golden glow suffuses the scene and in the adjacent room an old black man dances to classic records with his new lady friend. The atmosphere here is one of shabby romanticism, suggesting the endless flow of life and love, despite the fact that Gordon's own love affair is completely over. Though Gordon succumbs to temptation, taking one of the black man's cigarettes, and beginning to polish off a bottle of wine, the film's conclusion, with its tone of poetic resignation and understated hopefulness, avoids the express nihilism of the novel upon which it is based. Nevertheless, Gordon's circular journey back to his beginnings where he is again an unemployed asthmatic smoker, dramatises a typical pattern of Australian narrative, the '...natural structure of existence within an Australian context' with its mode of existence based on mere survival and an apolitical acceptance of one's fate.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> G.Turner, *National Fictions*, op.cit., p.84.



## **Ressentiment in *Praise* – The Book and the Film**

There is a very real sense in which the film of *Praise* bypasses many of the key ingredients that made the book so redolent of *ressentiment*. While the book is certainly a love story, it is also a story about nihilism, about the experience of being unemployed, going on the dole, of living in squalor and of lacking the energy to transform oneself or one's situation. The film achieves a somewhat different effect by focusing almost exclusively on the love story elements. Admittedly, this is no ordinary love story. With its sexually transmitted diseases, imperfect bodies and ambivalent hero it is a dirty and twisted take on the modern romance. Yet in the translation of the book into a love story, the writer and director have given it a certain timeless quality. An appealing soft focus attaches itself to the squalor. The characters are flawed but lovable, ugly yet strangely sensual and compelling.

The actor who plays Gordon, Peter Fenton, is 'interesting-looking' rather handsome, yet his inclusion on the Who Weekly 1999 'Fifty most beautiful people list' is a testament to the fact that the cinematic image transforms even ugliness and degradation into something romantic and 'larger than life'. The very act of putting something on film can imbue it with an aura of attractiveness, if not of beauty, a fact which has been previously noted in regards to the character of Ari in *Head On*.

Curran, with McGahan's scriptwriting help, has taken the book and transformed it into a film that is a kind of off-beat genre piece. Curran's position as an outsider, coming from a tradition of American cinema, could be seen as contributing to this slant on the material. Curran admits that his intention was always to pick out the central love story from the other nihilist elements of the book:

*'The book is a lot more nihilist. I mean I wasn't interested in that kind of nihilist film...I look at the smoking as a metaphor for love that you know, it's attractive and he's compelled to do it, but ultimately it can be bad for you. You know it's always going to come with a warning...'*<sup>267</sup>

Curran acknowledges the grunge books and films of the early 90s, of which *Praise* was one, and says that they were very much products of their time and that

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<sup>267</sup> John Curran, Interview, Appendix I.



he didn't want to 'go back there' but wanted something to achieve something 'more timeless':

*'I think that once we truncated the book, what we really just hung onto was the love story...When you read the book it is about a love story, but you have much more of a sense, because of the opportunity of the prose, to explore the world where [Gordon] hung out. The milieu and the sub-plots become bigger. So I think that just by virtue of focusing on the love story and focusing on the character of Gordon, it was warmer. And we did want it to be warmer I think.'*<sup>268</sup>

It is understandable, in light of this comment, that the film lends itself less to an exploration of *ressentiment* than the book upon which it is based. While this in itself is not a bad thing – as cinema, the film succeeds admirably – it is important to note that by focusing on the romantic elements, it is exhibiting what Denzin has referred to as the postmodern tendency to depoliticise, and to favour sexuality as the defining essence of human being. Denzin writes that postmodern values as expressed in film (he speaks of American cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s) subvert race, class and the larger issues of social reality to '...sexuality and the realisation of subjectivity in the bonded sexual relationship.'<sup>269</sup> *Praise* then, is a film that, to some extent, evades the social realities that were so specifically described in the novel, softening and 'warming' the characters and their situation to make them more appealing to audiences. While there can be no doubt that this is an Australian film based on an important Australian novel, it has taken the story, and down-played its social and historical locations in favour of its universal elements, and in the process of doing this, the film of *Praise* has managed to sidestep the issue of youth *ressentiment* and its connections to a set of very specific economic and cultural factors, while allowing the viewer, through its theme and characters, to experience a deep and empathic understanding of the emotion itself.

Rather than telling a flat realist tale that might lead the audience into a closed world of dole-bludger boarding-house hell, both the film and the book, through their craftsmanship and humour, their 'semantic innovations', open up an

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> N. K. Denzin, op.cit. p. 149.



imaginative space for the viewer to contemplate the seduction of addiction. There is a moment of freedom, of gold-infused bliss, glimpsed in the final scenes of *Praise*. Yes, Gordon's journey is a painful and halting one, in which he gets a haircut and properly breaks off with Cynthia, yet takes up smoking again, but the telling of the tale, the act of recounting it, creates for Gordon and the audience, a door that may open onto new horizons.

## **Australian Narratives of *Ressentiment*: First Steps Towards Freedom?**

At the beginning of this chapter I observed that the cinematic stories emerging from contemporary Australian youth were dark and disturbing; edgy modern flowers with roots far back in the culture's preference for themes and images of imprisonment and exile. I noted Turner's argument that such narratives actually operate ideologically to naturalise a politics of acceptance and survival, fostering the belief that individuals are powerless to challenge the system or to transcend their status as members of a social class grouping.

Through the use of the concept of *ressentiment*, it has been shown how two current films bring to the culture a couple more anti-heroes, men who are, in McAuley's words, 'independent but you could not call them free.' Gordon and Ari see their worlds with often admirable clarity. They note its many contradictions and hypocrisies, yet at this point in their lives they are impotent to correct them, or to contribute to making their worlds into better places.

Kirsty Leishman has argued that it is this honesty and clarity of vision, this 'active philosophical commitment' to the acceptance of squalor, possessed by the characters in Grunge fiction, which actually separates them from the Australian anti-heroes of old.<sup>270</sup> Leishman writes that these characters '...do not simply endure the conditions of their existences in exile from society, nor do they attain the kind of spirituality found by Patrick White's characters, in order to prepare them "to face death rather than enrich life."' <sup>271</sup> Leishman is convincing in her argument that these characters possess a self-awareness not permitted to characters in older narratives, and that they choose to actively live out their

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<sup>270</sup> Kirsty Leishman, 'Australian Grunge Literature and the Conflict Between Literary Generations', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no.63, 1999.



marginalisation, thereby opening up ‘new ways of thinking about the nation’.<sup>272</sup> What is not so convincing is her argument that this ‘lived philosophical commitment to the conditions of their existence’ is really a radical break from the acceptance of defeat identified by Turner as narrative tendency in Australian culture. While these new stories (in both fiction and film) portray contemporary characters ‘...whose identity [is] constituted by difference’,<sup>273</sup> they can still be identified as having qualities that identify them with a heritage of stoic survivors, convicts and exiles. These subcultural urban characters may not have the same relationship of conformity within community, or the same physical relationship with harsh rural geography, yet they are just as constrained by their reality and by their beliefs. By actively choosing such constraint, the characters in these films and books demonstrate the complete transvaluation we have come to understand through our study of *ressentiment*. Their choice to be powerless is a pathetic form of freedom. Its one and only virtue is that such active choosing allows these characters to articulate their condition, to play with it and construct narratives out of it, which may, potentially, though not necessarily, provide new ways of thinking and living.

Writing on *ressentiment*, Nietzsche was by no means entirely condemning, seeing it as an illness akin to pregnancy, as having the potential to give birth to new and vital values. He writes that ‘The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values’,<sup>274</sup> and that ‘A race of such men of *ressentiment* is bound to become eventually cleverer than any noble race; it will also honor cleverness to a far greater degree.’<sup>275</sup> Ari and Gordon are certainly clever, though not necessarily wise. The final images of both these characters present them with a sense of a confused but deep subterranean life-affirmation. These promising notes of acceptance and endurance do not, however, erase the concerns these narratives raise. They suggest that for a generation of *ressentiment* youth living in this culture, the only things keeping them in the land of the living

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> F. Nietzsche, op.cit., ‘On the genealogy of morals, I, 10, ii’.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.



are an active commitment to limited conditions, or an inability to commit to the finality of death.



## Chapter 4B: The Field of Australian Film: *Head On and Praise*

In this section I will give an ‘extra-textual’ analysis of the films and their directors – a structure to be repeated in following chapters. Using Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus*, symbolic capital, position-taking and autonomy, the films and their directors will be discussed in relationship to the Australian cinematic field at large. As Bourdieu has noted, it is extremely difficult to historically reconstruct a field and its ‘spaces of original possibles’,<sup>276</sup> yet the attempt is essential. By trying to place artists and art-works (filmmakers and films, in this instance) back within the circumstances that produced them, we uncover structures of belief, and structures of economic and symbolic valuing. We can begin to see what kinds of struggles and contradictions define that particular field, for as Bourdieu argues, it is the struggle over value that is the generative, unifying principle of cultural fields.<sup>277</sup>

### *Head On*

With its exploration of clashing ethnic and sexual identities, *Head On* is a particular manifestation of the field of Australian film at a specific instant in the late 1990s. With its roots in the success of the ‘grunge’ literature phenomenon of a few years earlier, and specifically, Christos Tsoolkias’ bestselling novel *Loaded* from which it was adapted, *Head On* was always a film project guaranteed a certain minimum of attention in both critical and popular spheres. The field of cultural production (encompassing literary and cinematic fields) had been transformed by the commercial success of these books among young Australian readers, and by the resistance and criticism heaped upon them by the more established critics or ‘prophets’ within the field. As Kirsty Leishman has argued, directly invoking Bourdieu’s theory, the incumbent elites found this new body of literature to be incomprehensible because ‘...the knowledges informing the values in these novels...were not part of [their] habitus.’<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., pp. 31-33.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>278</sup> K. Leishman, op.cit., p. 96.



The oppositional and 'heretical' status of these works, and their continuing presence as a source of dramatic conflict within the cultural field, meant that audiences encountering *Head On* at the cinema were coming to a text that already possessed significant symbolic capital – an already constituted and recognised 'degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour',<sup>279</sup> that derived specifically from its marginal status rather than its canonicity.

It could also be argued that the Greek-Australian and Gay nature of the story, and of the filmmaker, added to the symbolic capital of the film, emerging as it did in a decade of officially sanctioned and much celebrated multiculturalism and gay-friendliness. Where five years earlier a film like *The Heartbreak Kid* (1993, Michael Jenkins) offered a fantasy of heterosexual interracial Greek/Australian love, *Head On* could tackle a much darker and dystopian vision, actively criticising such multicultural fantasies. Yet the earlier film, also starring Dimitriades, no doubt prepared the way for the possibility of such subject matter, and the acceptance of such 'new' representations of Australian identity.

In purely commercial terms, the film was hardly profitable. Partly financed by the Australian Film Finance Corporation and developed and produced with assistance from Film Victoria, *Head On* had a budget of around \$3 million, while its gross earnings at the Australian box office were only \$2.7 million.<sup>280</sup> These earnings were significantly boosted by small releases in numerous overseas territories, prompted largely by the film's success at the Cannes International Film Festival, where it was selected to screen in the 1998 Director's Fortnight.<sup>281</sup> Andrew Urban has observed that in Cannes, '...people were still talking about the film five days after seeing it, and Southern Star, who handle international sales, had to put on extra screenings to satisfy demand.'<sup>282</sup> Urban notes that despite its 'R' rating, *Head On* was considered 'commercially interesting.'<sup>283</sup>

In addition to its screening at Cannes, *Head On* received numerous awards and accolades, among them an AFI best director award for Kokkinos, and a Best First

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<sup>279</sup> R. Johnson, 'Introduction', to Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>280</sup> See Appendix II - Film Facts, *Head On*.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Andrew L. Urban, 'Kokkinos, Ana: *Head On*', Urban Cinefile, <<http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=1418&s=Interviews>> (20/04/01).



Feature prize from the 1999 San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.<sup>284</sup> While its financial impact was small, this film's symbolic impact was enormous, receiving so much attention that the AFI Research and Information Centre has issued a special bibliography citing hundreds of books, journal articles, newspaper reviews and Internet information dealing with the film.<sup>285</sup>

The symbolic impact of the film is further indicated by anecdotal evidence suggesting that it has become a favourite 'thesis film', providing distinctive essay material for students wishing to discuss representations of race, gender, sexuality and national identity. (My thesis obviously exemplifies this phenomenon, adding to 'the production of discourse about the work' which recognises it as 'a worthy object of legitimate discourse.'<sup>286</sup>) The Cinemedia Screen Education Unit further has further emphasised the importance of the text by inviting Tsolkias along as a guest speaker at one of its specially curated youth programs within the 2001 Melbourne Queer Film Festival, where he was billed to talk about 'the cultural construction of gender'.<sup>287</sup>

Without drawing too much upon this one film to judge the nature of the Australian cinematic field and its autonomy, we can conclude that the symbolic power of this film, its 'ability to influence consciousness', derives in large part from its marginal status, its perceived low budget independence, its restricted 'R' rating and its 'controversial' subject matter that promises to shock and outrage large sectors of the community. That a film like this can be considered a 'success' within the local cinematic field, despite its relatively meagre box office performance, suggests that there is some significant separation between the values of the field and the values of the political and economic fields. While *Head On* could not be placed at the far left corner of the cultural field, where the only audience aimed for is other producers, shunning even the accolades and honours

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

<sup>284</sup> See Appendix II - Film Facts: *Head On*, 'Principal Awards'.

<sup>285</sup> 'Head On: A Select Bibliography', compiled by Joseph Alessi, AFI Research & Information Centre, <<http://www.cinemedia.net/AFI/biblio2/head.html>> ([20/04/02]).

<sup>286</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 35.

<sup>287</sup> 'Queeries: Bent on Film Youth Package', 11<sup>th</sup> Melbourne Queer Film Festival, 15-25 March 2001, printed program, p. 51.



specific to the field, it can still be seen as a manifestation of a field that gestures towards, in Bourdieu's terms, 'the economic world reversed'.

### **Ana Kokkinos: multicultural street cred**

Born in Melbourne of Greek parents, Kokkinos claims that though she had dreamt of making films as a teenager, '...the possibility of having a career in films was about as remote as flying to the moon.'<sup>288</sup> She pursued the practical option of studying law and after working as a solicitor, and as a researcher and an industrial officer, Kokkinos then had the financial resources to study filmmaking. In 1990, through a Women in Film and Television (WIFT) program, she wrote and directed her first two short films, and the following year completed the post-graduate Diploma in Film and TV, VCA School of Film and TV (formerly Swinburne).

Kokkinos' short film *Antamosi* won a number of Swinburne awards and propelled her into the co-writing and directing of an acclaimed short feature, *Only The Brave* in 1993/94. The story of two teenage Greek girls growing up in the bleak Western suburbs of Melbourne, *Only The Brave* was given limited releases in Australia, the US and Europe, and was invited to film festivals around the world.<sup>289</sup> This success opened the way for Southern Star distributors to offer part finance for Kokkinos' next project, *Head On*.

As a Greek lesbian, Kokkinos' position in the cinematic field is relatively unique, and thus far, her choice of subject matter has reflected these marginal identities. In the cultural sphere of 1990s Australia, where multiculturalism was a weighty and important preoccupation, as was homosexuality, Kokkinos held substantial symbolic capital in her opposition to white middle-class patriarchy. Her films have been praised for this opposition. For example, Tom O'Regan writes:

*...Ana Kokkinos in the acclaimed Only The Brave attempt[s] to create another separate and new space. Female protagonists are centred and foregrounded; they drive the story. Marginal identities and sexualities are explored. The goal is not simply a woman centred*

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<sup>288</sup> Ana Kokkinos, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>289</sup> Awards for *Only The Brave* included the Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards for Best Short Fiction and Best Screenplay in 1994, Grand Prix for Best Film and the Erwin Rado Award for Best Australian Film at the 1994 Melbourne International Film Festival, Best Film - Fiction Category, 1994 Sydney Film Festival.



*storytelling but a means of exploring new ways of  
rendering women characters in narration.*<sup>290</sup>

As O'Regan stresses, Kokkinos and her work occupy a space previously unoccupied in the Australian cinematic field. This potential position-taking has been actualised by Kokkinos, who comes to it uniquely suited by her racial and political background, her practical abilities and her sexual preference. Her habitus, her '...practical sense for what is to be done in a given situation...' <sup>291</sup> befits her to occupy this position. Bourdieu writes that this 'feel for the game' is a kind of '...art of anticipating the future of the game, which is inscribed in the present state of play.'<sup>292</sup> Back in 1990 when Kokkinos entered the field of filmmaking, she demonstrated this art of anticipation, however unconsciously, and in the process moved into the space of possible position-takings, proving with *Head On* that she was in tune with funding bodies such as Film Victoria and the FFC whose charter included the objective of financing 'a diverse slate of culturally relevant feature films'.<sup>293</sup> It is significant to note that Kokkinos has recently argued that the state of the industry now is such that, were she just entering it, she would not be given the kinds of access and encouragement which were available several years ago.<sup>294</sup>

With her desire to make low-budget films about controversial subjects, Kokkinos has artistic desires that have, up to this point, been harmonious with the Australian cinematic field's financial and official structures. She has said that 'Hollywood has to play it safe because it is dealing with budgets which immediately demand a return', whereas 'We have the capacity in Australia to make very bold films because our budgets are generally lower.'<sup>295</sup> Kokkinos directly relates this risk-taking filmmaking with government support, arguing that, '...we have a level of government funding in Australia that still enables filmmakers to come forward and say, "look, I actually want to try something very different".'<sup>296</sup> Such a statement can be seen to be the product of the 'structuring structures' of the field,

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<sup>290</sup> T. O'Regan, Australian National Cinema, op.cit, p. 301.

<sup>291</sup> P. Bourdieu, 'The New Capital', *Practical Reason: On the theory of action*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 25.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> *Australian Film Finance Corporation Ltd Annual Report 1998/99*, p. 6.

<sup>294</sup> A. Kokkinos, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>295</sup> A. Kokkinos, quoted in Stuart Diwell, 'Greek Boy', *The Sunday Tasmanian*, 18/10/98, p. 23.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.



with Kokkinos being, in Bourdieu's terms, 'objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.'<sup>297</sup>

Such arguments – that smaller budgets allow more experimentation and creativity, and thus greater artistic achievement – can be found repeatedly in the discourse surrounding Australia's national cinema. Other directors interviewed within this thesis have made similar comments, among them Rolf de Heer and the creative team constituting Working Dog. Without, at this point, commenting on the veracity of this philosophy it can nonetheless be seen as indicating something important about the habitus of the field, with its ability to 'make a virtue out of necessity'. As Bridget Fowler has put it, 'The habitus of the dominated frequently leads them to choose actively what they are objectively constrained to do.'<sup>298</sup> Within the global cinematic field most Australian filmmakers could be seen as 'dominated' and thereby constrained to work with fewer financial resources.

It is not at all surprising then to find that Australian filmmakers, heavily dependent upon state funding for their continued activities, have few postmodern qualms about the value of a state supported national film culture, and the need for it to assert itself against 'Hollywood' and 'the market', which according to Kokkinos '...will only respond to the high-end commercial product. That's all the market is interested in.'<sup>299</sup>

The need to 'tell our own stories' – a phrase repeated mantra-like throughout the industry – is an oft-repeated argument that is indicative of shared schemes of perception, a habitus that has become adapted to protecting the local field's autonomy from a purely commercial logic. Kokkinos illustrates this habitus with her presentation of herself as a local storyteller:

*'Basically I'm a storyteller who chooses to tell stories in the film medium...I feel very connected to the place that I live in, and I feel as if I'm trying to tell stories that come from a particular place in time...stories that reflect something about me and my life, on the screen, stories*

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<sup>297</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 53.

<sup>298</sup> Bridget Fowler, *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory: Critical Investigations*, Sage Publications, London, 1997, p. 18.

<sup>299</sup> A. Kokkinos, Interview, Appendix I.



*that actually reflect something about the community that I live in.*<sup>300</sup>

In addition to this self-presentation, Kokkinos mobilises the argument that state support is essential if such stories are to be told:

*'The Americans and the Australians may all speak...English, but I don't think we speak the same language. I think that it's crucial that if we want to have any films being made in this country with an independence and a vibrancy, we have to have government support. You cannot survive any other way. There's no country in any part of the world who has a film industry and doesn't rely on government assistance. It's just the way it is. You know, if any country is going to have an indigenous filmmaking community, well then, there's got to be government support.'*<sup>301</sup>

The use of the word 'Indigenous' is interesting here, for it allows Kokkinos to mobilise the powerful arguments made during the 1990s for the support of the local and the native in the face of the global. For Kokkinos, the child of Greek immigrants, and herself trading to a certain extent on that ethnicity, to identify herself with filmmaking that is indigenous, or natural to its locale, proves the rhetorical value of the phrase 'telling our own stories'. For this phrase is open enough, and yet specific enough, to allow all Australian film practitioners to mount an argument for their existence and their value.

Kokkinos' argument in favour of government support is one that she has made on numerous other occasions and on varied platforms, and one that is made repeatedly by many of the filmmakers discussed in this thesis. The nature of autonomy within this field is openly acknowledged as being indebted to state support, which is seen as essential in allowing a presentation of diversity.

The threats to this autonomy, in Kokkinos' view, come from the imposition of a more thoroughly commercial logic:

*'...less risks are being taken, there's less invention, less experimentation. People are far too worried about box office receipts and results. It's a more thoroughly commercially driven process now. Even when I think back to when we made Only the Brave, the changes that have happened in the last four or five years, even within the*

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<sup>300</sup> A. Kokkinos, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.



*domestic and international distribution, [the changes] are just so significant in terms of what they want to see and how they want to fund things, and what kinds of demands are placed on filmmakers now.*<sup>302</sup>

These concerns about the rapidly changing nature of the local industry are not just a product of a ‘good old days’ nostalgia expressed by a previously subsidised struggling filmmaker – Kokkinos herself continues to be well supported by the AFC and FFC. They are concerns also borne out by evidence from industry sectors like those of exhibition and distribution. ‘*Distributing Australian Films: a survey of current market conditions and distributors’ perceptions*’, gives weight to these claims of rapid transformations, many of which impact negatively on the domestic release of Australian films.<sup>303</sup> (The changing nature of exhibition and distribution and its impact upon the autonomy of the national cinematic field will be further discussed in Chapter Nine.)

What then is the form of capital Kokkinos appears to be pursuing? The idea of an ‘economic world reversed’ rings true with her declaration that ‘I certainly didn’t start filmmaking in order to make money’, and her descriptions of ‘enormous financial sacrifices’, ‘living off the smell of an oily rag’, being ‘constantly worried about money and making ends meet and ...constantly chasing the possibility of realising the work.’<sup>304</sup> The things which motivate Kokkinos, by her own account, would be primarily symbolic: the desire to tell truthful ‘uncompromising’ stories ‘about our cultural diversity,’<sup>305</sup> to tell stories from her own location in time and space, and to do so successfully enough to avoid a situation where ‘...they’ll stop giving me money to make films!’ This desire to ‘keep doing what you’re doing in order to keep doing it’ can be seen as the accumulation of symbolic capital to gain the means to obtain more symbolic capital, as defined by the cinematic field. It is indicative of an agent thoroughly embodying the habitus, with no need to pose an extrinsic goal as her behaviour’s end. thoroughly and complicitly absorbed in a local cinematic field that she

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Mary Anne Reid, *Distributing Australian Films: a survey of current market conditions and distributors’ perceptions*, Marketing Branch of the Australian Film Commission, 1999.

<sup>304</sup> A. Kokkinos, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>305</sup> A. Kokkinos in interview with A.L. Urban, op.cit.



explicitly and implicitly acknowledges to be dependent upon the ideological and financial support of the nation state.

## ***Praise***

Like *Head On*, *Praise* was a film project already imbued with the symbolic capital of the successful novel upon which it was based. After reading the book in 1992 first-time feature producer Martha Coleman optioned the rights to adapt it, and spent the next seven years working to get it on screen.<sup>306</sup> She negotiated for the Vogel-winning author himself to write the script, then showed it to her friend and collaborator, short filmmaker John Curran, whose film *Down Rusty Down* had made an impact at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival.<sup>307</sup>

By the time *Praise* was released in Australia in April 1999, it had already had its world premiere at the 1998 Toronto Film Festival, where it won the International Critic's Award, and had screened at the Fantasporto Film Festival in Portugal, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival. When it opened locally, the film therefore carried the symbolic weight of overseas acclaim, always useful in promoting Australian films to cautious Australian audiences.

This acclaim was from minor festivals however, and did not result in the kinds of box office sales that a Cannes seal of approval, or an Oscar nomination might bring. The film remained a definite art-house product, with gross earnings at the Australian box office (\$650,000) failing to recoup the low budget of the film (\$2.8 million).

The critical response to *Praise* was small but significant. While most local reviews of the film were positive,<sup>308</sup> Adrian Martin, arguably the most important critic/reviewer in the Australian cinematic field, gave *Praise* a four out of five star rating, admiring its specificity and its careful observations of doomed love.<sup>309</sup> Martin, a self-proclaimed 'cinophile', used his review as a forum to express an opinion about Australian film that he manages to air regularly: that Australian films are overly preoccupied with the polemics of 'social issues' rather than with

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<sup>306</sup> Press Kit notes for *Praise*, 1999.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> See Appendix II, 'Critical Response to *Praise*'.

<sup>309</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Praise not misguided; political polemics are', *Agenda, The Age*, Melbourne, 22/04/99.



the nuances of art and the formal and stylistic explorations of depths of emotion. The achievement of *Praise*, according to Martin, is that 'Every time a potential "issue" looms – relating either to substance abuse, sickness or suicidal impulses – the film instantly defuses it and moves on.'<sup>310</sup> This comment is reminiscent of Martin's review of Lawrence Johnston's 1996 prison drama, *Life*, where he writes that:

*It would be far too easy to reduce Life to a worthy 'social issues' piece about prison conditions, the treatment of AIDS and the homophobia inherent in Australian society. Yet there is a solemn, ritualistic, almost spiritual air to the film that raises its drama to a higher, more secretive and mysterious level.*<sup>311</sup>

It could be argued at length, though here we can only touch upon it, that the position of film critics within the Australian cinematic field is a fairly autonomous one. Being able to apply almost purely aesthetic criteria to the texts – a *habitus* expressed in the phrase 'art for art's sake' – they are therefore able to be critical of positions which are perceived as less autonomous, those positions revealing attachments to a conscious nationalist agenda or to social and political issues. Not all reviewers or critics subscribe to such evaluative criteria – Martin himself chastises other critics who judge *Praise* to be an inadequate treatment of society's 'marginalised'.<sup>312</sup> However, critics in privileged autonomous niches, such as Martin as carved out for himself, see merit in films which are likewise free from visible external ties. This critical dilemma will be revisited later, in relation to the film *Vacant Possession*, and we will see again the struggles inherent in a national cinema that tries to be both 'national' and aesthetically independent.

Like numerous other small Australian films of the 1990s, *Praise* was a low-budget, film whose main profits were in the symbolic domain. The film gained a definite status as a 'work of art', through its collection of awards from film festivals, and from the Australian Film Institute, and also through the local acknowledgement of critics who recognised the film as a manifestation of the more autonomous principle of hierarchisation operating within the field.

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> A. Martin, 'Johnston's Magical Mixture', *Metro, The Age*, 24/10/96.

<sup>312</sup> A. Martin, 'Praise not misguided...', op.cit.



## John Curran: an outsider looking in

What position then does the director of *Praise* occupy within the field of Australian cinema? A US expatriate, the 40-something John Curran has a background in art and graphic design. He received an art scholarship to Syracuse University in New York State, where he majored in illustration and design, then worked there for many years as a freelance graphic designer, illustrator and art director. In 1986 he emigrated permanently to Sydney, Australia, and set up a company with five other filmmakers directing music videos and television commercials.

Curran's aesthetic sensibility, his status as an 'artist', implicitly acknowledged by Adrian Martin's review, is further evident when Curran talks in interviews about the film having a 'painterly quality' with 'strong compositions'.<sup>313</sup> His reticence to judge his characters or their social milieu is also acknowledged as an explicit stance: 'We didn't want to be judgmental and present this world as disgusting.'<sup>314</sup> He further emphasises his aesthetic credibility, and its harmony with the smaller more autonomous Australian cinematic field, when he speaks of the freedom to make brave casting decisions here:

*'I suppose there's an advantage in this country in terms of casting [big names] because there really aren't [any]. We were free to cast correctly. There's a lot of films you see that have big names, but they're the wrong people. They might have helped get the film financed and distributed and maybe a lot of people went to see it, but it's not necessarily the right casting decision.'*<sup>315</sup>

Bourdieu argues that:

*The opposition between the 'commercial' and the 'non-commercial' ... is the generative principle of most of the judgements which, in the theatre, cinema, painting or literature, claim to establish the frontier between what is and what is not art...*<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> John Curran in interview with Anthony Kaufman, 'Yank Curran Makes Waves with Aussie Debut *Praise*', *IndieWIRE*, <[http://www.indiewire.com/film/interviews/int\\_Curran\\_John\\_000630.html](http://www.indiewire.com/film/interviews/int_Curran_John_000630.html)> ([20/04/02])

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 82.



While we can argue that this statement is less true in the cinematic field than in other cultural fields, in Curran's statements about making non-commercial casting decisions he aligns himself with the artistic pole of the field. When asked by an American interviewer if the film was successful in Australia, Curran's answer again aligned him in this way, completely avoiding any mention of commercial aspects or profitability:

*'It was critically really well received. We couldn't be happier. It was a small platform release and everyone was really blown away by it. And it was up for some 10 Australian Film Institute awards.'*<sup>317</sup>

We might question whether this statement is actually just putting a 'positive spin' on a commercial failure, yet Curran's comments reveals the possibilities within the field for an agent to emphasise their success through aesthetic measures rather than financial ones.

Bourdieu writes that one strategy of newcomers trying to distinguish themselves within a field is to '...necessarily push back into the past the consecrated producers with whom they are compared, "dating" their products and the taste of those who remain attached to them.'<sup>318</sup> Curran distinguishes himself and his film by deliberately distancing himself from the historical moment that produced grunge literature and the genre of films associated with such themes – which, with the passage of time, have acquired some small but significant degree of consecration. Curran has declared on numerous platforms that 'Mostly speaking, I don't like youth love stories with sex, drugs, and clubs...I rarely see a film of this genre that touches me – it's all very superficial',<sup>319</sup> or that the books and films of the genre were '...ideas of their time...' and that he was motivated by a principle of 'let's not go back there.'<sup>320</sup>

While Curran in no way distances himself from McGahan – they are working on another film project together – it is significant to note that McGahan and the other grunge writers were quick to distance *themselves* from the term, perhaps intuitively seeing that it would date their work, muting their artistic singularity

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<sup>317</sup> J. Curran in interview with Anthony Kaufman, op.cit.

<sup>318</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 106.

<sup>319</sup> J. Curran, Press Notes for *Praise*.

<sup>320</sup> J. Curran, Interview, Appendix I.



and pushing them back into a blurred crowd of writers loosely grouped for marketing purposes.<sup>321</sup> Curran's own way of distancing himself from the genre of the dirty youth picture is to skew the film towards another genre altogether, the love story, the tale of *amour fou*, where it stands out alone in opposition to more traditional romances, but is nevertheless 'a very real love story'.<sup>322</sup>

Why then did Curran move to Australia, and become involved in the dramatic side of filmmaking here, when as he admits, his previous home-towns of New York and LA are 'the epicentre of what I do'?<sup>323</sup> His answer is oblique but suggestive:

*'I don't know why I came down here, but it seems clear to me that I wasn't happy doing what I was doing, and I wanted to make a big change, a dramatic change...I consider Australia my home, and I love living in Sydney and my friends are here. It's hard being this far away from my family, but when I go back there I find myself kind of wound up...New York, LA, it's the epicentre of what I do...[but] I just find that it's so kind of "you are what you do" and that's what defines you. It's literally the same size country [as Australia] but with 250 million people...it's the old rats in a box theory – you put a lot more rats in the box, they're going to be scurrying a lot faster and clambering over each other a lot more aggressively for food and stuff, and that's what I feel when I go back there. It's kind of "we've got to get someplace, we're going someplace," and here it's just a little bit more relaxed...'*

It is significant to note that Curran considers Australia to be a good place to enter the field of filmmaking, saying that Australia is '...a great place to make a first film, but it's hard to have a career here.' He notes that it is '...a small market, an expensive medium and it's a long time between takes, and you need to make money in development, and there's not a really strong development culture.' The implication here is that the structure of the Australian cinematic field is such that it allows an easy entrée to the newcomer. It could be suggested that Curran's *habitus*, his 'feel for the game' led him to see that this would be an ideal place to enter the field and to create a position from which to move forward. Curran's

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<sup>321</sup> See K. Leishman, op.cit., p. 94, for a description of the ways in which the 'grunge' authors disputed the categorisation and its homogenising effect.

<sup>322</sup> J. Curran, Press Notes for *Praise*.

<sup>323</sup> J. Curran, Interview, Appendix I.



appreciation of the slower pace and more relaxed lifestyle available to Australian filmmakers is perhaps also an appreciation of a field where there is less competition, fewer ‘rats in the box’ competing for opportunities to make a first film.

For the filmmaker wanting to continue making films after their debut, however, the Australian field seems not to be structured to keep talent at home. Richard Lowenstein has written bitterly of our industry in the 1990s that it chews up first-time directors ‘...who are so keen that they can be controlled, underpaid, told what crew to use and dropped like hot-cakes if they fail to deliver “Tarantino”-like success on their first outing’.<sup>324</sup> Curran also admits the nature of the field is such that it is necessary to go abroad to be really successful and to then come back and work here when time and money permits:

*‘You’re kind of swayed by opportunities abroad, so a little of it is just a natural kind of progression into reaching a place where you have a bit more control, so you can come back here and define your career. [For example] Baz Luhrmann, Jane Campion, Peter Weir – they’re all at stages of their career with successes behind them, where they can say “Oh, I’m going to live in Australia. I’m going to make my films where I want.”...Inevitably you find that most filmmakers have to go and learn that environment somehow, because you can’t avoid it really. So I don’t have a desire to go back there [to the States] but I’m sure I’ll do stints there.’<sup>325</sup>*

Curran’s comments are interesting in terms of the position of the Australian cinematic field in relation to the Hollywood field, suggesting a relationship of centre and periphery, where the Australian filmmaker, in order to achieve anything significant and continue working, must eventually take their position in relation to the internationally dominant cinematic culture.

## Chapter 4: Summary

### Narrative Elements

*Praise* and *Head On* emerge from what many commentators would describe as the ‘new’ Australian cinema, cinema that is diverse and makes no conscious

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<sup>324</sup> Richard Lowenstein, ‘The Director’s Cut’, *Cinema Papers*, no.137, Feb/March 2001, p. 12.

<sup>325</sup> J. Curran, Interview, Appendix I.



gesture towards representing the nation or defining a singular version of national identity. Yet the themes and characters in these films have been shown to have clearly perceptible links with a rich narrative tradition stressing the experiences of imprisonment, alienation and political impotence. Through an understanding of *ressentiment*, the new slave characters evident in these narratives are seen to be caught in the tormenting conflict between impotence and desire. Their freedom-fighting weapons include a sense of irony and a clarity of vision, yet these seem, for the most part, weak and ineffectual versions of an underdeveloped longing for emancipation.

### **Industry Elements**

This discussion of the positions of Kokkinos and Curran within the local cinematic field, while brief and broadly sketched, nevertheless points to some significant characteristics of the field and the way in which Bourdieu's theory opens up new ways of investigating its operations. We see that the cinematic field is intertwined with the larger cultural field, here specifically demonstrated by its relationship with the literary field, and that field's particular forms of symbolic and cultural capital. We see that it is possible, within this small social space, to make films whose production and measures of evaluating 'success' defy many of the rigorous financial imperatives of bigger budget filmmaking. This relative autonomy is enabled by a national field which acknowledges the importance of 'telling our own stories'. Yet this is a fragile autonomy based on the low risks of low budgets, and is highly dependent upon the sacrificial ardour of first time filmmakers intent upon making art rather than upon making a living.



## Chapter 5A: Aboriginality, Recognition and Australian Great Narrative

*'Aboriginality', therefore, is a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create 'Aboriginalities'... – Marcia Langton<sup>326</sup>*

To fully understand the persistent themes of exile, alienation and imprisonment within Australia's Great narrative, we must account for that part of the story dealing with the dispossession of the country's indigenous population, and the important role this continues to play in the national imagination. It is with the Aborigines that any story of Australia as a nation must begin, and it is around their insistent presence that this story continues in the present and forwards into the future. For our Great narrative to fulfil its aspirations to truth and coherence, it demands continual reconfiguration so as to account for what happened and continues to happen between white Australians and Aborigines. The two films discussed in this chapter, *Vacant Possession* (1996, Margot Nash) and *Dead Heart* (1996, Nicholas Parsons), each made by white filmmakers, can be studied as attempts at such narrative reconfiguration during the crucial period of the 1990s.

The historical facts are sobering, and despite the numerous cinematic depictions of Aborigines, '...the white community is still generally ignorant of Aboriginal culture',<sup>327</sup> and of the historical details surrounding the invasion and elimination of so many of the indigenous people: In 1788 the British declared the continent *terra nullius*<sup>328</sup> – land without a sovereign, or land not owned by anyone – and claimed it as the property of the British Crown.<sup>329</sup> With such a declaration, the invaders dismissed as insignificant the diverse and culturally rich indigenous

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<sup>326</sup> Marcia Langton, *Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...: An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things*, Australian Film Commission, North Sydney, 1993. pp. 33-34.

<sup>327</sup> Michael Leigh, 'Curiouser and Curiouser', *Back of Beyond: discovering Australian film and television*, ed. Scott Murray, AFC and UCLA Film & TV Archive and Aust. Bicentennial Authority, North Sydney, 1988, p. 79.

<sup>328</sup> The notion of Australia as Terra Nullius was only overturned 1992 with the Mabo case. See L. Behrendt, *Aboriginal Dispute Resolution*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, p 2.



communities spread across the country,<sup>330</sup> an attitude persisting into this century, as exemplified by the fact that Aboriginal people were not included in the national census until after the 1967 referendum in which they were finally given citizenship rights.

The *terra nullius* declaration was embodied in a number of policies that suggested the Aborigines were sub-human; a doomed race who must be ignored, eradicated or assimilated. Strategies included, initially, the skirmishing warfare of the first settlers, then the removal of peoples from their traditional lands, by methods including massacre, poisoning, and the rounding up of people in order to institutionalise them in missions or reserves,<sup>331</sup> many of which, as McGrath notes, ‘...were run like internment camps, quarantine stations or prisons.’<sup>332</sup> Diseases like measles, chicken-pox and flu, to which the indigenous peoples had no immunity, also wiped out perhaps hundreds of thousands, as did the introduction of refined food products, alcohol,<sup>333</sup> and later, the badly regulated nuclear testing on traditional lands in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>334</sup> Up until the 1960s a policy of assimilation and ‘breeding out the black’ meant that half-caste Aboriginal children were removed from their families and placed in white foster homes.<sup>335</sup> Their status as non-citizens was exemplified by the fact that Aboriginal mothers were excluded from receiving the maternity bonus, while their elderly were not eligible for the pension.<sup>336</sup>

The current position of Aborigines in contemporary Australian society remains a source of contention and national embarrassment.<sup>337</sup> Unemployment, poverty, disease, and over-representation in prison populations continue to be problems in

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<sup>330</sup> Behrendt estimates that there were well over 200 different language groups, with each community varying significantly in customs and lifestyles.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>332</sup> Ann McGrath, ‘A National Story’, *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown*, ed A. McGrath, Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, St Leonards, 1995, p. 6.

<sup>333</sup> L. Behrendt, *op.cit.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>335</sup> A. McGrath, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>337</sup> This embarrassment is illustrated by the uproar created by John Pilger’s 1999 documentary, *Welcome to Australia: The Secret Shame Behind The Sydney Olympics*. Pilger argued that as a country with an ongoing history of human rights abuses (including the fact that up until recently Aboriginal athletes were precluded from participating in our Olympic teams) Australia should not be able to host the 2000 Olympic games. 1999, screened on ITV.



Aboriginal communities, as do infant mortality, deaths in police custody, low rates of literacy and educational participation, and the persistence of racial discrimination.<sup>338</sup>

Not only have the Australian Aborigines suffered physical imprisonment and exile from their native lands, but they have suffered also the symbolic imprisonment of seeing themselves cinematically depicted through stereotypes, misrepresentations and condescending appropriations of their traditions. Far from being absent in the domains of representation, Aborigines have proved endlessly fascinating to writers, painters, anthropologists and filmmakers, a fact that has led Tom O'Regan to surmise that they are '...probably the world's most anthropologized people'.<sup>339</sup> As the subjects of more than 6000 films,<sup>340</sup> Aborigines are therefore abundantly, though by no means diversely, represented in Australian cinema, with a significant majority of these films being of the documentary rather than the feature variety,<sup>341</sup> and the vast bulk of them being made by scholars or missionaries.<sup>342</sup> In films of all types, the Aboriginal characters occupy a limited repertoire of roles, often as curiosities, side-kicks to white heroes, representatives of 'nature', ciphers of 'spirituality', or as the pitiable and doomed 'social problem people', inducers of white Australian guilt.<sup>343</sup>

The imprisonment and exile of contemporary white characters in Australian narratives is largely symbolic and psychological. It may seem somewhat indulgent to focus on the white angst that stems from relations with indigenous Australians, while for many of the Aborigines themselves, the issues of incarceration remain intensely practical and physical realities. The two problems however, are entwined and inseparable, products of the white culture's conceptualisation of what it means to be Aboriginal.

As Marcia Langton has powerfully observed:

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<sup>338</sup> *Year Book Australia 1996*, ABS Catalogue Number 1301.0.

<sup>339</sup> T. O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, op.cit., p. 93.

<sup>340</sup> S. Muecke, 'Narrative and intervention in Aboriginal filmmaking and policy', *Continuum*, ed. T O'Regan, vol.8, no.2, 1994.

<sup>341</sup> Andrew Pike, 'Aboriginals in Australian Feature Films', *Meanjin*, No.4, 1977. Documentaries mentioned include Ian Dunlop's series of nineteen films, *People of the Australian Western Desert* (1966-1970) documenting the way of life of the last remaining tribes living in the desert as hunter-gatherers.

<sup>342</sup> M. Leigh, op.cit., pp. 80-81.



*The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories by former colonists.*<sup>344</sup>

She notes that the Aborigines that most white Australians ‘know’ are fictional characters like Jedda and Marbuk, Bony, or the rebel Jandawarra in the Ion Indress novels.<sup>345</sup> It could be added too, that in contemporary Australia such characters include Mick Dundee’s sidekick, played by Ernie Dingo, or the young legal advisor Vince (Aaron Pederson) in the television series *Wildside*.<sup>346</sup>

Whoever the characters may be, the fact remains that their Aboriginality, what it means to be Aboriginal, the signs and symbols constituting this identity, are, like all identities, the results of complex negotiations and intersections between past and present, a ‘dialogue’ involving both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

White Australia plays an integral and inevitable part in the construction of Aboriginality. What it means to be an Aboriginal person in Australia has everything to do with the way one is perceived and represented, not just by other Aborigines, but by non-indigenous Australia and its mechanisms of identification.

The criticism can be reasonably made that white Australia has, thus far, had too much influence in the construction of cinematic representations of Aboriginality and that there is an imbalance requiring redress. Few would argue with such reasoning, and the official establishment of various filmmaking programs and initiatives for Aborigines to participate more fully in this dialogue, is to be praised and encouraged.<sup>347</sup> If the Great narrative of Australia is to be truly reconfigured, stories by Aborigines about their experiences, must take their place.

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<sup>343</sup> S. Muecke, op.cit.

<sup>344</sup> M. Langton, op.cit.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>346</sup> In the less narrative-focused, yet no less symbolic domains of music, dance and sport, the characters we ‘know’ include singer islander Christine Anu, champion sprinter Kathy Freeman, the indigenous dance company, Bangarra, and the rock music group, Yothu Yindi.

<sup>347</sup> In 1979 white filmmakers Alec Morgan and Martha Ansara handed over directorial control of the film *My Survival as an Aboriginal* to Essie Coffey, an Aboriginal woman. Since this date a number of projects and initiatives have been established in order to encourage and support indigenous film-making and television production, and a number of Aboriginal film and video makers have emerged, including Michael Riley, Destiny Deakin, Eric Renshaw, and perhaps most famously, Tracey Moffatt. Though these developments are significant, the fact remains that such progress exists on the margins of the cinematic field, most commonly witnessed by those small audiences with a specific interest in indigenous art, and cinema of the alternative or experimental kind. Therefore, when cinematic images of Aboriginal people are seen by popular audiences, they will still most probably be those documentaries or feature films made by non-Aboriginal filmmakers.



White Australia, however, is an ineradicable part of the story of Aboriginal Australia and its problems. For whites to withdraw completely from contributing to the cinematic stories surrounding the issue of the Aborigines' place in Australia's history and in its present national culture, is a false retreat from a dilemma that cannot and will not be avoided in other arenas. Langton, herself an Aborigine and a key figure in academic and political debate, argues strongly against a white retreat from tackling Aboriginal issues, stating that 'Most Aboriginal people involved in production of artforms believe that an ethical, post-colonial critique and practice among their non-Aboriginal colleagues is possible and achievable.'<sup>348</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that it is only through participation in attempts to create such ethical critique and practice, that a more balanced and just dialogue might be able to emerge.

The films I wish to examine here, *Dead Heart* and *Vacant Possession*, are white attempts to contribute to this dialogue with indigenous Australians. Each film depicts a white Australian culture that is entrapped and haunted by its past interactions with indigenous people. Pointing to metaphors of nation, each film insists upon the need to renovate the monologic aspects of Australia's Great narrative, to pierce it through with contradictions and complications; to rent open the false divides that have been established between past and present, black and white. Carefully foregrounding their fictional status these films highlight at every opportunity the fact that they are stories; imaginative representations, often highly figurative, with particular points of view that can in no way be taken as the last word, and in no way should be taken as prescribed solutions to the Aboriginal 'problem'.

While each film presents its central white characters as trapped and exiled, certain of its Aboriginal characters are allowed a freedom and transcendence that is rare in Australian cinema. It will be demonstrated that these stories exemplify the continued preference for themes of national alienation – alienation from self, from god, from the natural environment, and from homeland – while providing, especially in the case of *Vacant Possession*, some way forward to a kind of freedom that can only be navigated through the recognition of Aboriginal

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<sup>348</sup> M. Langton, op.cit., p. 26.



characters in the national story and the essential intersubjectivity that exists between black and white.

### ***Vacant Possession: History, Land and White Identity***

*'...the big thing I have learnt over the last few years consulting with (and getting into trouble with) the Aboriginal community is that I can't write from a black point of view.'* – **Margot Nash**<sup>349</sup>

An allegory of white Australia's fraught relationship with its history, with the land and with the indigenous peoples, *Vacant Possession* is a film that revels in its own fictional and metaphorical status. Drifting between dream and waking reality, past and present, vivid symbolic imagery is used to create a visual text that is painterly and surreal, yet deeply and intrinsically political in its dealings with land rights issues, and with the relationships between a white family and its black neighbours. The film's radicalism is marked not just by its brave stylistic flair (often considered a rarity in Australian cinema), but by its firm resolve to write only from a white point of view. As the writer/director, Margot Nash, has stated:

*'I decided to write the film completely from the white character's point of view, so we would never be privy to any conversation the Aboriginal mob might have if [the white character] Tessa was not in the room. We wouldn't have any privileged information.'*<sup>350</sup>

It is this very approach, a determinedly white subjective stance, which paradoxically allows both white and black characters to evade entrapment in each other's stories.

Stephen Muecke has argued that when we look at films involving indigenous subjects, we have to '...consider not just the narrative in the production, the story-line, but the narratives about the production (what "we" think we are doing).'<sup>351</sup> It is for this reason that at this point I will discuss some of the background process involved in making this film, leading onto a discussion of the text, and then later move onto a separate exploration of Nash's position within the field.

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<sup>349</sup> Margot Nash, *Masters of Fine Arts (MFA)*, University of New South Wales, 1994, p. 23.

<sup>350</sup> M. Nash quoted by Claire Corbet, 'Vacant Possession: sacred land and haunted houses', *Cinema Papers*, No. 104, June 1995, p. 20.

<sup>351</sup> S. Muecke, op.cit.



Nash's own narrative about the making of *Vacant Possession*, inscribed in her Master of Fine Arts Thesis,<sup>352</sup> is particularly concerned with outlining the difficult creative journey leading her to the decision to write only from a white perspective. It is the account of a painful and confronting process, bringing the realisation that for all her good intentions of 'writing strong Aboriginal characters', of 'consultation' with Aboriginal people, and about properly representing their point of view, her imaginative and figurative representations were nevertheless still offensive to them. She writes: 'I have realised that my desire to get things right, to be correct, is not particularly radical. I am still a white person wanting to be right.'<sup>353</sup>

Nash, whose professional work as documentary filmmaker and teacher has given her years of experience working with Aboriginal people and tackling indigenous issues,<sup>354</sup> encountered an 'unexpectedly hostile' response when she showed the first draft of her script to the Aboriginal people in the area she'd set her story, the La Perouse Land Council.<sup>355</sup> She was accused of racism for depicting an Aboriginal character who had just come out of jail, and found that the fictional characters she'd written could not be accepted as such by the Aborigines, who took all the characters as literal renderings of real people in the La Perouse area.<sup>356</sup>

The shattering response to her initial ideas provoked Nash to make several dramatic shifts in the way she worked and in the story she was trying to tell. She employed an official Aboriginal advisor, Kathy Kum-Sing to help with the script; changed the location of the film from La Perouse to the other side of Botany Bay, so as to escape literal interpretations by the local community; and changed the focus of the script to a 'broader more mythical story'.<sup>357</sup> Thus the narrative became a deep psychological study of a white dysfunctional family whose guilty

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<sup>352</sup> M. Nash, *MFA*, op.cit.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>354</sup> Nash has worked at CAAMA as a mentor in the documentary area, and has worked with a group of Aboriginal writers, putting up projects for the AFC indigenous drama initiative. She has conducted a drama intensive writing workshop at CAAMA, and been a consultant for SBS on an indigenous documentary series. Nash's 1982 documentary *For Love or Money*, a history of women's work, beginning with an examination of Aborigines' work.

<sup>355</sup> M. Nash, *MFA*, op.cit., p. 12-14.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.



history also, almost incidentally, encompassed relationships with their Aboriginal neighbours. This more oblique approach, informed by dialogue between Nash, the Aboriginal community and her advisor, led to a narrative that was starkly different from the ideas that originated it, while remaining faithful to those initial philosophical preoccupations.

This ‘story about the story’ is significant because it articulates the necessary process of cultural maturing in an artist and storyteller who already had extensive experience working in the difficult terrain of intercultural exchange. Nash was forced to move away from trying to ‘accurately’ represent the ‘other’ – even in a way that would by most definitions, have been well-informed and well-intentioned. Even representations borne of good will and good research might lead to definitions and descriptions of the marginalised other that could confine them, leading perhaps to an essentialist conception of Aboriginality.

Instead, the approach Nash was impelled to take was to move to a position of speaking for oneself, to the other, leaving an opening for reply. The generosity of this gesture allows space for change and movement on both sides. The issues of representation are still present – there are Aboriginal characters who play significant roles in the story – yet the explicit rendering of a subjective (white) point of view invites the unfolding of an hermeneutic process rather than collapsing of it down into a containable package.

### **Exiled in Botany Bay**

The film begins with a dream sequence. The light is blue and in the misty mangroves fishes feed amidst a tangle of submerged roots. The scene shifts to a woman sitting in the prow of a boat as it moves through ocean water, a dolphin plowing alongside. The woman’s voiceover accompanies the scene:

*‘Some dreams you remember as if they were real. Others are like fragments that float away, never to be held. This dream returned to me again and again. I knew it was about home because it started here, on a boat heading for Botany Bay, birthplace of a nation, my birthplace, my home. The heads lay in front of me like the entrance to a womb, and the great land whispered behind it. All I could think of was that my mother was dying and I wouldn’t*

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., p. 17.



*reach her in time. In the dream I thought of her mother  
and her mother's mother. I followed the links in the chain,  
one by one, back to the ancestors, prisoners, sweating and  
hungry in the dark hulls.'*

Here the camera looks out to the land, an ugly industrial cityscape made beautiful in morning sunlight, aeroplanes slicing through the sky. The voiceover continues:

*'I thought of my father and his father's father. Fear of the  
unknown gripped me like a cold chill.'*

The sound of a rattlesnake then accompanies the title frame, *Vacant Possession*, cutting to the scene of a hand on a gate. Blue light, signifying the continuation of the dream, reveals an old and flimsy weatherboard house with a corrugated iron roof:

*'There it was, the house I grew up in, and as I moved  
closer, I thought of the Aboriginal children down the road,  
the children we weren't allowed to play with, and One,  
who showed me the snakes and told me stories. But in the  
dream, all I could feel was the cold chill of the serpent's  
body, hungry for my warmth.'*

We see the woman, Tessa (Pamela Rabe), strong and strikingly handsome, in a red silk nightgown. A live and slowly writhing snake is coiled around her neck and shoulders.

This dream sequence introduces each of the story's major aspects, themes of exile, dispossession and alienation that it will later unfold. There is, first, an immediate identification of the woman with the non-indigenous Australian people, for Botany Bay is her birthplace and also the birthplace of the nation. We are reminded of the convicts, Britain's refuse, expelled from a grimy yet familiar homeland into the outer reaches of the new world. While the majority of non-indigenous Australians do not trace their heritage to the convicts, the position of the convict beginnings remains strong in the Great narrative, its key emblems persisting and mutating to encompass the varied experiences of 'new Australians'.

The identification of Tessa and her family with the convicts is repeated when later, her father Frank (John Stanton) sings an old Irish convict tune:

Farewell to the groves of Shelady and Shamrock  
Farewell to the groves of old Ireland.  
May their hearts be merry as ever I would wish them,  
As far away on the ocean I lay bound.  
Oh my father is old and my mother's quite feeble,



To leave their own country it grieves their hearts so.  
Oh the tears in great draughts down their cheeks they are  
rolling,  
To think I must die upon the foreign shore.

He sings this gazing out the window, a sweet nostalgic pause in his generally menacing behaviour. That Frank, the terrifying and violent patriarch is also (like Tessa and the Aborigines) a victim of dispossession is suggested not just by his Irish convict heritage, but by his relationship with the house that he built.

Having lost the house in the divorce to Tessa's mother, Frank tells Tessa that he wishes to spend his superannuation payment buying it back. Seeing her appalled look he pleads with her:

*'For God's sake Tessa, I built the bloody place! You put  
the sweat of your hands into something and it's part of  
you.'*

There is something very poignant in the idea that this old man must now buy back the house that he built. For all his faults – he's a drunk, a racist and a clearly paranoid war-vet who drove his daughter away from home at the age of 16 – the film has previously revealed that he was, at times, a sweet and attentive father. We have seen that he was a practical man who built things for his daughters and tried to provide for his family despite a worsening mental condition. That he built the house, with his own labour, investing himself in its construction, represents a strong claim of ownership.

As Elizabeth Ferrier notes, in an essay on architectural metaphors in Australian narrative, the act of building is linked, at least in western culture, with 'cultural presence and "being"'.<sup>358</sup> Ferrier writes that 'Building signifies settlement, the establishment of a relationship with the land, usually an assertion of ownership of the land', and that 'When ownership of the land is somewhat uncertain, building confirms one's claim on the land.'<sup>359</sup> Acknowledging the importance within Australian culture of home ownership and the galloping development of the Australian 'home improvements' industry, Ferrier links this desire to build with the need to assert ownership, to reassure ourselves that we cannot be displaced by prior claims to the land; with the need to erase links between the land and its prior

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<sup>358</sup> Elizabeth Ferrier, 'From Pleasure Domes to Bark Huts: Architectural Metaphors in Recent Australian Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies*, Vol.13, No.1, 1987, p. 43.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.



occupants, the Aborigines. Thus in this film, Frank's claim that he built the place, appeals to a white Australian audience's sense of justice. Empty land can perhaps be 'given back', but it becomes more contentious when that land has been built upon, inscribed by the invader's culture.

Ann Curthoys has argued that:

*Lurking beneath the angry rejection of the 'black armband' view of history, is a fear of being cast out, exiled, expelled, made homeless again, after two centuries of securing a new home far away from home.*<sup>360</sup>

Frank's dispossession, the seeming injustice of having to buy back his own house, embodies the worst fears of the white land-owners facing indigenous claimants. Manifested in the question, 'Well where do I go then if it's their land?' (as Pauline Hanson so famously asked), this is the deep fear of many non-indigenous Australians, the fear of a double exile, another experience of homelessness.

### **Alienated From Nature**

Tessa's relationship to the land, both in her dreaming and waking life, is presented as a fraught and fearful one. The opening sequence, where we see her heading through the heads of Botany Bay into the 'womb', signifies that the land is present as a hauntingly beautiful yet terrifyingly alien character, a sick but still powerful mother. The earth is scarred and gouged by industry, yet its deep constant breathing, suggested in the soundtrack, signifies the persistence of life, as do the abundant fish and bird life seen in the mangrove swamps. The depiction of the land in this film – as spooky sick mother – is illustrative of a transitional attitude in the Australian psyche, encompassing as it does both the historical view of the land's harshness and 'weird melancholy' with a more contemporary view of our environment as ecologically fragile and threatened.

Like the self in her dreams, Tessa is brought over the ocean (from somewhere 'overseas', New York perhaps), to visit her sick and dying mother, Joyce (Toni Scanlon). Arriving too late, the only thing left to do is to visit the grave and settle the sale of the old family home, 'Irene'. She finds the land itself to be sick and dying. As her sister Kate (Linden Wilkinson) drives her to the semi-deserted

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<sup>360</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology', *Journal of Australian Studies - Imaginary Homelands: The Dubious Cartographies of Australian Identity*, No.61, UQP, 1999, p. 17.



house alongside the ruined yet still beautiful Botany Bay, they pass cranes, silos and earth-moving equipment. Another plane roars overhead. 'What's that smell?' asks Tessa, wrinkling her nose as she encounters a foul odour rising from the earth. 'They're dredging the bay,' her sister tells her.

Later, rifling through a kitchen drawer looking for her mother's will, Tessa finds an old newspaper clipping with the heading, 'Health Fears Over Botany Bay Mercury Find'. The poisoning of the water, the stirring up of the heavy metals in the bay, is referred to several times in the film, with the hint that perhaps it was connected with Joyce's death. There is also a scene where Tessa vomits on Auntie Beryl's lawn, attributing her sickness to 'something in the water'. 'Don't talk to me about the water', replies Auntie Beryl dryly, as she hoses down the lawn with resignation.

An uncomfortable intruder in the natural environment, Tessa's clothes and lips are stark red throughout most of the film, changing to earth tones only towards the conclusion as she becomes more reconciled with her family, her history and her home. Her accent (as played by the Canadian-born Rabe) also indicates a certain transatlantic lostness, neither British, Australian nor American, but a stilted, somewhat stagey mixture of all three.

Tessa says at one point, to the young Aboriginal girl Millie (Olivia Patten) that she finds the bay 'really creepy', to which the girl replies, 'It wasn't always like that, but'. Tessa then tells her the story of when she was a girl, and the local dance hall fell into the sea. 'We didn't care, we kept right on dancing,' she says, with a brisk defiance that speaks of a real fear of the sea, a bleak underlying terror of the power of nature to interfere with human concerns.

This fear of nature is also hinted at in the scene where the teenage Tessa (Melissa Ippolito) and Mitch (Graham Moore) are lying on the beach, kissing and talking about what to do about her pregnancy. A snake slithers by. 'Let's get out of here,' Tessa whispers as she shudders in fear. Mitch stops her, unafraid. 'That's my spirit,' he says, 'and when I die that's what I'll be.' He takes her hand, resting it on the ground. 'Feel that,' he says, and then touches her belly, 'like that, alive.'

The image of the snake is central in *Vacant Possession*. Otherworldly and dangerous, the snake is Tessa's fear of 'nature' embodied. Yet as Nash has noted



in her thesis, after researching the role of snakes in mythology, particularly in the Greek stories of Medusa and Athena, she discovered that snakes ‘...are great protectors, emerging from the ground after winter, and shedding their skins, they remind us of death and rebirth.’<sup>361</sup> When Millie talks with Tessa as they walk along the beach, she speaks of her uncle Mitch’s ability to collect snakes and perform with them, ‘and they never bit him, not once. True!’ The suggestion that the Aboriginal character had some kind of special relationship to the animal nature could be interpreted as condescending or stereotypical if it weren’t for the fact that the emphasis is strongly upon Tessa’s own relationship to the serpent. This creature, which she is forced to encounter in her own dreams, a cold body ‘hungry for my warmth’ is symbolic of the need for her to die to the past and be reborn in the present. Like her nightmares of drowning in the bay, amidst ghostly pulsating white jellyfish, Tessa’s fear of the serpent is the expression of her terror in the face of the long repressed family history she must confront.

In the final scenes of the film, after the house has been partially destroyed by a storm, and she has at last confronted her father, Tessa’s new equilibrium is represented by a scene in which she wraps herself in a blanket and stands peacefully on the beach. In that ultimate liminal space between earth and sea. She stands in the wind, eyes shut and then looking upward as a plane flies overhead. For the first time in the film the planes do not seem menacing or ugly, and a voiceover confirms this lack of fear:

*‘There were so many questions unanswered, so many stories still to tell. But that night I looked to the future, and to the past, for the first time without fear.’*

The openness and calm bravery of this stance, with its acceptance of the earth, the sea and the presence of industry (as represented by the plane), signifies a new harmony between present and past, conscious and unconscious. This harmony arises, predominantly, through the resolution of issues of ownership, not only of the house and land, but ownership of guilt and culpability.

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<sup>361</sup> M. Nash, *MFA*, op.cit., p. 12.



### **‘They think they own the bloody place’ : Entitlement, ownership and place**

Central to this film are the constant disputes about ownership of the house itself. Despite its age, its sad history and its proximity to polluted waters, it seems that everyone feels some tie to the place, a sense of entitlement and a kind of desire to own it, inhabit it or profit by it – much like the attachment so many different groups feel to the land that is Australia. A simplistic rendering of the conflict between blacks and whites for Australian land might have attempted to portray the white family fighting the black family for possession of the house. It is true that this film positions the Aborigines in the background, hinting at their desire to inhabit the house, and indicating, in numerous ways, a comfortable and homely relationship with the property. Yet in its project of speaking from a white point of view, the film finds its narrative backbone in a familiar and resonant story of a white family, two sisters and their father, fighting amongst themselves for the family home.

The central conflict about ownership occurs between the sisters themselves. Kate believes that, having nursed her mother through illness, she is entitled to all the proceeds from the property. Experiencing financial difficulties, due to her husband's drunken gambling ways, she has been counting on the money to get them out of trouble. Tessa, however, has been told of a more recent will in which their mother has left the house to be divided equally between the women. Never without her pack of playing cards and her dice, it appears that she too has a gambling habit and needs the money in order to 'make a fresh start'. The surreal image appears on screen of a drowning Tessa chasing a handful of coins as they float to the bottom of the bay. They glisten there, surrounded by wafting alien-looking jellyfish. The images suggest a betrayal (the biblical thirty pieces of silver?), a loss, the deep subconscious levels on which this financial issue affects each member of the family.

After a heated debate about the property, Tessa leaves her sister's house, camping out at the old property and searching for her mother's new will that she believes must be hidden there. Haunted by creakings and apparitions from the past, she is confronted at last with a real intruder, a real-estate agent who enters through a side window, believing the house to be empty. He is a comical figure, balding and



bumbling, yet nonetheless prepared to barge through uninvited to survey the property. Embarrassed at being sprung he apologises, saying 'This business turns you into an animal.' Tessa screams at him to get out of her house, and he retreats awkwardly out the window.

Tessa later learns that the snooping real estate agent was doing so at the bidding of her father Frank, who explains how it came to be that her mother was given the house:

*'Well, she always owned the land. She won it in a ballot after the war. One of those schemes for dividing up vacant crown land. A lottery. Your mother got lucky. Then [in the divorce] the judge gave her the lot.'*

In this exchange between father and daughter it becomes clear that this much-contested piece of property, now being fought about by two sets of debt-ridden gamblers (Tessa and her sister's husband Harry) and a drunken madman (Frank), was itself originally obtained through a lucky gamble. The lottery in which the land was won was based upon the questionable premise that the land was vacant and that, being owned by the Crown it could therefore be divided up and sold, or in this case, given away in a lottery. Suddenly all claims to ownership seem shaky and ill-founded. The parallels to white Australia's possession and inhabitation of 'Terra Nullius' are clear. As Millie jokes when she refers to Australian history – 'The great "uninhabited" land. Pretty bad eye-sight eh?!'

The way the Aboriginal characters are first introduced into this story immediately signifies their acknowledgement of white invasion. Visiting the house, Tessa and Kate encounter Millie, in her school uniform, searching for her lost cat in the overgrown garden. The cat is named 'Cookie', they are told, because like Captain Cook, no one invited him and he wouldn't go away. This humorous reference is made without malice, for the cat is a much-loved old pet, despite the fact that he is rather grotesque, having lost his ears to skin cancer.

As the Aboriginal girl searches for Cookie, Kate says in a bitter aside to Tessa, 'They think they own the bloody place.' Later, as Millie and her grandmother 'Aunty Beryl' (Rita Bruce) stand at the gate with their recovered cat, Beryl slyly, or perhaps inadvertently, says that the cat keeps coming back to the house because 'he thinks he owns the place!' Kate is not amused. She stands with her arms



crossed as if willing the 'invaders' to leave. Beryl persistently inquires, however, what will happen to the house now: 'I wonder if you'd be interested in renting out the house again', she says. Kate answers dismissively that she is going to sell it. Beryl persists. 'How much you asking?' she says, to which Kate replies shortly, 'Don't know. We'll have to value it.' With her mouth set hard, she is clearly appalled by the idea of the Aboriginal family having anything to do with the house.

### **'We don't want your house'**

The crucial conflict between Tessa and her father occurs in the basement of the house, as they sit in the dark with a storm raging overhead, tearing the house apart. It is here that Tessa decides that 'if there's anything left after all this, I think we should give it to Auntie Beryl, as compensation for losing her son.' Through flashbacks we have learnt that Frank is, in a way, responsible for Mitch's death. Discovering that the teenage Tessa is pregnant – 'you filthy little bitch on heat' – Frank directs his rage against her. Trying to shield her, Mitch enrages Frank even more and he goes to get his gun. Raising an ineffectual stick in self-protection, Mitch is shot in the leg. He is later imprisoned for 'trespass and assault with a deadly weapon', a result of Frank's determination to lay charges against him. Years later Mitch is released, but never really recovering from his time in prison he has a heart-attack, drives into a tree and is instantly killed. Frank's prejudice is implicated as part of Mitch's downfall. His violence also contributes to the death through miscarriage of Tessa's unborn baby – the child that would have been Auntie Beryl's grandchild.

Sitting quietly in a dark corner of the basement is Millie, listening to the exchange between Tessa and Frank. Later as the three emerge from the ruined house, she looks up at Tessa and says, 'We don't want your house. Why do you white people always think you know what we want?' Confused, Tessa reminds Millie of a conversation she'd overheard in which the Aboriginal family were discussing ways of raising funds to buy the property. Millie answers, 'It was only gammon, joking. But we was talking about a home not a house. A home is a place. It's where you belong'.



There is much that is left unresolved in this exchange. What do the Aboriginal family really want? And if the house is not a place where they feel they ‘belong’ then why are they interested in its sale price or the possibility of renting it out again? What, if anything, can be done, should be done, in order to compensate them for their loss? Despite the questions raised here, the film makes the very valid point that white Australians should not assume that Aborigines want to take away their homes, or that they even share the same conception of what it is to be at home. As Pamela Rabe has stated in an interview, *Vacant Possession* ‘...hints at a different connection that Aboriginal Australians have with the land, a bond not confined to the dream of owning a house.’<sup>362</sup>

### **Basements and Roofs: Opening up the house**

*Or finally  
is what you know, enough?  
When the roof's ripped off  
to let in the sky  
And let out past to the air.*  
**Judith Wright**<sup>363</sup>

Overloaded with metaphor, the house in *Vacant Possession* is presented in such a way as to present both continuity and rupture between past and present. Ferrier argues that ‘The passage of time is often spatialised or stabilised through the image of the house; the dwelling endures (even if only in memory) and creates a sense of continuity between past and present.’<sup>364</sup> It is only when Tessa begins to live in the old house, a sun-bleached weatherboard construction ‘...reminiscent of a carcass’,<sup>365</sup> that her past and present really begin to converge. This is conveyed through the seamless scene transitions between Tessa’s childhood, her teen years, and the present. Standing at the dressing-table she glimpses her young mother’s retreating skirt or hears her singing an old show-tune; or her child-self happens upon her father sobbing on the floor as he clutches a photograph of his dead fellow soldiers. This bringing together of past and present, an act of meaning-

<sup>362</sup> Pamela Rabe, quoted in Claire Corbett, op.cit., p. 18.

<sup>363</sup> Judith Wright, ‘Habitat VII’ in *Alive: Poems 1971-72*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973, p.11.

<sup>364</sup> E. Ferrier, op.cit., p. 45.

<sup>365</sup> Architect Michael Philips, the film’s production designer, in C. Corbett, op.cit., p. 20.



making, of making sense of the senseless, is made possible through the enduring dwelling and its provocation of memories.

It is symbolically significant that the real confrontation between Tessa and her father occurs as they shelter beneath the floor of the house that Frank built, waiting for the storm to pass. Catherine Simpson, discussing the film *Radiance*, by Aboriginal director Rachel Perkins (1998), and its depiction of the area under the house, quotes from author David Malouf:

*While the family house is described as an ordered familiar space dominated by convention and clear boundaries, the area under it is an unstructured void, associated on the one hand with sexuality, freedom and mystery and yet also with darkness, fear and death. It is the area of illicit activity, representing all that is repressed in conventional social life.*<sup>366</sup>

It is while they are under the house that Tessa and Frank discuss the heart of their conflict, and it is here, in the unconscious womb of the house that Frank reveals his feelings about Aboriginal people in the following exchange:

*Tessa: (grabbing away her notebook) It's a story. It's about a girl who runs away from her father and becomes a professional gambler. She played the casinos, Blackjack, Poker, but when the chips were down she still felt like a stranger. (Bitterly, self-mockingly) D'you think it will sell?*

*Frank: (sadly) I was drunk.*

*Tessa: And were you still drunk when you laid charges against him? Was mum drunk when she lied and told me he didn't want to see me?*

*Frank: You've got to understand your mother's position.*

*Tessa: I don't understand anybody's position.*

*Frank: We wanted to protect you.*

*Tessa: From what?*

*Frank: You know bloody well what. If you'd married an Abo what sort of life would*

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<sup>366</sup> David Malouf, *Johnno*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1987, p.84. Also quoted in C. Simpson, 'Notes on the Significance of Home and the Past in *Radiance*, *Metro Magazine*, No.120, 1999, p. 30.



*you have had? They don't want to work,  
just want to lie around and get drunk  
and talk about bloody landrights!*

*Tessa: (Gesturing towards the corner where  
Millie sits shivering in a blanket) Are  
you talking about Millie?*

Soon after this conversation, Frank breaks into tears, talking about his war experiences, the smell of burning flesh and the terror he has experienced through years of electric shock therapy. He describes his head as a 'dark cavernous pit where nothing exists' and, sitting in the dark basement both Millie and Tessa begin to understand something about the extent of damage he has suffered, and the pain he still feels. It is a moment reminiscent of the unmasking of the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, where the bogey man is revealed to be scrawny and pitiful. Yes, Frank is culpable, and has some ugly and ignorant attitudes. But he has also been affected by a war that had nothing to do with the land rights war at home, but a war that was itself about protecting home from invasion.

As Nash has noted, the evolution of her script brought about a reluctant focus on the daughter's relationship with the father, and the discovery of a compassion for him that she did not expect to find.<sup>367</sup> There is the risk that this humanising of the father 'lets him off the hook' too easily by placing him in the position of victim, a powerful and cherished place in Australian historical consciousness. As Curthoys has argued, '...it is notable how *good* non-Aboriginal Australians are at memorialising their own sufferings',<sup>368</sup> and that this is one strategy that can be used to avoid blame for the dispossession of indigenous peoples.

It could be argued that by setting up a situation in which Tessa is a victim of her father's aggression and violence, as are the Aboriginal family, the narrative then goes about turning Frank, a character representative of previous generations of white Australians, into a pitiable and suffering victim, thus defusing blame. All sides can now be harmonised through their mutual experience of being wronged. There is a way in which the narrative does find resolution, and a kind of reconciliation, through this strategy, but to give undue weight to this is to miss this film's subtleties and its attempts to delve deeply into the psychological

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<sup>367</sup> M. Nash, *MFA*, op.cit., p. 10.

<sup>368</sup> A. Curthoys, op.cit., p. 3.



territory of the father-daughter relationship. To focus on the relative sufferings of the various characters, making them stand for blacks and whites of present and past generations, is to enter again into a simplistic and unproductive competition for the status of 'most wronged'. To read the narrative in this way is also to mistake the nature of empathy, understanding and forgiveness, which by no means need take away from the responsibility, or the consequences, of the wrong-doer's actions.

Ensuing scenes reveal Frank's ability to be compassionate. There are echoes of the bravery he must have shown during the war as he solicitously carries Millie to her grandmother's car, telling her to look after her injured ankle. He looks over at a stunned Auntie Beryl, and says, 'She's a great kid Mrs Mullins'. This is a small gesture, and we know that Beryl will not forgive easily the injustice that was done to her and her son. (In a previous scene she has said to Tessa, 'He got off scott-free. I hope a Tiger snake bites him in the dead of the night.') Tessa's own compassion and forgiveness of her father do not take away from the fact that she has suffered as a consequence of his brutality, that she has lost a lover and a baby, and that her life has been permanently altered.

**'The thing I like about stories...'**

*'The thing that I like about [a story] is all the pictures you get in your head when you're reading it. Somebody else can read the same story and get a completely different set of pictures.'* – **Tessa to Millie**

Far too often in the Great Australian narrative 'Aboriginality' has been constructed by white filmmakers purporting to take the Aboriginal perspective. By self-consciously taking a white perspective and highlighting its narrative as simply one point of view, a model to be tried out and tested, *Vacant Possession* acknowledges its limitations and its subjectivity, and is all the more powerful for it.

Marcia Langton has argued that Aboriginality is created through interaction, dialogue between blacks and whites, and that in these exchanges, '...the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals involved test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as responses are processed to find some



satisfactory way of comprehending the other.<sup>369</sup> In this film the primary attempt is to comprehend the self, the white national self as represented by Tessa, yet the Great narrative demands that such self-interrogation involve acknowledging the aspect of Aboriginal dispossession, and the relationships that have evolved between whites and blacks.

It is perhaps ironic that through the focus upon the white self and her position regarding history, the film is able to blur the boundaries between what is white and black. There is a very real suggestion that Tessa is more at home with the Aborigines than she is with her own family. It is with them that she appears free and at ease. It is with Beryl that she shares the mourning of their respective children – Tessa’s unborn child, and Beryl’s son Mitch. The fact that Tessa fell in love with Mitch, and wanted to give birth to the child of their union again symbolises the blurring of boundaries between white and black, and her close friendship with Millie, a friendship that transcends any adult/child power dimension, reiterates the point that though there are distinct differences between the experiences of blacks and whites in relation to history, in the present there may be much ground to meet upon. In Muecke’s words, ‘...in the merging of that familiar opposition self/other, how can one be sure just what part of oneself is indubitably “self” and what part is definitely from another cultural place?’<sup>370</sup>

### ***Dead Heart: Power, Law and Land***

A provocative, sometimes confusing and disturbing film, *Dead Heart* suggests that the reconfiguring of white Australia's Great narrative so that it encompasses Aboriginal perspectives may be much more difficult than the simple recognition of the Aboriginal ‘other’s’ essential humanity or dignity and the respect of difference. That this generalised and essentialised Aboriginal ‘other’ does not exist, becomes obvious the moment we move from theory to reality, and to try to construct it is to engage in a ludicrously reductive exercise.

*Dead Heart* narrativises some of the problems of mutual recognition that can arise when indigenous and non-indigenous Australians attempt to coexist. Giving equal weight to multiple and conflicting perspectives, the film presents each of its main

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<sup>369</sup> M. Langton, op.cit., p. 83.

<sup>370</sup> S. Muecke, op.cit.



characters, white and black, as stranded in the centre of a complex and contradictory identity dilemma. Here their respective identities are fixed by race, colour and history, yet simultaneously (and paradoxically) they are unfinalised, mutable and forever in the process of being negotiated.

Amidst all the various shadings (literal and symbolic) of white, brown and black, there comes a point where negotiation or reconciliation seems impossible, yet as a process unavoidable and essential; for even in the centre of the Australian desert, no man or woman is an island, and no culture can exist in isolation. By centering the narrative around the conflict between the beliefs and laws of the desert tribesman, and those of the white policeman, *Dead Heart* explores some of the reasons why these two points of view cannot be easily harmonised, why they are stuck, like the settlement of Wala Wala 'eight hours West of Alice Springs' at the dead heart of an impasse.

The film begins with three Aboriginal men meeting under a tree in the desert. Wearing cowboy hats and sunglasses, they walk barefoot and carry spears, an odd sartorial mix of modern and primitive. After greeting each other with hugs, they sit down to play cards and tell stories. The first man tells of how he's 'finished' an enemy by 'pulling out his ribs and taking his heart.' The second man tells of how he's healed a friend, by sucking out a cursed stone from his arm. The third man, Poppy (Gnarnayarrahe Waitaire) can beat both these stories, for he has 'finished' the entire Aboriginal settlement of Wala Wala, and he 'fixed that police fella good one.' Throwing his cards up in the air, Poppy begins his story and we, the audience, are taken back in time to the scene of the crime.

A loose encampment of Aborigines live near the tiny cluster of buildings that have been constructed to serve them, a settlement administered by a motley group of white public servants. They include a policeman, a doctor, a teacher and his wife, and an anthropologist intent on mapping the local life-style before it disappears. An Aboriginal Lutheran pastor, David (Ernie Dingo) performs an advocacy role for the local people in their interactions with government bodies, while preaching Christianity to them on Sundays. In this hot and dusty social microcosm an intense and deadly battle of wills is played out between the elder tribesman Poppy and the local policeman, Ray Lorkin (Bryan Brown).



This conflict has its origins with a death in custody, the suicide hanging of Poppy's nephew Danny in the local lockup. Hearing of the death, Poppy's brother-in-law, Danny's father Mannga (Peter Francis) travels from the remote desert to Wala Wala. He brings with him his grandson Tjulpu (Djunawong Stanley Mirindo), Danny's son, who has been raised in isolation, strong in ancient traditions, never learning to read or speak English, in the hope that he won't become like his father Danny, who was a violent drunk.

A fight erupts around a campfire as Mannga and Tjulpu try to assign blame for the suicide hanging. Their first target is Poppy who, as a relative, should have looked after Danny. Poppy quickly passes on the blame to the decidedly un-traditional Tony (Aaron Pederson), the laddish jokester who regularly smuggles slabs of forbidden beer into the settlement. 'You brought him drink!' Poppy yells at Tony accusingly. Tjulpu lunges at Tony with a spear, stopped only by the intervention of the pastor David, who steps between them.

It is here that we are introduced to Ray, who arrives in his four-wheel drive with a makeshift siren attached to the roof. Armed with spears the mob pause as Ray gets out the car. He tucks in his shirt as he walks, buckling his belt and slotting his gun into its holster as he moves over to the group. There is something in this gesture which speaks of his rough authority, but also of its fragile nature, its dependence upon the props that accompany the role. Like the siren attached to his car, Ray's power is a tenuous and assumed kind that must be improvised within the rugged context.

'Alright, shut up the lot of ya!' Ray shouts in his broad 'strine' accent, jaw jutting out in a show of authority. He is soon told that the newcomers are relatives of the dead man, and that they want to exact tribal 'payback' revenge. Mannga tells Ray to leave, raising his spear, but Ray whips out his gun, making it clear that he has the upper hand. 'No way. Whitefella law, I stay,' he says, advising Mannga to chose one person to pay back, and then to get it over and done with. Mannga eyes the crowd, moving from one person to the next. Poppy, angry at seeing Ray, who he already hates, chimes in, telling Mannga that Ray is the one that put his son in the lockup and is therefore responsible for his death. Mannga rests his spear on Ray's leg, then looks at Tony, but eventually chooses Billy Curlew (Lafe Charlton), Ray's Aboriginal sidekick, a black-tracker. 'No, not Police!' insists



Ray, but Billy steps in, offering himself up for the spearing, 'It was my responsibility Ray, I should've looked after him.' Ray is skeptical but Billy insists, 'I know how to make the pain not hurt, boss.' Taking his trousers off, Billy submits to the spearing.

It is a graphically violent moment. Shown in close-up, by firelight, we see a thick pointed spear slice through from one side of Billy's thigh to the other. This occurs twice before Ray steps in and says, 'enough, no more'. Leaning down over the bleeding man Ray looks up at Mannga appalled. 'I hope you're satisfied,' he says, to which Mannga nods slightly, non-committally.

In this scene we see Ray's dilemma. On the one hand he is there to ensure that white law is upheld, a law that does not allow for revengeful violence. At the same time, Ray is there to maintain order and he realises that the violence will be much worse if he does not allow it to take place in a controlled and limited way. He reveals himself to be open to the idea of another way of administering justice, though he's not at all happy about it. He's prepared to bend the rules, to try and find a middle way, or 'Wala Wala way' as he terms it on a number of occasions, but it becomes clear as the story progresses, that his attempts to control the black community, and to integrate their justice systems with the white systems of justice is doomed to failure.

Another destructive domino of payback is set in motion when Tony is discovered to have violated a sacred site. Engaged in an illicit affair with the schoolteacher's wife Kate (Angie Milliken), Tony frequently takes her to a nearby waterhole, where she sketches the scenery, he swims, and then they make love. On one occasion they venture into a secret cave 'where we kill boys and make men'. As a woman, and a white one at that, Kate's presence in the cave is blasphemous enough, yet the couple not only enters the site, but also destroy the intricate sand painting on the cave's floor as they tussle around in passionate embrace.

Several days later, Kate finds Tony dead in his bed. The doctor (Ann Tennyson) can find no evidence of foul play and declares it to be a freak heart attack. Ray is convinced, however, that Tony is the victim of a secret murder technique, known by some of the old Aborigines, by which the arteries in the neck are blocked, causing a reflex stoppage of the heart. Ray begins to suspect that behind the death



are Poppy and the tribal newcomers, Mannga and Tjulpu. Ray is enraged, not only because he believes a terrible and pointless crime has been committed, but because despite all his sympathetic attempts to integrate payback, his trust has been violated by the extreme measure, and his power as law enforcer has been undermined. 'I never told you to kill anyone', he says to the gathered crowd of Aborigines after violently arresting Tjulpu. 'I let you do things the tribal way, but we're going to tighten up now. You treat me like a whitefella, I show you whitefella way, don't you fuckin' worry!'

### **Aboriginality as a construction**

This film's most significant achievement is its presentation of Aboriginality, indeed of any identity, as a construction, thus bypassing any simplistic categorisations of black and white or any easy alignment of them with notions of 'good' or 'bad'. Each subject on the broad spectrum of characters exists in a social space that is constituted by conflicting loyalties and conflicting beliefs about race and culture.

This ambiguity is demonstrated most clearly in the character of the white policeman Ray, a second-generation cop who has lived all his life in the Northern Territory and who genuinely loves working in the harsh desert environment, where he knows the land, the people and the language. When his job at Wala Wala is threatened, by Poppy's connivings, Ray puts his position in Aboriginal terms:

*'This dirty little hole is my dreaming. Charlie [the anthropologist] should put it on his map, "Ray's Dreaming". I belong here. And that bastard's trying to get rid of me because I sent him down for shooting up his own Toyota. Is that a joke?'*

Ray's attachment to the land, and his belief that it is the only place he belongs, is no doubt an attitude held by many Australians who live and work outside of the major urban centres. That Ray is played by an actor like Bryan Brown, who has been described as having '...supplanted from Jack Thompson the role of the actor most epitomising the Australian male...' <sup>371</sup> again identifies him with this kind of

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<sup>371</sup> Geoff Mayer, entry on Bryan Brown in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, eds. B. Mcfarlane, G. Mayer, I. Bertrand, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1999, p. 46.



iconic white Australian male. As art critic John McDonald has argued, speaking about landscape painting and its continuing popularity:

*We somehow think that Aborigines have this amazingly intrinsic relationship with the land that we can't duplicate. However I'm sure that, a lot of Australians, particularly those who live in the land, a lot of white Australians feel that they belong on the land no less so than the Aboriginal inhabitants and feel that's the only world they know...*<sup>372</sup>

The point is not whether Ray's relationship to the land is as intrinsic as that of the Aborigines, but that he *feels* that it is. He understands himself, defines himself, by his tough pragmatic approach to the land and its people.

Ray's skill in surviving on the land is demonstrated in the scenes where he traces Tjulpu, Mannga and Poppy out into the desert where they are trying to force the genteel Aboriginal bureaucrat Dave to rediscover his black culture. In contrast with Dave, who pathetically limps along, mopping his brow with a handkerchief and wearing spectacles and flimsy shoes, Ray is comfortably tough, touting his rifle and wearing a bandana across his face to keep out the dust. He knows where all the secret waterholes are, and he's a skilled tracker, reading the minute signs left on the land by the men he's following.

In these scenes we are given a powerful deconstruction of the simplistic alignment of the Aborigine with the 'natural', and the white man with the 'cultural'. As Ray says to Dave when he's found him:

*'You're a fuckin' white man, Dave, a fuckin' white man. I've got more blackfella in me than you'll ever have. That's how I know you couldn't find this place by yourself!' There are echoes in this of a previous conflict between the two men, where Ray shouts at Dave, 'You're such a fuckin' bureaucrat, you know that?'*

Dave replies to this meekly, with a simple 'Yes'.

This debate, about what a 'whitefella' or a 'blackfella' might be, is carried on throughout the film, through shifting, ever-changing models of blackness and whiteness which the characters try out on each other and on themselves. The process echoes Langton's description of intersubjective exchanges, whereby both

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<sup>372</sup> John McDonald, speaking with Julie Copeland in *A Brush with Landscape*, episode three, Radio National, Sunday August 30, 1998.



Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals repeatedly test and adjust their models of each other.<sup>373</sup>

*Dead Heart* plays with stereotypical models of Aboriginality, bringing them to light and then complicating them. That it does this without merely inverting the stereotypes is part of its difficult achievement. Witness the following exchange: Billy Curlew (Lafe Charlton), Ray's blacktracker offsider, is looking at one of the anthropological maps that Charlie is constructing. He points to a section of the map and says 'Tingarri dreaming track'. Charlie, delighted, agrees, and asks Billy, 'Where's your dreaming Billy?'

*Billy:*                      *Not there. I've got Tiger dreaming.*

*Charlie:*                  *Tiger? Tassie Tiger?*

*Billy:*                      *Melbourne.*

*Charlie:*                  *Melbourne Tiger?*

*Billy:*                      *Yeah. Richmond!*

*Charlie:*                  *Football! Football dreaming! (The white men laugh.)*

*Billy:*                      *(Annoyed) What you laughing at? Whitefella funny bugger.*

Billy is not being deliberately humorous in this exchange, and his deadly seriousness reinforces the idea that the dreaming is indeed a subjective and evolving spiritual concept, particularly problematic for the urban or semi-urban Aborigine.

The complicated and contradictory notion of the Dreaming is again illustrated in an exchange between Tony and Kate at the sacred waterhole. Tony, who seems much more aligned with the white community than with the black one, from which he was removed at a young age, points out to the desert and says, 'That's my country, that's my dreaming.' Kate looks at him confused, and says, 'But you don't believe in that. You told me...' Tony laughs at her. 'Yeah, but I get lonely for that country, and just because I stop believing one way doesn't mean I've got to start believing another.' He shakes off the seriousness of the statement with a joke, 'All I believe is that you've got to have a bit of fun!'

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<sup>373</sup> M. Langton, op.cit., p. 83.



It has been argued by Benterrak, Muecke and Roe that the concept of ‘the dreaming’ is ‘...not a set of beliefs which is being lost because it is no longer valid, it is rather a way of talking, of seeing, of knowing, and a set of practices, which is as obtuse, as mysterious and as beautiful as any poetry.’<sup>374</sup> They argue that ‘the dreaming’ is a living and ongoing tradition that is political, contemporary and not necessarily attached to any particular religious dogma, depending instead on ‘...people living in the country, travelling through it and naming it, constantly making new stories and songs.’<sup>375</sup> *Dead Heart* seems to recognise this, presenting each character’s dreaming as an individualised and indefinable attachment to places or things, a vital cultural in-between-ness that is a troubled but essential hybrid of black and white.

### **Equal treatment and the law**

In Chapter One of this thesis, drawing on Honneth’s work on recognition, I described modern legal systems as attempting to indiscriminately ascribe to all persons a fundamental equality of rights and obligations. Based on the assumption that people share the universal qualities of free and equal beings capable of autonomous decision-making, modern law is the embodiment of modern societies’ notions of justice and fairness, and its notions of individual responsibilities. In *Dead Heart* we are shown the flaws of this model when it is applied too literally, and without cultural sensitivity, to people who do not understand its assumptions or its operations.

When Ray uncovers the truth that Tjulpu killed Tony, he immediately arrests him and throws him (along with a few punches) into the lockup, the very cell where Tjulpu’s father Danny hung himself. As the journalists who are visiting the settlement point out, Tjulpu has had little contact with white society, speaks no English, and is being held under a law he’s never heard of. Ray is asked if this is fair, to which he replies, as if by rote, ‘um, the law has to apply equally for everyone’. The journalist raises the suggestion that this may be equal, but not necessarily fair treatment, as it is Aboriginal custom to avoid places where family members have died. To lock Tjulpu in such a place is extreme cruelty. Of course

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<sup>374</sup> K. Benterrak, S. Muecke, P. Roe, *Reading the Country*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 1984, p. 14.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.



Ray knows this, yet he replies like a robot, 'It's unfortunate but it's the only cell we've got.'

When Dave tries to explain Tjulpu's behaviour to Ray, saying that he was forced by the elders to do the killing and that 'he didn't have a choice', Ray's reply is succinct: 'Not in my book. In my book you've always got a choice.' There is a seeming contradiction in Ray's application of the white law. He is willing to bend the law to fit in with local traditions, as exhibited in the opening payback scene, yet he can be stubbornly insensitive and tyrannical in carrying out his role as policeman, even extending this aggressive behaviour to his white 'mates' when need be.

The key to this complex mixture of flexibility and inflexibility is Ray's attachment to power. The white laws can be bent, transformed into 'Wala Wala way', as long as Ray is overseeing them, as long as his word is law and he is in control. It is when he realises that Poppy and Mannga have taken the law into their own hands, have deliberately deceived and excluded him, that his anger transforms his seemingly benevolent rule into the behaviour of the petty and abusive tyrant. It is not the law, or even the land and people that Ray loves, but his power to administer the law, a control that is at the heart of 'Ray's Dreaming'. When this power is threatened he becomes a desperate man, even disobeying his superiors in attempt to shore up his power base.

At the film's conclusion, after Ray has been almost fatally speared by Mannga and Tjulpu, and carried off to hospital, we see the final news broadcast by the journalists. They ask the Senior Sergeant Oaks (Marshall Napier) if any action will be taken against the Aboriginal men. He replies that the men are being sought for questioning. 'Will you detain them in custody?' the journalist asks. 'They will receive exactly the same treatment as any other Australian citizen under Australian law,' Oaks says, reinforcing the fact that although Ray will probably now be expelled from the police force, his basic application of white law, regardless of context, was in keeping with the official line.

As Charles Taylor has argued, the limited and restrictive interpretation of equal rights, regardless of cultural context, is not the only possible way to apply



them.<sup>376</sup> Taylor argues that the standard schedule of rights can be applied differently in accordance with different notions of individual and collective responsibility and goals,<sup>377</sup> a point which is highly relevant in the case at hand – where Tjulpu has killed a man, in accordance with beliefs about the violation of sacred sites, and at the direction of the collective elders of the community. As Nick Parsons has argued, what is murder in one culture is execution in another.<sup>378</sup>

That Ray, and his superiors, realise the injustice they are perpetrating is illustrated in the exchange where they talk, with relief, about how Tjulpu has no notion of his rights to silence, or his rights to be properly represented by a lawyer. Their refuge in the letter of the law, that it must apply equally to all citizens, is a weak and flimsy one, born not of ignorance, but of a manipulation of the law's principles to serve their own interests.

### **The Eye of the Camera: The media and Aboriginality**

The presence of journalists in the community of Wala Wala as the drama unfolds is interesting and symbolically significant, though perhaps not entirely necessary to the plot. The two Channel Seven journos suspect a story and turn up in the middle of the desert when they get wind of the fact that Mannga and Tjulpu have returned from their wanderings to mourn the death of Danny, a story in itself as a 'death in custody'.

The television men are told by David, who represents the community in such matters, that they will not be able to film without permits, and that the arrangements for such permits might take several weeks to arrange with the local Council. They are understandably reluctant to make the eight-hour drive back to Alice Springs, so try to persuade David of the importance of the story:

*Journo: Look, the old man, his grandson, first contact, never seen a white person, at the mercy of white society and all that. Victims of white culture. It's a good story, and let's face it, there'll be shitloads of media turning up to talk to*

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<sup>376</sup> Charles Taylor & Amy Guttman, *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, p. 52.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Nicholas Parsons, Press Kit for *Dead Heart*.



*them. Or you can deal with us. Let the story die a natural death. We're just out here trying to get a bit of depth. It'll take half a day.*

*David: The story isn't quite true you know...*

*Poppy: (Seeing the journalists with their cameras) You give me money?*

The film presents the media here as both capable of uncovering important issues, yet also responsible for ravenously consuming and manipulating 'a good story'. It is the journalists who question not only Ray's sense of justice in locking up Tjulpu, but also the fairness of Aboriginal cosmology, when they hear that a (seemingly) randomly chosen person is often punished merely because someone has to fulfil the role of culprit.

The media, as represented in this story, exhibit a certain amorality. Their supposed impartiality is at the heart of their power, and also at the root of their gross omissions, their culpable manipulation and complete inability to really understand the subtleties of the issues they are addressing. With the eye of the camera they pin Ray to the role of villain, and they roll on relentlessly filming as Kate weeps over Tony's dead body. Their incomprehension is illustrated as they film Ray shouting at the crowd and waving his gun at them:

*Journalist 1 (to journalist 2): What was all that about?*

*Journalist 2: Who gives a fuck? It was fuckin' great!*

In the final television story, we see the story packaged up by the journalists, who in a string of dead clichés, summarise the devastating events. They note that the community is packing up and leaving the settlement. In a voiceover we are told that, 'What occurred [in the desert between Ray and the Aboriginal men] remains unclear...but one thing remains clear...' and then the scene cuts off, as though a television has just been turned off. The suggestion here, is that nothing is clear, everything is a messy and unfinalised moral dilemma, and the film refuses to give the media the license to so easily dismiss the confusion.

### **Power to Poppy: 'I didn't do nothing!'**

Perhaps the most complex and mysterious character in this story is Poppy, an old Aboriginal man who, in Ray's words, 'never saw a whitefella till he was



seventeen.' Poppy's history has encompassed huge changes, from living in the traditional tribal way as a boy, to going out on killing and raiding parties as a young man. Now, as an elder, he lives 'in-between' tradition and modernity, wielding his power over the community, wanting the young people to go back to their black ways, yet always looking for money from the journalists, and plotting ways of getting a new Toyota from 'the government'.

Poppy's power lies in his ability to use both camps, the white and the black, to further his interests. Ray summarises the position thus:

*'We're only here because the Council wants us here.  
We're all treading on eggshells. They're very smart, y'see.  
They're hunter-gatherers, you know? And what they've  
done is gathered a few white people, a little handful in the  
middle of the desert. And the thing about white people is:  
you only need a few, and they can last your whole life.'*

Poppy wants to be rid of Ray because, among other reasons, Ray cannot be used any more. His usefulness expired when he fined Poppy for shooting up his own Toyota – 'wilful damage to property.' Yet Poppy and Ray share many of the same qualities. They are each, in their own ways, complex hypocritical tyrants, attached to power and somewhat justified in their attachment.

Poppy's hypocrisy lies in his insistence that all Aboriginal people must choose either 'white way' or 'black way'. When he draws a line in the desert sand, he insists that David joins one camp or the other, that he cannot exist in the middle, that there is 'no middle road'.

The irony here is of course, that Poppy himself has found his own unique middle road. Yes he is defiantly Aboriginal, has his heart in the 'black camp', but he is, in his own way, a politician, a schemer, an old man in a red satin cowboy shirt who succeeds in getting rid of Ray, getting his relatives out of court, and driving off in a brand new silver four-wheel-drive.

In the final scene we are taken back to three men playing cards under the tree. Poppy has finished telling his story and the other men are impressed, and maybe a little sobered at their friend's power to destroy. They ask how he managed to escape prison and the law. He replies: 'I been witness. I don't do nothing!' He drives off in his new car, which until now has been concealed from the camera. He is a self-satisfied man, knowing that he has used the individualist white law,



found a way of making it relevant. He has destroyed Wala Wala and Ray, without actually lifting a spear or committing a convictable crime. Even as Mannga and Tjulpu repeatedly stab Ray at the waterhole, Poppy sits on a rock like an evil lizard, watching and directing the whole operation.

While he is a despicable and infuriating character, there is something immensely compelling in the film's depiction of this important character. Here is the Aboriginal man brilliantly intelligent and complex. Like Ray he is a villain and a hero in one, but he is ultimately triumphant, able to transcend any victim status and to find his own way of being both black and white.

### **In-betweenness: 'I'm just a fella'**

Perhaps the most important message of *Dead Heart* is found in the words uttered by Dave as he finally shields Ray from a fatal spearing, saying 'You spear him, you spear me too'. Poppy asks him, 'Are you whitefella or blackfella?' to which Dave replies imploringly, 'I'm just a fella'.

By referring back to a shared essential humanity, Dave's comment takes us beyond the complexity of the various cross-cultural conflicts to what must ultimately be the starting point for any reconciliation. His statement also suggests that in this society there is no way of being purely a whitefella or a blackfella. There can be no refuge in such essentialism, and every person must forge their own way of living in between the two camps. That this is a difficult and painful exercise is a fact borne out by the narrative, but, it suggests, there can be no alternative, no easy answers that can be generalised across the entire population of 'Australian citizens'. The only resolution possible, suggests *Dead Heart*, is for each and every Australian to accept their present state, exiled in a state of in-betweenness, of cultural permeability, and to continue to wrestle with the issues of difference and sameness in a difficult and ongoing dialogue.



## Chapter 5B: The Field of Australian Cinema: *Vacant Possession* and *Dead Heart*

Following on from the structure established in the previous chapter, this section will focus on the films and directors in relationship to the Australian cinematic field. We will begin to see that the difficulties inherent in attempting to reinstate Aborigines back into the national narrative during the 1990s were manifested in the cinematic field. These films and filmmakers occupied new positions within the field, and in doing so, reveal much about the fierce conflicts between the field's values of aesthetics, commerce and progressive politics.

### ***Vacant Possession*: Poetic Politics**

Those viewers wishing to locate a copy of *Vacant Possession* will encounter difficulties unless they approach specialist libraries such as the Australian Film Institute's Cinemedia access collection, or purchase a copy through the AFI's special distribution service. This is due to the fact that after a limited release in small cinemas, like Melbourne's Lumiere, Sydney's Chauvel and Perth's Cinema Paradiso, *Vacant Possession* was only given a narrow-scale video release. A small budget film (\$1.6 million), fully funded by the AFC,<sup>379</sup> *Vacant Possession* made very little money at the box office, and does not, therefore, occupy a position of power at the heteronomous (commercial) pole of the field of Australian film.

At the more autonomous pole of the field, however, the film gained significant recognition. When SBS screened it as the 2001 special Australia Day movie, *Vacant Possession*'s position of symbolic power within the national field was finally underlined. This was the culmination of several years of critical acclaim, recognition was gained through screenings at dozens of festivals and events where the film was targeted to, and appreciated by, a specialised but global cinema-literate audience.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> C. Corbett, op.cit., p. 18.

<sup>380</sup> For a list of festival screenings see Appendix II, *Vacant Possession*.



Writing in numerous forums, critic Adrian Martin declared *Vacant Possession* to be ‘a truly exciting piece of cinema’,<sup>381</sup> exhibiting a ‘resonant “poetic politics”’,<sup>382</sup> and ‘unquestionably the best Australian film to have appeared so far this year.’<sup>383</sup> The film reminds Martin of Douglas Sirk’s classic technicolour melodramas, and he discusses Nash in relation to the ‘...great experimental filmmaker Maya Deren...’, and the much admired feminist auteur Susan Dermody.<sup>384</sup>

In other forums the film was similarly well received. Of the 250 films screened at the 1995 Sydney Film Festival, audiences polled *Vacant Possession* in the top 10.<sup>385</sup> Critics described it as ‘...a landmark Australian film...’,<sup>386</sup> ‘...an emotionally powerful work...rich in its layering of detail...’,<sup>387</sup> praising again its ‘...resonant and poetic imagery...’,<sup>388</sup> and its ‘...keen sense of humanity...’.<sup>389</sup>

Where the film was criticised, it was for its overly resolved conclusion,<sup>390</sup> its ‘...try-hard moments of overstating its many themes...’.<sup>391</sup> It was accused of being ‘...excessively didactic, wearing its heart too much on its sleeve – perhaps as a consequence of its own grand ambitions and dreams’.<sup>392</sup> A pure aesthetic, as the previous chapter noted in relation to *Praise*, is suspicious of political commitment, of too much attachment to ‘social issues’, requiring the art object to exist for its own sake. For Bourdieu, ‘The invention of the pure gaze is realized in the very movement of the field towards autonomy’,<sup>393</sup> and it is in its evaluation of films such as *Vacant Possession* that the Australian cinematic field reveals its conflicting desires to move in this direction. For on the one hand, the field itself is structured and funded in such a way as to support projects that deal with issues of

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<sup>381</sup> A. Martin, ‘Critic’s Choice – *Vacant Possession*’, *The Age*, Melbourne, 9/6/95.

<sup>382</sup> A. Martin, ‘In Memory of Homelands’, *The Age*, Melbourne, 25/5/95.

<sup>383</sup> A. Martin, ‘The Week in Film’, Radio broadcast, *Radio National* 17/6/95.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Ruth Hessey, ‘Taking Possession’, *Elle*, August 1995.

<sup>386</sup> Anna Maria Dell’Oso, ‘A Meditation on Heritage and History’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16/5/96.

<sup>387</sup> Tom Ryan, ‘Land Rites’, *The Sunday Age*, Melbourne, 19/5/96.

<sup>388</sup> A. Dzenis, ‘Review of *Vacant Possession*’, *Cinema Papers*, no.110, June 1996, pp. 52 & 54.

<sup>389</sup> Evan Williams, ‘How the Land Lies’, Review, *The Weekend Australian*, 18/5/96.

<sup>390</sup> A. Martin, ‘The Week in Film’, Radio broadcast, op.cit.

<sup>391</sup> A.M. Dell’Oso, op.cit.

<sup>392</sup> A. Dzenis, op.cit.

<sup>393</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 264.



national importance, ‘...to promote a more inquisitive, imaginative and thoughtful society, allowing us to define and explore what it is to be Australian’.<sup>394</sup> On the other hand, ‘serious’ artists and critics are keen to distance themselves from any taint of producing or praising ‘official’ culture, or what could amount to politically correct art or nationalistic propaganda.

The attempt to overcome this contradiction between ‘disinterested’ aesthetics and art that is ‘interested’ in issues of national culture, is perhaps best expressed by Anna Dzenis in her review of *Vacant Possession*. Dzenis argues that it is in its ‘...lesser stated and more ambiguous poetic moments that the film is most successfully revealed, committed and enduring’.<sup>395</sup> In this deft, almost alchemical maneuver, Dzenis reveals how critics and film intellectuals working within national cinemas can work towards having it both ways, aligning themselves with the aesthetically autonomous, while simultaneously allowing for the politically committed principles which underlie the existence of the field.

## **Margot Nash: 'The colonised start to look like the colonisers'**

Born in New Zealand and raised in suburban Melbourne, Nash began her career in the 1960s as an actor in theatre and television, having associations with the Melbourne Theatre Company, La Mama, and the Pram Factory. She also worked as a freelance stills photographer, gradually becoming more involved in the behind-the-camera world of independent documentary and experimental film production, and with the celebrated Sydney Filmmaker’s Co-operative.

In 1976 Nash directed an audacious short film, *We Aim to Please* (1976), with her friend Robin Lurie. Later, she participated as producer on *For Love or Money* (Megan McMurchy and Jeni Thornley, 1983), an intensely political feature length documentary about women’s working lives throughout Australian history.<sup>396</sup> Her other works include, *Speaking Out* a dramatised documentary about at-risk young girls in state care, which won the Best Documentary Award at the 1986 Australian

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<sup>394</sup> Executive Summary of the report prepared by the AFC and FFC in response to a request from the Minister for the Arts and the Centenary of Federation, the Hon. Peter McGauran MP, tabled 13/9/99, can be found at <<http://www.afc.gov.au/resources/o.../reports/ftvpireport/summary.html>> ([20/04/02]).

<sup>395</sup> A. Dzenis, op.cit., p. 52.

<sup>396</sup> For an extended discussion of this film see Felicity Collins, ‘The Experimental Practice of History in the Filmwork of Jeni Thornley’, *Screening The Past*, La Trobe University, May 1998.



Video Festival, and an experimental short drama, *Shadow Panic*, which was awarded by the American Film and Video Festival in 1990. These achievements at the avante-garde edge of fact-based cinema, together with her decades spent teaching and assisting indigenous filmmaking, Nash terms ‘paying my dues’, a kind of apprenticeship that befitted her to receive the unusual honour of full AFC funding on her feature.<sup>397</sup>

According to Nash, her project fitted the charter of the AFC:

*‘...whose brief it is to create cultural diversity, and to put money into projects that aren’t necessarily commercial, but are dealing with issues of cultural identity...that are important to Australia.’*<sup>398</sup>

Nash is quick to point out, however, that her initial ‘didactic’ script was rejected, and that it was only after the radical re-write from a white perspective, that she was successful in her application for funding.<sup>399</sup> She rejects out of hand the idea that a script would be approved by the AFC just because it dealt with a favoured status ‘issue’:

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<sup>397</sup> M. Nash, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.



*'I think there is a sort of fallacy that everybody's desperate for Aboriginal stories, whereas in fact it's very tough to get projects going that have Aboriginal characters; very tough to get these stories told.'*<sup>400</sup>

Nevertheless, an examination of Nash's position within the field reveals that there is significant official sponsorship of indigenous filmmaking in this country. Not only has she been supported in creating a film that makes a central issue of indigenous subject matter, but she has spent decades as an advisor and facilitator of Aboriginal filmmaking. It is in her candid, irreverent, but ultimately passionate comments about Aboriginal filmmaking that we begin to see the national commitment that has been undertaken to help indigenous people 'tell their own stories'.

*'We're at a really interesting point with all that sort of development [in supporting indigenous filmmaking]. And I think I just made Vacant Possession [in time]. I think I just got away with it really. It was before its time, but it couldn't have been made much later than I made it, because I would have got too much shit from the Aboriginal community. I wouldn't have got the money, because now it's really tough to get money for a film like that. Unless you're black...there's been a lot of hostility from Aboriginal people towards a number of white filmmakers making films, documentaries, and taking on Aboriginal topics and subjects...'*<sup>401</sup>

This comment suggests a change in the state of the field over the last six years, a change effected by agents such as Nash herself, with her involvement in initiatives designed '...to try and fast track Aboriginal people into telling their own stories, which is what they said they wanted to do.'<sup>402</sup>

Bourdieu writes that cultural producers who are economically dominated, but symbolically rich within the field of cultural production, '...tend to feel solidarity with the occupants of the economically and culturally dominated positions within the field of class relations.'<sup>403</sup> Nash's desire to connect with issues of indigenous subject matter, and to help indigenous filmmakers, can be seen as an expression of such feelings of solidarity – for the Aboriginal people are surely the most

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 44.



‘dominated’ group in Australian society. When she jokes that ‘they all think I’m black anyway, because I’m dark!...I think they all think I’m really a blackfella’,<sup>404</sup> there is a sense in which Nash really believes, as she says, that ‘...the colonisers start to look like the colonised, and the colonised start to look like the colonisers.’<sup>405</sup>

This identification is again suggested when Nash refers to the importance of the AFC within the field:

*‘I wouldn’t be filming without it, and many of my friends wouldn’t be either. Over the years, the different films we’ve made and been supported through, we’ve been able to find our own voices. In the same way that the AFC has put energy into the indigenous initiative, you know, it’s been very good.’*<sup>406</sup>

The notion of finding one’s own voice is again stated by Nash who says that when she’s not working on her own films, she’s ‘...teaching other people to find their voice’. This process of identification with Aboriginal filmmaking is also suggested in Nash’s conversation, which she peppers with outrageous personal anecdotes about activist Marcia Langton, Aboriginal filmmaker Rachel Perkins, and sassy auteur Tracey Moffatt.

The strongly articulated official policy of assisting Aboriginal filmmakers in finding their own voices and telling their own stories is fraught with practical difficulties, many of which Nash identified in our interview. Literacy problems, cultural misunderstandings, and the fact that despite the creation of opportunities for Aboriginal people, there are ‘...really not enough people out there who can do it.’ She comments:

*‘It’s very tricky, because a lot of the Aboriginal people who are doing very well are ones who have been brought up white way, or who are very light-skinned. And the ones from remote areas are often working with white people from behind the scenes doing the work. And then you have the more urban Aboriginal mob...who went through CAMA, who’ve got skills through documentary and then gone on to the film school, and they just want to go to*

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<sup>404</sup> M. Nash, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.



*Hollywood!*<sup>407</sup>

Despite her sometimes flippant comments about these conflicts inherent in the project of indigenous filmmaking, Nash displays a deep sense of commitment to the ideals behind it. In Bourdieu's terms, this project could be described as a political intervention designed to enable the direct transmission of cultural, social and symbolic capital to a group of people who have previously been excluded from 'telling their own stories'. While such intervention may be seen as a political limitation of the autonomy of the cultural field, it is an intervention that directly fosters polyphony, and is only made possible through the field's considerable separation from the logic of the market.

### ***Dead Heart: 'Waiting for a little middle-class respect'***

Surrounding the Australian reception of *Dead Heart* there is one plaintive refrain: that the film deserved more attention than it received, either from international festivals, the public or the Australian Film Institute Awards, where it was nominated for one award (for best screenplay), but won none. Academic Geoff Mayer, in the film's entry in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, writes that *Dead Heart* '...deserved greater audience support',<sup>408</sup> while Adrian Martin likens the film to Chauvel's *Jedda*, 'a movie that had to wait for 30 years for a little middle-class respect' and to Tim Burstall's 'Fine adaptation of Morris West's *The Naked Country* – a movie dismissed 11 years ago as trash and buried ever since.'<sup>409</sup> The literature and criticism surrounding the film repeatedly circles the idea that *Dead Heart* arrived 'out of its time', a fine film, a 'milestone' work, that the cinematic field was incapable of properly placing or recognising.

Five years after the film's release, and a week after its screening on a major television network (Channel 7), broadcaster Terry Lane made this lament in the *Saturday Age* newspaper:

*After seeing it three times I am of a mind to declare Dead Heart to be the best film ever made in this country. For the past three years I have been enthusiastically commending it to pals and acquaintances. Not one of them has taken*

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

<sup>408</sup> G. Mayer, 'Dead Heart', *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, op.cit., p. 102.

<sup>409</sup> A. Martin, 'Not Fussed on Taste or PC', *The Age*, Melbourne, 14/11/96.



*my advice to see it. All have looked at me with a glazed eye, promised to get it from the video library the very next day, and gone off shaking their heads in pity. 'Poor old Lane. Taken leave of his senses. Fancy recommending a flick about Aborigines!'*<sup>410</sup>

Lane goes on to note that his friends, being 'politically correct to a T', assume that they know the story and do not therefore need to see the film: 'Good black fellas. Bad white fellas. Bleeding hearts. Seen it. Know how it ends. Boring.'<sup>411</sup>

In his colloquial way, Lane has suggested the primary reasons behind audience reluctance to see *Dead Heart*. The subject matter – 'it's about Aborigines' – places the film in an awkward space of being neither 'art' (as *Vacant Possession* certainly was) nor 'entertainment'. For all the effort made by director Nicholas Parsons, and star Bryan Brown to emphasise the film's 'Western' genre,<sup>412</sup> and the fact of it being 'a damned good thriller',<sup>413</sup> the idea that it dealt with a difficult political and emotional issue was almost insurmountable. The left-leaning liberal audience assumed they were already 'converted', while the more general audience for whom Brown wanted to make the film, (especially those in the Western suburbs where he grew up), were not prepared to risk the guilt; did not want to pay to see a film that might make them feel bad.

Bourdieu argues against analysing works of art in ways which strip them of everything that attaches them '...to the most concrete debates of their time'.<sup>414</sup> *Dead Heart* came to cinemas amidst one of the most explosive concrete debates of Australian politics in the late 1990s. Pauline Hanson and her right wing One Nation party emerged, lashing out against the economic rationalism and pro-integrationist policies of the conservative Howard government, under which many groups were suffering, including farmers, small business people, and low income families. This pain found its voice in the untutored nasal tones of the crudely nationalistic Hanson, who seemed to be railing against ethnic minority groups and the 'preferential' treatment of Aborigines. The confusion, anger and

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<sup>410</sup> Terry Lane, 'Postscript', Saturday Extra, *The Age*, Melbourne, 06/01/01.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> N. Parsons, quoted in Jeremy Eccles, 'The 10-Year Dreaming of Nick Parsons', *Canberra Times*, 1/1/97.

<sup>413</sup> Bryan Brown quoted in 'Last Rites Replaced by Bar Rights', *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 8/03/97.

<sup>414</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 32.



embarrassment surrounding this debate seemed to work against the film *Dead Heart*. As Parsons has said:

*'I'd like to think the film dramatises where [Hanson's] feelings come from, they're not all myths, some are real behaviour. But it then goes on to say, 'We're different. OK. Let's find a middle road, it exists, even if we don't know where it starts.' Of course the whole Hanson thing blew up after we'd finished the film, and all that happened was we lost box office. People were sick of the whole thing – they went off to see Ransom (a Hollywood blockbuster starring Mel Gibson) instead.'*<sup>415</sup>

Bryan Brown, the film's star and producer announced his hurt and bewilderment when the film quickly died at the box office. 'I can't believe Australians are hard-hearted,' he is reported to have said, 'but a lot of people told me you can't make a film about Aboriginal themes. Maybe they are right.'<sup>416</sup> The film's fortunes improved somewhat after this impassioned plea for the public to take notice of the film – 'What is the block with this movie? Do we have a real problem between white Australians and our indigenous people?'<sup>417</sup> The one remaining cinema where the film was still showing, the Chauvel in Sydney's Paddington, began to see audiences taking to the film after the newspaper article ran,<sup>418</sup> perhaps attesting to Brown's persuasive powers. That this ocker 'everyman', the iconic Australian Male, was not only starring as a 'baddie', but was also pleading for people to overcome their racism, and to give the film 'a fair go' created a small but powerful symbolic shift in perception. The film then went on to screen at the Chauvel for seven months, becoming the highest grossing Australian production the theatre had seen,<sup>419</sup> and having a limited re-release in other arthouse cinemas like Melbourne's Lumiere.

While *Dead Heart* never made a significant impact at the commercial pole of the cinematic field, the text's ability to influence consciousness, its symbolic capital, has grown in the years since its release. Parsons says of the film that 'It seems to have grown in stature since it was released...more and more I find [people]...say

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<sup>415</sup> N. Parsons, quoted in 'The 10-Year Dreaming of Nick Parsons', op.cit.

<sup>416</sup> Bryan Brown, quoted by Paul Sheehan, 'Dead Heart Struggles for Box Office Life', Sydney Morning Herald, 6/01/97.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid.

<sup>418</sup> Jim Schembri, 'New Life for Dead Heart', Film Diary, *The Age*, Melbourne, 6/2/97.



to me, “I remember that film as being an important one.”<sup>420</sup> It might be argued that the film itself contributed to changes in the nature of the field, and that with the developments towards reconciliation in the larger culture, the work finds for itself an audience somewhat more open to the idea of a film ‘about Aborigines’. As Bourdieu argues, ‘The meaning of a work ...changes automatically with each change in the field within which it is situated...’<sup>421</sup> and the changes in the field in the years since *Dead Heart* was released have seen an increasing presence of Aboriginal filmmaking<sup>422</sup> and Aboriginal themes or subjects tackled by white filmmakers.<sup>423</sup>

It is difficult to separate the status of the film *Dead Heart* from the successful stage play, also written by Parsons, first performed in 1992 at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA). It was then performed at the Festival of Perth, by the Black Swan theatre company, and then in 1994 by the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney, under the direction of acclaimed theatre director, Neil Armfield. The play later won the 1994 NSW Premier’s Literary Award, An AWGIE (Australian Writer’s Guild Industry Award) and the Australian Human Rights Award. In 1999, the stage play was approved as a set text for the NSW High School Certificate course in Contemporary Australian Drama, thus bringing it a certain canonical status. In 2001 a production of the play occurred, amazingly, in Vietnam, with a Vietnamese cast, testing and extending the text’s effectiveness outside of its immediate historical and political context. This is an honour usually only bestowed upon texts which have already established their importance within their native context, and thus suggests the play’s growth in stature.

It is significant to note that the *Dead Heart* narrative has more easily found its place within the theatrical rather than the cinematic field. Perhaps this is because

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<sup>419</sup> N. Parsons, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>422</sup> Initiatives by the AFC resulted, during the 1990s, in numerous short films, documentaries and (occasionally) features by Aboriginal filmmakers like Ivan Sen, Richard Frankland and Mitch Torres. Films by Aboriginal directors include: *Radiance* (1998, Rachel Perkins), *Harry’s War* (1999, Richard Frankland) and *Beneath Clouds* (2002, Ivan Sen).

<sup>423</sup> Documentaries by white directors concerned with indigenous subject matter include: *Mabo: life of an island man* (1997, Trevor Graham), *The Bush Mechanics Series* on SBS (2001), *Kabbarli* (2002, Andrew G. Taylor) and *Gulpilil* (2002, Tom Zubrycki). Features, by white directors, concerned with indigenous subject matter have had a resurgence in the early 00s, including: *Yolngu Boy* (2000, Stephen Johnson), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002, Phil Noyce) and *The Tracker* (2002, Rolf de Heer).



the theatrical field is by nature more heteronomous, less concerned with catering to mass, or even medium-sized audiences than the cinematic field. Theatre has the capacity to cater for high-risk narrative preoccupations, and has tended to predate cinema by decades in its overtly political or radical subject matter. Since the 1960s, Aboriginal themes, and Aboriginal writers, actors, singers and musicians have increasingly impacted upon the Australian theatrical field in ways not yet evident in the cinematic field. Musicals such as Jimmy Chi's successful touring show, *Bran Nue Dae*, Jack Davis' *Kullark* and Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* have impacted significantly upon the theatre scene, while the Bangarra Dance Troupe and Yothu Yindi have gained a presence in the arenas of music and dance.

Theatre critic Katharine Brisbane (incidentally, Parsons' mother), has traced this progression in an article, 'The Future of Black and White: Aboriginality in recent Australian drama'. She argues that following the civil rights outcries in the 1960s, indigenous artists began to be visible, with poetry and song coming first, and drama later.<sup>424</sup> This trajectory fits with Bourdieu's theories, in which the social outsider is more likely to find a home in the more autonomous parts of the cultural field, and then, with time, to move into more general acceptance.

That Parsons' film did not find the same level of acceptance as his stage play suggests that the cinematic field, at that particular moment, was arranged around a dichotomy between art and entertainment in ways which did not leave space for films in which art, entertainment, politics and social commentary coexisted. Parsons himself has gone some way towards acknowledging this, saying that '...the film was something of a conundrum for the distributors because it didn't fit easily into the genres they were used to promoting.'<sup>425</sup> There is also the issue here of the limited time frame in which a film is given to prove its audience pull, whereas with theatre, a limited audience builds with successive performances and upon slow-building word of mouth recommendations. In this case, after several weeks of poor box office performance, the major exhibitors removed *Dead Heart* from screens, while its continuing performance at the Chauvel suggests the small

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<sup>424</sup> Katherine Brisbane, 'The Future in Black and White: Aboriginality in Recent Australian Drama', <[http://www.currency.com.au/preview/b\\_and\\_w.htm](http://www.currency.com.au/preview/b_and_w.htm)> ([20/04/02]).

<sup>425</sup> N. Parsons, Interview, Appendix I.



but significant success of a word-of-mouth publicity campaign, spearheaded by Bryan Brown's hands-on promotion and his free-drinks celebration of the film's continuation at that venue.<sup>426</sup>

### **Nicholas Parsons: 'Every nation protects its own culture except us'**

It has already been noted that the play *Dead Heart* succeeded within the theatrical field in ways the film did not within the cinematic field. This leads us to a discussion of the position of playwright/director Nicholas Parsons, who possesses a highly developed 'feel for the game' of theatre, owing to a family background which has richly endowed him with the specific forms of cultural and symbolic capital operating within that field.

Parsons is the son of two establishing figures of Australian theatre. His father, Philip Parsons, was an academic teaching for many years in the department of theatre studies at the University of New South Wales, where he was known for his commitment to Australian drama. Parsons' mother, Katherine Brisbane, was a national theatre critic for many years, and has been known since the 1960s as the 'den mother' of Australian playwrights.<sup>427</sup> In 1971 the couple established Currency Press, a publishing house which continues to be responsible for the publication of most of the screen and stage plays in this country, together with a list of other books including theory, criticism, educational manuals, mixed media, print music and musical anthologies.

Now a chairman of the company, Nicholas Parsons describes his parents' motivation for setting up the press as being '...because they thought that Australians should have access to their own plays. If you can't read your own stories you can't [perform] them.'<sup>428</sup> Katharine Brisbane's continuing presence in public life, through eloquent speeches to the likes of the Sydney Institute and at her Alma Mater, the University of Western Australia, articulate an ongoing

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<sup>426</sup> Jeremy Eccles, 'Last Rites Replaced by Bar Rights', op.cit., p. 13.

<sup>427</sup> 'Who We Are - Katherine Brisbane, Publisher, Director of Theatre Publishing', Currency Press, <<http://www.currency.com.au/who.htm>> ([20/04/02]).

<sup>428</sup> N. Parsons, Interview, Appendix I.



commitment to national cultural life, and a passionate critique of the way in which the arts ‘...now reflect the needs of government and corporations.’<sup>429</sup>

Nicholas Parsons, raised within the heart of the activist cultural renaissance of the 1970s, obviously shares many of these opinions and concerns articulated by his mother. In our interview, conducted just before the 2000 Sydney Olympics, he expressed outrage at the fact that the Olympic Arts Festival included not one Australian play.<sup>430</sup> He railed against ‘...the danger of allowing our culture to be defined as a commodity’,<sup>431</sup> and stressed the importance of Australians being able to tell their own stories:

*‘We are particularly vulnerable, because of our history, to the notion that other people’s culture is better than ours. I think the cultural cringe is making a pretty strong comeback at the moment. You know, I’m quite happy to accept other people’s stories as being their own. And unless we are there to instil a certain confidence in the nation’s identity, I think that is the first step towards our own disenfranchisement as a nation...’*<sup>432</sup>

In this concrete example of a family tradition, we can see the perpetuation of existing structures of perception, expectation and aspiration. This is a *habitus* arising out of a field in which there are clear connections and dependencies between the idea of the ‘nation’ and the conviction of the importance of national storytelling. As the written history of Currency Press emphatically states, ‘That the company exists is a tribute to Australian nationalism.’<sup>433</sup>

Parsons’ career trajectory is one of finding himself drawn back into the world of theatre after forays into areas of the humanities and arts. A philosophy graduate of Sydney University, he then trained at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, studying predominantly in the area of writing and directing for film:

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<sup>429</sup> K. Brisbane, ‘Amusing Ourselves to Death: Press Criticism and Public Issues’, Speech to the Sydney Institute, 9/9/97, available online at <<http://www.currency.com.au/preview/9Sep97.htm>> ([20/04/02]).

Other speeches by Katherine Brisbane include ‘Cultural Policy and the National Debt’, Talk to the X Club, University of WA, 5 October 1999, available at <<http://www.currency.com.au/preview/5Oct99.htm>> ([20/04/02]) and ‘The Arts and the Pre-emptive Buckle’, The 1999 Sir Frank Callaway Lecture, Presented by the Callaway International Resource Centre for Music Education at the University of Western Australia, 10 October, 1999, available at <<http://www.currency.com.au/preview/10Oct99.htm>> ([20/04/02]).

<sup>430</sup> N. Parsons, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> ‘History of Currency Press’, <<http://www.currency.com.au/history.htm>> ([20/04/02]).



*'I graduated in 1986, which was a terrible time for the film industry because the IOBA had just closed. So there were no jobs in film, so everyone who graduated in that year were out of work. It was interesting that the year I made Dead Heart, David Cesar and Monica Pellazari all made their first features, and they were in my... they were a year behind me...so it was ten years to make it over that hump getting out of film school and not having anywhere to go. So I thought at the time I'd go to NIDA, develop the skills that I wanted to have. You can go years between making films, you know, so I went back to theatre which was my earliest experience of storytelling anyway, and so I've kind of worked between the two mediums ever since.'*<sup>434</sup>

While he admits to having several screenplays out in the market, it is in theatre that Parsons has made his name and his living, having directed more than a dozen stage plays. In 1994 he was resident director at NIDA, and in 2001, was resident playwright there, with one of his recent works playing on Radio National's Airplay series.

The film *Dead Heart* reveals Parsons to be a highly competent and original director capable of working well with the cinematic form, yet it seems that this domain has not yet recognised his abilities or provided him with the financial capital or the opportunity to continue filmmaking. With his tendency towards storytelling that is politically engaged, it would seem that Parsons has found in theatre a field which recognises his abilities and rewards them accordingly. Without extrapolating too broadly from this one instance, we can hypothesise that the Australian cinematic field is/was structured around an art/commerce dichotomy with few positions available for practitioners wishing to boldly combine aesthetics and politics.

## **Chapter 5: Summary**

### **Narrative Elements**

The two films studied here articulate a white experience of the Aboriginal 'problem', raising themes of national guilt, alienation and imprisonment. Yet through their self-conscious fictionalisation, both texts actually operated to open up a dialogue that emphasised the mobile rather than fixed nature of white and

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<sup>434</sup> N. Parsons, Interview, Appendix I.



black identities. It is possible that through this stance, these films operated within the field to forge new positions for later narratives, helping to create an environment for the seeming renaissance of Aboriginal themes in films in the early part of the new millennium.

### **Industry Elements**

The positions of these films, and their directors, have been shown to have some symbolic strength, while being economically quite weak. While these films were critically applauded, their poor box office performance highlights the near impossibility of self-financing a film dealing with Aboriginal issues, or made by Aboriginal people themselves. This suggests the importance of state intervention in ensuring that this essential strand of Australian diversity is represented cinematically.



## Chapter 6A: Globalisation and the Indigenisation of Hollywood Genre

*A man and a woman who in relation to their spouses are incapable of ever penetrating the wall of separateness are moved to tears when they participate in the happy or unhappy love story of the couple on the screen. For many couples, seeing these stories on the screen is the only occasion on which they experience love – not for each other, but together, as spectators of other people's 'love'.*  
– **Erich Fromm**<sup>435</sup>

Nothing more aptly captures the spirit of Hollywood than the 'happily-ever-after' ending, the image of hero and heroine in tight embrace, headed for the altar and/or the bed. Where an 'art' film like *Praise* leaves its couple separated and directionless, mainstream cinema prefers its couples united and purposeful. Clinging tenaciously to the core of western culture is the doctrine that romantic love might be one of the true paths to human freedom and wholeness, and while contemporary filmmakers and audiences may be increasingly skeptical of such narrative denouement, the soft-focus ideal remains embedded, guiltily cherished even as it is being challenged, repudiated or satirised.

The struggle to make sense of the conflict between the reality and the dream is most overtly discernible in the genre of romantic comedy, where laughter resolves the unresolvable, dissolving the differences between the hard-headed cynic and the hopeless romantic. By focusing on this genre, and its peculiar adaptations in Australian cinema, I will illustrate ways in which the Australian cinematic field is participating in a global conversation with Hollywood genre.

Because of Australian cinema's peripheral position in the world cinematic field, Australian genre films can be seen as a response, a reply, an off-centre reaction to the traditions of Hollywood. By examining some of the ways in which Australian films deal with issues of love and romance – themes which we will see have historically been muted or absent in much of our national cinema – I will demonstrate some of the ways in which cultural interpenetration occurs; the complex coexistence, in relations of unequal power, of the dominant global and the dominated local; the cheeky subversive freedom of the local, even as it pulls

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<sup>435</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, Allen & Unwin Australia, North Sydney, 1987 edn., p. 85.



against its chains. The kinds of freedom open to Australian cinema, and to the Australian forms of courtship and romance, are available through a stance that is, paradoxically, both resistant and compliant with Hollywood power.

## Genre as Dialogical Process

Genre films can be defined as ‘...those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters and familiar situations.’<sup>436</sup> Variations on a theme, genre films have historically been associated most often with Hollywood and its Studio production system, a system capitalising on the reliable nature of popular formulas.<sup>437</sup> Though genre films can by no means be limited to Hollywood (for it is common for various genres and subgenres to emerge in other national cinemas) the Hollywood genres are by far the most easily identifiable, and arguably, the most popular with world cinema audiences.<sup>438</sup>

That we can speak amongst ourselves of a Western, a Gangster Film, a Romantic Comedy, or a Thriller implies that we share certain expectations and understandings of what such films might be like. Yet the idea of genre can be misleading, suggesting as it does that a static formula has preexisted the individual films (a classic ‘chicken or egg first’ dilemma), and that there are a number of identifiable features which a film must exhibit before it can be included in a particular genre. The reality is much messier, expressing a diversity and unpredictability with which the ever-sprouting theories of genre must continue to struggle.

A whole field of study has arisen to grapple with the questions and problems surrounding film genres.<sup>439</sup> When does a group of films *become* a genre? What is the relationship of the auteur director to genre filmmaking?<sup>440</sup> Can genre films be

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<sup>436</sup> Barry K. Grant, ‘Introduction’, *Film Genre Reader II*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995, p. xv.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> It should also be acknowledged that obviously not all films to come out of ‘Hollywood’ are necessarily genre films.

<sup>439</sup> For example among the most prolific writers on genre are, Rick Altman, (*Film/Genre*, British Film Institute, London, 1999); Barry K. Grant ((ed.) *Film Genre Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995); Stephen Neale, (*Genre*, British Film Institute, London, 1980); Thomas Schatz, (*Hollywood Genre: Formulas, Filmmaking and the Studio System*, Random House, New York, 1981).

<sup>440</sup> Regarding the debate between auteur and genre, in recent times both theories have become reconciled. See Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 159.



considered ‘art’ or are they merely calculated reinforcements of the status quo?<sup>441</sup> Is it possible to have an Italian Western (For example Sergio Leone’s ‘Spaghetti’ Westerns) or a Romantic Comedy in which the sympathetic couple do not end up together? Can a completely self-conscious tongue-in-cheek homage, such as Woody Allen’s *Everyone says I love you* (1996) still be included within the musical genre?

Despite its imprecise complexity the concept of genre is nevertheless useful, providing a framework, and a set of questions with which to examine certain types of films and their relationships with each other, with history, and with audience expectation. If we characterise a genre as a kind of conversation, an ongoing dialogue between films themselves, and between films and audiences, it becomes easier to accept that genres do not remain static, but instead evolve with societal norms and expectations, and with audience sophistication, for as Leo Braudy has written, ‘successive exhaustions of convention’ characterise the history of American film:

*When the genre conventions can no longer evoke and shape either the emotions or the intelligence of the audience, they must be discarded and new ones tried out. Genre films essentially ask the audience, ‘Do you still want to believe this?’ Popularity is the audience answering, ‘Yes.’ Change in genres occurs when the audience says,... ‘Show us something more complicated.’<sup>442</sup>*

Instead of seeing a genre film as one which exhibits specific non-negotiable narrative properties (for example, guns and horses in the Western, futuristic sets in the sci-fi adventure, or the final funny kiss in the romantic comedy), we can see genre films as ones which participate in an ongoing historical dialogue within an emerging tradition. Or, in Rick Altman’s words, genres are best viewed ‘...not as

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<sup>441</sup> Judith W. Hess has argued that genre films operate to maintain the status quo in her article ‘The Status Quo’, contained in *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Barry K. Grant, The Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, 1977.

<sup>442</sup> Leo Braudy quoted in Tom Sobchack & Vivian Sobchack, *An Introduction to Film*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Scott Foresman and Co., Glenview Illinois, 1987, p. 280.



formal patterns or as textual canons, but as system and process,<sup>443</sup> an idea that concurs with the process-oriented genre theories of Neale, Jauss and Cohen.<sup>444</sup>

What then is the relationship between Australian cinema and Hollywood genres? In what way do our films participate in the conversation of genre? How might an examination of Australian genre filmmaking illuminate the situation of the Australian nation within an increasingly globalised culture? And how might an understanding of genre as process illuminate the manner in which imagined communities evolve and transform in relationships of unequal power?

Rick Altman tentatively makes the daring connection between genres and nations, writing that ‘Against all expectation, genre theory might actually help us think about nations.’<sup>445</sup> Altman argues that:

*The imagining of community, like the genrification process, always operates dialectically, through the transformation of an already existing community/genre.*<sup>446</sup>

He proposes that both nations and genres are constituted and transformed by ongoing conflict between centres and margins, between the contradictory desires for stability and change, openness and impermeability.

Taking this conjunction of genre and nation one step further, I argue that genres and nations can not only be viewed as having similar processes of formation and transformation, but that they can be studied as intertwined processes. Here we can see, applying Bourdieu’s theory of fields, that at any time there are certain nations and certain genres occupying the centre of the world field of power, while there are other nations and genres on the peripheries, jostling to ‘plant their flag’, in Altman’s words, in this centre and thereby transform it, while benefiting from the many advantages of being at the hub of activity.

What Altman’s model also allows for, but does not articulate, is a possible explanation of how the reverse process might simultaneously occur, whereby centres of power also attempt to ‘plant their flag’ in the margins and thereby

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<sup>443</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, British Film Institute, London, 1999, p. 195.

<sup>444</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre*, BFI, London, 1980, p.19; Ralph Cohen, ‘History and Genre’, *New Literary History*, vol.17, no.2, Winter 1986, p. 207; Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, The Harvester Press, Brighton, 1982, p. 80.

<sup>445</sup> R. Altman, op.cit., p. 206.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid.



absorb the cultural and financial capital that exists in small but significant quantities on the peripheries of the globe, the industry, and the genre in question.

## Hollywood Genres and the Global Cinematic Field

A quick glance at the ten top-grossing films per year, worldwide, from 1992 to 1997 (See following Table 6.1.) reveals that almost without exception the films dominating world cinema in that period were large-budget genre-driven pictures from the major Hollywood studios<sup>447</sup>, with the animated ‘classic’ children’s story, the action/adventure and the sci-fi thriller being the most frequently represented types.<sup>448</sup>

A rough analysis of the huge financial success (and exhibition monopoly) of these Hollywood genres provides a convincing argument that they continue to be, at present, the dominant film forms in the global cinematic field, repeating their success, not just with English language audiences, but dominating film exhibition in societies as relatively autonomous and distinct as those of France, Japan and Indonesia.<sup>449</sup> There are some notable exceptions, like the oft-cited anomaly of India, with its marked and continuing preference for its own plentiful local product.<sup>450</sup> There is also the discernible trend for a local film to make an appearance on a country’s annual list of top grossing films, marking its lonely patriotic existence in company that will otherwise be a repetition of the model of Hollywood’s global reach and power.

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<sup>447</sup> The majority of these films came from the major Hollywood studios such as: Buena Vista International, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century Fox, Columbia Tristar Films, and United International Pictures (encompassing Universal, Paramount and MGM).

<sup>448</sup> *International Motion Picture Almanac 1998*. 69<sup>th</sup> edition, p. 27A.

<sup>449</sup> For example, *Variety International Film Guide 1998* states that the top three grossing films in France 1996-97 were: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Independence Day* and *The Fifth Element* (p. 166); In Japan 1996: *Mission: Impossible*, *Seven & Twister* (p. 229); In Indonesia 1996, *Independence Day*, *Mission Impossible* & *Twister* (p. 203).

<sup>450</sup> For example, Chris Johnston, ‘Bombarding the Senses, Indian-Style’, Today, *The Age*, 22/6/01. Johnston quotes prominent Indian academic and co-author of *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, Ashish Rajadhyaksha as saying, ‘Hollywood films have a very marginal presence in India. We watch nationally made cinema, the audiences prefer it.’



**Table 6.1. Top Grossing Films Worldwide 1992-1997**

<b>1997</b> <b>1. Men in Black</b> <b>2. The Lost World</b> <b>3. Liar Liar</b> <b>4. Jerry Maguire</b> <b>5. Star Wars (reissue)</b> <b>6. Ransom</b> <b>7. 101 Dalmations</b> <b>8. Air Force One</b> <b>9. My Best Friend's Wedding</b> <b>10. Face/Off</b>	<b>1996</b> <b>1. Independence Day</b> <b>2. Twister</b> <b>3. Mission: Impossible</b> <b>4. The Rock</b> <b>5. Eraser</b> <b>6. The Hunchback of Notre Dame</b> <b>7. The Birdcage</b> <b>8. The Nutty Professor</b> <b>9. Phenomenon</b> <b>10. A Time to Kill</b>	<b>1995</b> <b>1. Batman Forever</b> <b>2. Apollo 13</b> <b>3. Toy Story</b> <b>4. Pocahontas</b> <b>5. Ace Ventura</b> <b>6. Casper</b> <b>7. Die Hard with a Vengeance</b> <b>8. Goldeneye</b> <b>9. Crimson Tide</b> <b>10. Waterworld</b>
<b>1994</b> <b>1. The Lion King</b> <b>2. Forest Gump</b> <b>3. True Lies</b> <b>4. The Santa Clause</b> <b>5. The Flintstones</b> <b>6. Dumb and Dumber</b> <b>7. The Mask</b> <b>8. Speed</b> <b>9. Clear and Present Danger</b> <b>10. The Client</b>	<b>1993</b> <b>1. Jurassic Park</b> <b>2. Mrs Doubtfire</b> <b>3. The Fugitive</b> <b>4. The Firm</b> <b>5. Sleepless in Seattle</b> <b>6. Indecent Proposal</b> <b>7. Maverick</b> <b>8. The Pelican Brief</b> <b>9. In the Line of Fire</b> <b>10. Schindler's List</b>	<b>1992</b> <b>1. Aladdin</b> <b>2. Batman Returns</b> <b>3. Lethal Weapon 3</b> <b>4. A Few Good Men</b> <b>5. Sister Act</b> <b>6. The Bodyguard</b> <b>7. Wayne's World</b> <b>8. A League of their Own</b> <b>9. Basic Instinct</b> <b>10. Bram Stoker's Dracula</b>

In Australia, unsurprisingly, the figures model almost perfectly the pattern described in the table above, with the 1997 statistics showing that films released by the ‘majors’ represented 87 per cent of gross Australian box office,<sup>451</sup> with the

<sup>451</sup> ‘The Cinema Industry: distribution sector’, *Get The Picture*, op.cit., p. 139.



top grossing films being *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld), *Liar Liar* (Tom Shadyac) and *Jurassic Park: The Lost World* (Steven Spielberg).<sup>452</sup>

## **Hollywood Genres and the Australian Cinematic Field**

Australian cinema's peripheral position in the world cinematic field is illustrated by its weak relationship with Hollywood genre. The status of the Australian film industry, as a small, government-subsidised national cinema, means that it typically lacks the resources, the film culture, or the social context to successfully emulate the Hollywood genre within the Australian context. Graeme Turner has written about the industrial and cultural factors that prevented much exploration of genre in the Australian films of the 1970s revival,<sup>453</sup> while Scott Murray has written about the generally unsuccessful attempts by numerous filmmakers to emulate American genre models during the 1980s, noting that the thrillers, action-adventure films and comedies to come out of this period failed, on the whole, both critically and commercially.<sup>454</sup>

Financial factors provide the most obvious reasons as to why the Australian film industry has traditionally been financially unsuited to producing certain Hollywood genres. The blockbuster sci-fi film, for example, with its demands for expensive special effects technology, requires budgets far beyond the imaginings of most local filmmakers. Although the possibility of such films being made in Australia has greatly increased with the arrival upon our shores of studios like Fox and Warner Brothers, the verdict among the people involved in making identifiably Australian films, with Australian money, is that these studios have little or nothing to do with the local industry proper – a phenomenon which will be further discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

Quite apart from the problems of *raising* the capital to produce certain Hollywood type genre films, Australian films are more likely to be marketable if they do not try to compete with the Hollywood product, instead attempting to fill smaller audience niches, modest gaps in the market which allow the differentiated

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<sup>452</sup> 'Top Box Office in Australia, 1997', *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>453</sup> G. Turner, 'The Genres are American: Australian narrative, Australian film, and the Problem of Genre', *Film Literature Quarterly*, vol.21, no.2, 1993.

<sup>454</sup> S. Murray, 'The 1970s and 1980s', *Australian Cinema*, op.cit.



Australian product to compete with other smaller, national cinemas, such as those of Britain, Canada and the European countries.

Typically referred to as 'arthouse' (a term which has become flabby with overuse, and is now used to refer to just about any film, including the ever-so-slightly offbeat studio film), this increasingly competitive independent sector has evolved its own genres or subgenres. Witness for example, the social realist films working in the tradition of Ken Loach or the contemplative 'relationship' films of directors like France's Eric Rohmer. From a financial point of view, Australian sub-genres, such as the period drama, the kitsch comedy or the 'social problem' film, have a far greater chance of making their mark in this limited exhibition sector.

Setting aside financial considerations, the politics of a taxpayer-funded film industry prevents certain Hollywood genres from transplanting themselves easily in Australian soil. The stated cultural objective behind the subsidy of a national film culture is that local films should be supported precisely to exist as an alternative to the ubiquitous American product, that we 'tell our own stories' without recourse to another culture's categories or formulas.

What our own stories might be, and how they distinguish themselves as particular to Australian culture constitutes ongoing critical and industry debate, which as we shall see in the case of romantic comedy, often takes as its point of reference the classical narrative patterns of Hollywood, even as it tries to subvert them, imitate them or indigenise them. As Tom O'Regan puts it, any distinctiveness we may claim for our local cinema '...must turn on the participation, negotiation, adaptation and hybridization following on from unequal cultural transfers.'<sup>455</sup> The two romantic comedies studied here reveal that there is, within the constrictions of this model, scope for considerable distinctiveness and originality.

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<sup>455</sup> T. O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, op.cit., p. 231.



## Australian Romantic Comedy?

Several years ago, Helen Garner observed that, 'The romantic comedy is not a genre that Australians, as a rule, do well.'<sup>456</sup> She might have added that it is also a genre that Australians, up until recently, have rarely even attempted. Romantic love and sexual relationships have hardly been the subject of positive (or even, for that matter, negative) in-depth treatment in Australian films, regardless of the genre. The cultural factors determining this lack are more significant than are the cost factors, for after all, the romance genres require the minimal ingredients of two people in a room together.

In an essay dealing specifically with the topic of personal relationships and sexuality in our films, Meaghan Morris succinctly describes the reticence of Australian cinema to explore romantic love:

*Australian cinema could scarcely be accused of promoting the virtues of life-long love and marriage. There is little or no glorification of full-blown love, for example, and none of the heightened respect for the eternal drama of the couple that defines the themes of so much European and American cinema. Instead, there is a fascination with group behaviour, and with relationships seen in the context of social institutions.*<sup>457</sup>

Numerous other commentators have observed this tendency. Debi Enker writes that our cinema '...seems skeptical about the capacity of love, and particularly passion, to endure. And even when it flickers for a while, it generally dies.'<sup>458</sup> Scott Murray has also noted the unease of Australian directors in treating human sexuality, observing that 'Even at the height of the sex comedies in the 1970s, there was often evident a touch of embarrassment.'<sup>459</sup> In the Australian cinema of the past, the most frequently depicted passionate relationships have been between heterosexual men, or between men and their country, or even between men and their horses!

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<sup>456</sup> Helen Garner, 'Romantic Friction', *The Australian's Review of Books*, October 1997.

<sup>457</sup> Meaghan Morris, 'Personal Relationships and Sexuality', in *The New Australian Cinema*, ed. S. Murray, Thomas Nelson Australia and Cinema Papers Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, 1980, p. 135.

<sup>458</sup> Debi Enker, 'Australia and the Australians', *Australian Cinema*, ed. S. Murray, op.cit., p. 220.

<sup>459</sup> S. Murray, 'Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s', op.cit., p. 121.



The tendency to avoid romantic love has most usually been identified in relation to films of the 70s and 80s, but what of Australian cinema in the 90s and beyond? Are our films still suspicious of love and romance, or do they display an emerging comfort with the notion that passion might flourish on Australian soil?

As the 1990s progressed, Australian filmmakers appeared more willing to directly address the romance of the couple in both humorous and serious ways. Films with elements of romantic comedy or romantic melodrama include titles as varied as: *Death in Brunswick* (1991, John Ruane), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992, Baz Luhrmann), *The Nostradamus Kid* (1993, Bob Ellis), *Feeling Sexy* (1999, Davida Allen), *Siam Sunset* (1999, John Polson), *Strange Planet* (1999, Emma Kate Croghan), *Innocence* (2000, Paul Cox), *Me, Myself, I* (2000, Pip Karmel), *The Wog Boy* (2000, Aleks Vellis), *Looking For Alibrandi* (2000, Kate Woods) and *Better Than Sex* (2000, Jonathon Teplitzky). Interestingly, this renewed local interest in 'the couple' coincided with a period when Hollywood dramas, tragedies and comedies dealing with grown-up love were rapidly pushed to the bottom of the charts by 'boy's own' action adventure films. This suggests again the model of a peripheral cinema seeping its way onto the screen via the gaps and leftovers of the monolithically popular Hollywood.

The two films examined below do not merely include elements of romance and comedy, but deal specifically and self-consciously with the closely related Hollywood genres of screwball and romantic comedies. *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996, Emma Kate Croghan) and *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (1997, Cherie Nowlan), transpose the genres into contemporary urban Australia, exploring the notions of love, sex, intimacy and commitment. Each film, through its particular negotiation of genre conventions, suggests strategies by which an imagined community might tell its own stories, in many variations of local accents, while acknowledging narrative indebtedness to other communities and other storytellers.



## ***Love and Other Catastrophes: Screwball Revisited***

An extremely confident and energetic low-budget film, *Love and Other Catastrophes* (herewith referred to as *Catastrophes*) borrows greedily from the conventions of the classical screwball comedy, managing to situate them in the contemporary and local setting of university life in Melbourne. While it humorously portrays some of the shockingly casual sexual mores of young Australians (the dash to the condom vending machine, the squalid, drunken sex in toilets, and the matter-of-fact exchange of sexual favours for economic reward) this film ultimately gestures towards old-fashioned notions of companionate love and playful romance.

That the film, produced by ‘Screwball Five’, directly draws its inspiration from these sources is attested to by the director, Emma Kate Croghan in an interview with *Cinema Papers*, where she mentions her love Leo McCarey’s work in *The Awful Truth*, ‘...which is a story of re-marriage, and there’s an aspect of that in this film.’<sup>460</sup> Croghan continues:

*‘Basically, Love and Other Catastrophes draws upon the Hollywood tradition of that factory thing, where things had to happen really fast and turn over. You got the script, you got the cast, the crew went out and shot it and you cut it. A lot of screwball comedies came out of that environment. The films I watched a few times in the process of filmmaking, and I kept coming back to, were Holiday, The Awful Truth and Shop Around The Corner. There are little homages to those throughout, some quite obvious actually.’*<sup>461</sup>

The Hollywood screwball comedy of the 1930s and 40s, to which Croghan is referring, grew out of a melding of romantic comedy and slapstick humour, combining ‘...the sophisticated, fast-paced dialogue...’ of the former, with the ‘...zany action, comic violence and kinetic energy...’ of the latter.<sup>462</sup> Such comedies focus on the eventual pairing of a witty, eccentric and often antagonistic couple. An anarchic sense of fun and chaos surrounds them as they engage in a

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<sup>460</sup> Emma Kate Croghan in Interview with Fincina Hopgood, *Cinema Papers*, August 1996, no.111, p. 35.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Tina Olsin Lent, ‘Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy’, *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds, K. Brunovska-Karnick & H. Jenkins, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 327.



playful battle not only with each other, but with the straight and confining world around them.

Byrge and Miller, writing of the characters in the old screwball comedies, describe them as:

*...middle-to-upper-class, smartly dressed, and verbally deft pretty folk...[who] defied the social proprieties of their class and culture in the innocently aggressive, noisily silly, endearingly defiant, and happily destructive way that little children at play repeatedly disturb the peace and boredom of adults' vain attempts to maintain domestic tranquillity*<sup>463</sup>

In such frequently cited examples of classic screwball comedy like Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth* (1937), we can observe this combination of romance and play, the companionate couple who discover love amidst their madcap adventures.

*Catastrophes* conforms in a number of ways to the basic pattern of screwball comedy. Romance and play are its central preoccupations. Charting a day in the life of four Melbourne university students, the film shows them flitting from café to café, pontificating about love, truth and American cinema, navigating infuriatingly rigid student administration procedures, and of course, falling in and out of love.

The university setting proves ideal for a nineties reworking of the genre. Where films of the 30s and 40s focused on members of the wealthy leisured classes who had time for romance, fun and bantering word-play, a contemporary version of this freedom and leisure can be found in the life of Arts students. With their (relatively) large amounts of unstructured time and their propensity for a kind of 'work' that is often deemed to be leisure – for example, philosophy or cinema studies – in a socially stimulating environment, university students occupy a charmed world that is a little removed from the serious realities of fully independent adulthood.

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<sup>463</sup> Duane Byrge & Robert Milton Miller, *The Screwball Comedy Films*, McFarland and Company, North Carolina, 1991, p. 2.



In this particular group of students, scholastic activity is a minor, though troublesome, distraction in their socially frenzied lives. Very little study seems to take place at this university, even amongst the medical students. Mia (Frances O'Connor) is reprimanded by the head of her department for 'handing in assignments consistently late', and she has accumulated \$600 of unpaid library fines. Alice (Alice Garner) is four years late in submitting her thesis – entitled 'Doris Day as Feminist Warrior' – and spends the first half of the film narrowly avoiding a meeting with her supervisor, Novak, played by film critic Paul Harris. Michael (Matt Day), a medical student, is preoccupied with the futile search for decent student accommodation, while Ari (Mathew Dyktynski) a Classics student, juggles appointments as a part-time gigolo with his practice of making melodramatic and pretentious observations into a tape-recorder.

As in the old screwball comedies, and in the more recent additions to the genre, (for example, with Woody Allen's wealthy bohemian Manhattan-dwellers) work is peripheral to the drama, a backdrop providing opportunities for the meetings of romantic couples, and giving a context for humorous misunderstandings and mishaps. Like the classic screwball characters of the 1930s, the characters in *Catastrophes* command our admiration for their ability to pursue happiness before work, to show '...marvelous independence in regard to their surroundings.'<sup>464</sup>

In *Catastrophes*, the university setting, with all its seemingly absurd bureaucratic procedures, lends itself to the slapstick elements of the screwball comedy – collision, perpetual motion, and a preoccupation with utilising cinematic time and space.<sup>465</sup> As Olsin Lent has observed, 'The underlying premise of slapstick comedy was the miraculous survival of the human in a world in which man is treated as a machine and which depended upon collision as its dominant force.'<sup>466</sup> The subplot in *Catastrophes*, in which Mia tries to complete the paperwork to change departments, is a demonstration of this comic device. She cannot complete the paperwork until she has paid her library fine; she cannot enroll in one department until she has been formally released from the other department, which

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>465</sup> Sobchack and Sobchack write that 'The narrative structure of slapstick comedy depended less on coherence than on motion, less on nuance than on the ridiculously broad, and less on the development of character and intricacies of plot than on the use of physical space and cinematic time.' op.cit, p. 212.

<sup>466</sup> T. Olsin Lent, op.cit., p. 327.



will not release her until she has already been accepted by the new department. She tries to appeal to Mr Pappadopolous, the head of student administration, but he is out to lunch. Finally, Professor Leach (Kym Gyngell), the man whose signature she needs, dies of a donut-induced heart attack. Here is an hilarious depiction of the individual constantly thwarted by a mechanistic apparatus (the university), whose representatives are rigid middle-aged office drones who seem intent only on sharpening their pencils and following absurd arbitrary rules.

As Mia is buffeted from one department to another, from one officious secretary or pedantic academic to the next, she seems to be in perpetual motion. We are shown numerous sequences of her small figure rushing from one end of the campus to the other, with focusing shots on her stockinged legs as they climbing up endless flights of stairs. A musical accompaniment underscores the slapstick humour of this frantic rush against the clock. Busy big-band jazz, reminiscent of the slapstick silent films of Chaplin, or the musical accompaniments to Laurel and Hardy comedies, contributes to the atmosphere of chaotic motion, gesturing playfully towards those previous texts.

The slapstick use of symbolic collision with authority and bureaucracy is a dominant motif for Mia, and it is echoed physically by the accidental collision of Alice with her supervisor. This event is accompanied by a marvelously whimsical shot of her scattered papers being tossed up into sky as the two opposing forces (Alice and Novak), run headlong into each other.

## **Commitment and Reaffirmation**

Kristine Brunovska Karnick has observed that screwball comedies can be broadly divided into ‘comedies of commitment’ and ‘comedies of reaffirmation’. She writes that:

*In both types the focus is on sexual confrontation and courtship. However, whereas commitment comedies focus on the establishment of the central couple, reaffirmation comedies focus on the re-establishment of the couple after circumstances at the beginning of the film have succeeded in separating them.*<sup>467</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> K. Brunovska Karnick, ‘Commitment and Reaffirmation in Hollywood Romantic Comedy’, *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds, K. Brunovska-Karnick & H. Jenkins, Routledge, New York, 1995, p. 131.



*Catastrophes* is a film which incorporates both these elements, focusing on the formation of a new couple, Michael and Alice, and on the re-formation of an estranged pair, Mia and Danni (Rhada Mitchell).

The commitment comedy establishes the couple as ‘right for each other’ and then proceeds to unite them despite various obstacles, misunderstandings, and often, despite other romantic rivals. In such narratives, the ideal couple ‘...comes to realize that their fun and play together indicate their compatibility and thus form[s] a sound basis for a successful marriage.’<sup>468</sup> The screwball comedy was historically one that redefined sexual relationships in such a way that the lovers were paired both companionably and sexually, combining elements of friendship *and* romance, and this is also demonstrated in the pairing of Michael and Alice.

### **‘I believe in the forces of fate...’**

At the commencement of the film, both Michael and Alice are wistfully single, ready and hopeful to meet a partner. Alice is having difficulties finding a man who fulfills her rather whimsical criteria: That he be left-handed, honest, and that he like the same movies as she does. These criteria are repeated several times in the course of the film, reiterating their importance, and providing a symbolic sketch of the ideal screwball love match. Analysing them, it becomes clear that the first one, the left-handed requirement, is arbitrary, romantically silly, and physical in nature. The second, honesty, is a moral criterion upon which a lasting commitment can be based. The third, that he shares her taste in films, is a companionate criterion. Alice has a passion for cinema, and it is something she wishes to be able to share with her lover. The combination of these three requirements perfectly elucidates the screwball comedy philosophy of romance, with its emphasis on fun, friendship, compatibility; and that quirk of individuality, the magical ingredient, which draws one person to another – here represented by left-handedness.

Michael too, is able to be fairly specific when asked what it is that he is looking for in a partner. He states that he wants to find someone who is honest and sincere and who shares his interests, ‘the type of girl who’d like to get a long-term thing going.’ Immediately the pattern is established, wherein Alice and Michael are

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33. Ibid.p.132<sup>468</sup>



seen to share values and aspirations. The attentive observer will also note that Michael is left-handed, and that he shares with Alice a certain clumsiness and endearing naiveté.

Scholars of the genres have noted the importance in romantic and screwball comedy, of the 'blocking' character, the rival who deliberately or inadvertently strives to keep the ideal couple apart.<sup>469</sup> The triadic pattern recurs as a narrative device in which the third and disruptive point of the love triangle serves to illustrate the 'rightness' and connection of the other two points. Here the blocking character is Ari. Suavely handsome and arrogantly confident, he is the initial focus of Alice's interest. It is obvious to everyone except Alice that this rather morbid 'Warren Beatty of the campus' is not the right match for her idealistic lightness and innocence. Firstly, he is not left-handed. Secondly, he delivers a long and laughable monologue about the relativity of truth, suggesting that honesty is perhaps too difficult for him. Lastly, his listing of his three favourite films (*Raging Bull*, *Eraserhead*, and *Alphaville* – 'for its dystopic vision') reveals him to be completely incompatible with the romantic Alice.

Alice almost considers 'not following her dreams' in order to pursue a relationship with Ari, but is rescued from this fate of painful incompatibility when Michael appears in the middle of the 'reefer game'. This is a game where everyone takes a puff on a joint and lists their three favourite films and the reasons why. Michael has been absent while Alice has listed her current and ever-changing list – *Meet Me in St Louis*, for the family she never had; *Calamity Jane* for Doris Day; and *Purple Rose of Cairo*, 'because it warns against not following your dreams.' Michael is invited to join the group and play the game. Has he been listening on the stairwell? Or is this a magical case of a match made in Heaven? The film is quite adamant that Michael has just stumbled in on the game, and there is a certain whiff of destiny in the air as he lists his favourite films: *Calamity Jane*, for Doris Day – 'She's great'; *Meet Me in St Louis*, 'because I always wanted a family like that'; and *Purple Rose of Cairo*, 'because it's about following your dreams'. In this indulgently contrived plot device, Michael is shown to be Alice's match, the one who revives her faith in following her dreams,

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p. 134.



the one who mirrors her own true values back at her. A scene of such fateful congruence is a staple of romantic comedies. For example, in Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), Sally's (Meg Ryan's) best friend Marie (Carrie Fischer) meets Harry's (Billy Crystal's) best friend Jess (Bruno Kirby) and for first time in her life Marie quotes something she's read in a magazine, only to find that it was written by Jess. It is a moment in which they begin to see each other anew, and marked, supposedly, as each other's destiny.

Interestingly, in the last scene in which we see Michael and Alice alone in her bedroom, he has just finished reading her thesis and is impressed and envious of it, telling her she should submit it exactly how it is 'without changing a word'. They kiss, tentatively, but without the awkward lack of 'fizz' of the earlier kiss between Ari and Alice. Here we see all the elements of Alice's life come together harmoniously, her thesis, her love of cinema, and her love life. This is the cosy completeness of a companionate love.

### **'Have a little faith...'**

The reaffirmation comedy in *Catastrophes* occurs between a lesbian couple, Danni and Mia, who separate early in the film. They break up due to Mia's inability to commit, her tendency to stretch the truth and to break appointments. The couple spends the rest of the film navigating their breakup, and realising that they are still very much in love.

Brunovska Karnick describes the reaffirmation comedy:

*...hard work and socially acceptable notions of heterosexual love and marriage lead to the establishment of the comic/romantic couple. The characters in reaffirmation comedies have fallen short of these ideals. The emphasis of the narrative is on steering the couple back toward the goals and commitments they have abandoned. Such films often begin with the separation of the couple, and the film then traces their reconciliation.*<sup>470</sup>

Though Danni and Mia are a lesbian couple, this description is no less relevant. Mia certainly, has fallen short of any goals of commitment or hard work. It is suggested that they have had a fairly intense and lengthy relationship – they share a history. Danni is ready to take the next step and move into Mia's warehouse

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<sup>470</sup> Ibid., p. 132.



apartment, but Mia stalls, pleading that they need to be ‘more independent’, and that she has already promised the vacant room to another prospective flatmate – a blatant lie. This dishonesty is the eventual cause of the breakup, revealing an ultimate falling short of the necessary ideals of honesty and trust. When Mia tells Danny to ‘Have a little faith’, it sounds like a hollow cliché, something Danny immediately senses: ‘Which movie did you get that from?’ she asks. (Perhaps this is echoing the line in Woody Allen’s 1979 film *Manhattan*, when Allen’s young lover Tracey (Mariel Hemingway) tells him, ‘You have to have a little faith in people’.)

While Danni and Mia have not been ‘married’ and have not even been living together, their status as established couple who become estranged and then reconcile, makes them eligible to be included in the category of ‘reaffirming couple’ making this a film of the type which Stanley Cavell has termed ‘the comedy of remarriage’.<sup>471</sup> The scene at the end of the film, when they are in bed together and Mia asks Danni to move in with her, performs the same function as the marriage proposal in the screwball comedies of the 30s and 40s. As Brunovska Karnick has observed, the comedy of remarriage does not necessarily conclude with a complete resolution of the couple’s conflicts, but merely signals a renewed commitment and ability to work together. Such films ‘...simply indicate that the characters have acquired the tools with which to solve future problems without divorcing.’<sup>472</sup> In the relationship between Danni and Mia, those tools are honesty, trust and commitment.

### **Stretching Screwball Conventions**

While the discussion thus far has centred on the conformity of the film to classical screwball conventions, there are of course a number of areas in which it stretches and extends the traditional boundaries of the genre. Marriage, a central preoccupation in the romantic comedy, is completely irrelevant to the commitment between Danni and Mia, or Michael and Alice.

But of course the most unconventional aspect of *Love and Other Catastrophes* is its unselfconscious depiction of the lesbian relationship. The fact that these

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<sup>471</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1981.



beautiful, fashionable and extremely feminine young women are a ‘couple’ is presented matter-of-factly. There is nothing overtly political about their homosexuality. They simply exist within the film’s world as a given variant of normal sexuality. They may or may not be bisexual, though we know that in her own lawless way, Mia is not above giving a ‘hand-job’ to a male computer nerd who promises to help her hack into the university files. The fact that the narrative has chosen to focus on the lesbian couple as the established and estranged couple, rather than as the newly committing pair, suggests that this is not *about* lesbianism. Rather, it is about a ‘normal’ and typically conflictual love relationship between two individuals who happen to be women.

In her book *Creating the Couple*, Virginia Wright Wexman has observed the tendency in American cinema to depict positive alternatives to the traditional ideals of heterosexual marriage:

*Homosexuality, promiscuity, and other nontraditional forms of sexual expression have gained wide currency, aided by the premium that advertisers put on eroticism in any form...Hollywood has responded to these changes in more than one way. It has continued to make films in the traditional realistic mode while modifying their content in such a way as to validate the new life-styles...*<sup>473</sup>

*Catastrophes* is an example of this modification of a traditional genre, exhibiting both a surprising adherence to formula, while unapologetically flouting one of the basic principles which has underpinned the genre – heterosexuality.

It can be argued, however, that for several reasons, the screwball genre lends itself particularly well to such challenges to social norms and gender roles. Firstly, the genre is extremely physical, with its slapstick elements, yet is not usually explicit in its depiction of sexual intimacy. Speaking of the classical screwball comedies Olsin Lent has argued that their ‘...extreme physicality allowed the characters to touch intimately, but humourously, offering alternative outlets for repressed sexual energy.’<sup>474</sup> It fits within the genre then, that the lesbian relationship between Mia and Danni is affectionate and suggestive of extreme attraction, yet

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>473</sup> Virginia Wright-Wexman, ‘Destabilising of Gender Norms’, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage and Hollywood Performance*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993. p. 184.

<sup>474</sup> T.O. Lent, op.cit., p. 328.



we are shown nothing more controversial than a couple of kisses and a giggling retreat underneath the bedcovers.

There is another important reason for the compatibility of the screwball genre with a depiction of lesbian love. It has often been argued that the genre allowed for female characters who were, by Hollywood standards, unusually independent, eccentric, assertive and sexual. Kathleen Rowe argues that where the transgressive male can exist within the heroic genres, the unruly woman is most fully comfortable within the 'lower' forms of cinema like melodrama and romantic comedy. These genres are the cinematic home of the transgressive female. But where the melodrama only really allows the transgressive woman to triumph in suffering and tragedy, the romantic comedy offers a positive inversion of gender roles: According to Rowe:

*Making fun of and out of inflated and self-deluded notions of heroic masculinity, romantic comedy is often structured by gender inversion, a disruption of the social hierarchy of male over female through what might be called the topos of the unruly woman, or the 'woman on top.' When romantic comedy most fully realizes the potential of this topos, it dramatizes a resistance to the law of Oedipus, a carnivalizing of sexual identities and gender hierarchies that posits a new and more inclusive basis for community than the social order it takes as its point of reference.*<sup>475</sup>

While the screwball comedy traditionally allowed its female characters a certain space for wildness and willfulness, this did not, except in the rarest and most subtle of cases, extend towards challenging their heterosexuality.<sup>476</sup> Nevertheless it can be seen how the genre has always had the potential for posing such challenges, and that in the current social and political climate, there is an easy and seamless merging of traditional screwball conventions with the newly confident presentation of homosexuality.

## **Intertextual Screwball**

Any understanding of *Catastrophes* as an Australian romantic screwball comedy requires us to situate it within a tradition of Hollywood cinema, for it is only

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<sup>475</sup> K. Rowe, 'Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter', *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. K. Brunovska-Karnick & H. Jenkins, op.cit., pp. 41-42.

<sup>476</sup> Note: A number of screwball comedies do allow for such subversive readings. See Alexander Doty's essay, 'Queerness, Comedy and The Women' in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, op.cit.



within that context that most of the humour can be understood. While this is ostensibly an Australian film, and it comments incidentally upon the behaviour of young Australians, it is really about movies themselves, American movies, Hollywood movies. Several of the central characters are cinema studies students, and the others discuss films with the eclectic fondness and familiarity of the typical GenXer. In an extremely funny scene, a cinema studies lecturer, Professor Leach, announces to the students that they will be studying Hitchcock films that semester. He is met with groans and heckling complaints. In his own personal version of a horror scene, the professor realises that he is 'behind the times'. He looks out with terror into the audience and sees groups of students who announce, with their caricatured dress and speech patterns, their allegiance for various contemporary American film directors – Woody Allen, Quentin Tarantino and Spike Lee. The characters in this film make sense of their lives through movies, and especially, conduct their love-lives with particular reference to taste in films.

While this film borrows heavily from screwball conventions of the 30s and 40s, it is also shamelessly catholic in its quotations from other popular culture sources and in its homage to familiar icons. Littered throughout are references to Jane Austen, John Travolta, Lewis Carroll, The Bee Gees, John Lennon, Orson Welles, Milan Kundera, Oprah Winfrey, Nietzsche, Jung, and Zorba the Greek. These are the reference points of a postmodern generation raised on television, pop music and American cinema, but who are also familiar with a selection of classical literature, philosophy and popular psychology; a grab-bag of goodies selected from global culture.

In keeping with the tendency of the global artifact to be both global and local, we find within this film some striking examples of its Melbourne origins. The location, of course, is instantly recognizable. Melbourne University, Rhumbarella's Café on Brunswick Street, the Palm lined esplanade of St Kilda. Most essential in its local-based humour is the inclusion of prominent and controversial Melbourne film critic Adrian Martin, who appears as himself in a cameo role. Martin is a small but essential character in the film. Mia's troublesome attempts to change university departments are motivated by her desire to be 'in Adrian's Class'. She longingly stares at the picture of Martin on the back of a book entitled 'Feral Cinema'. Her entire mission is proved to be



futile when it is revealed that Adrian is taking a Sabbatical and going to the Sorbonne for six months to ‘...take a class on Australian Cinema.’ It is in this sub-plot that we see the operations of the local film culture, and it is for this initiated minority that the long and involved in-joke is constructed. As Morris notes, the in-joke ‘...has always been a favourite ploy of Australian colonial culture’,<sup>477</sup> marking out the local in small but symbolically powerful ways.

Perhaps the most subtle indication of *Catastrophes*’ indigenisation of the genre is its focus more on friendships and group socialising than on any particular couple’s intimate relationship; thus echoing the observation by Morris about Australian cinema’s fascination with group behaviour. The most obvious celebration of the ‘gang’ rather than the couple, in this film, occurs in the closing picnic sequence. Rather than finishing with clinches between either of the couples, the film chooses to conclude with all the characters gathered in a park, eating a birthday cake and clowning around in front of a home movie camera. Significantly, even the blocking characters, Ari and Sevita, are present, suggesting that these friendships are not to be neglected just because the characters have proved unsuccessful in their love bids. The scene, sepia toned and speedy, shows all the characters in motion, running and tumbling over each other as they throw cake around.

It is difficult to determine who are the couples here, and the irrelevance of this detail is underlined by the soundtrack. An edgy modern version of the song ‘Let’s fall in love’, the lyrics push home the biological and instinctual nature of pairing, referring to it as a social pattern less about individuals loving one other than about an unindividuated mating pattern shared by all creatures. ‘*Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it, let’s do it, let’s fall in love.*’ The contrast is clear between the sentiment of this song, and the songs which function in more traditional romantic comedies, as with the song ‘It had to be you’ in *When Harry Met Sally*.

While its characters speak their words of love in a local accent, it can be argued that *Catastrophes*, in its flagrant borrowings from American cinema, reveals the lack within our local cinema of any such tradition in the area of romantic comedy.

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<sup>477</sup> Meaghan Morris, ‘Tooth and Claw: tales of Survival and Crocodile Dundee’, *The Pirate’s Fiancée: Feminism, Reading and Postmodernism*, Verso, London, 1988, p. 247.



The film illustrates the idea that the positive or optimistic notions of romantic love we might find in our culture are likely to be borrowed and absorbed from that giant machine of romantic ideology, Hollywood.

**Something old and something new; something borrowed...**

*Catastrophes* demonstrates Australian cinema's entwinement and indebtedness to Hollywood cinema, both classic and contemporary. Witty, modest and refreshing, *Catastrophes* suggests one way independent Australian filmmakers might wish to use the conventions of Hollywood cinema without becoming imprisoned or compromised by them. Such a stance exemplifies, in Morris's words, 'positive unoriginality', where: '...survival and specificity can both be ensured by the revision of American codes by Australian texts, in a play which can be beheld quite differently by various audiences, and individual eyes therein.'<sup>478</sup> Such canny recycling, evident in *Catastrophes*, springs from an attitude that refuses to accept simplistic dichotomies of the global or the local, the national or the international, the arthouse or commercial cinema. Where negative originality is imprisoned by its surly reference to what it is not, and can never be, positive unoriginality pays its debts playfully, joyfully, and sometimes it profits greatly by doing so.

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., p. 247.



## ***Thank God he Met Lizzie: The Death of Romantic Ideals***

*“Romantic love must die.” – Alexandra Long,  
scriptwriter of Thank God He Met Lizzie.<sup>479</sup>*

A tart romantic comedy with an achingly wistful edge, *Thank God he Met Lizzie* (hereafter referred to as *Lizzie*) is a thoughtful examination of love, romance and commitment within contemporary Australian society. As has been previously noted, the focus on such subject matter has been quite rare in our cinema, though the fact that recent films seem more prepared to address such themes might suggest an increasing comfort with the idea (and the ideals) of the cinematic depiction of romantic love. *Lizzie* however, is no easy transplantation of the Hollywood romantic comedy. Here the indigenisation of the genre effects a subtle but powerful warping that scrutinises romantic love and will not let its contradictions dissolve in laughter or soft-focus clinches.

An analysis of the film reveals that it is quite clearly an *anti*-romantic comedy, a deliberate demystification of the genre’s tendency to exalt the fleeting first stages of romance. It seems to be critiquing not only the genre itself, but the culture of contemporary mating that produces and is produced by it, a culture that exhibits a peculiar and contradictory mix of romanticism and pragmatism. Unpacking these contradictions under the microscope of acidic comedy, *Lizzie* manages to challenge the genre and the culture that perpetuates illusions about love that cannot possibly survive the rigors of real grown-up relationships. This skepticism fits well within the traditions of Australian cinema.

### **‘I’ve found the perfect girl...’**

*Lizzie* fits roughly into Brunovska-Karnick’s category of the romantic comedy of commitment, with its humorous narrative concerning a man’s journey towards commitment, marriage and eventual fatherhood. Guy, (Richard Roxburgh), is a single man in his early thirties. The first scene shows him entering the sexual hunting ground of a smart Sydney party. The music in the background is the dance ballad hit of the mid 1990s – ‘I miss you/like the deserts miss the rain’ – a

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<sup>479</sup> Alexandra Long reportedly made this statement at the Byron Bay Writer’s Festival, following a screening of *Thank God He Met Lizzie*. She is quoted by Helen Garner, op.cit., p. 31.



song of craving and longing by a band whose name sums up Guy's predicament – 'Everything but the girl'.

After an abortive and humiliating attempt to seduce a beautiful woman, Guy returns to the kitchen, where his friend (Jeanette Cronin), guzzles cocktails and asks if he's met anyone:

*Guy:                    You've got to be joking. Why do people  
                             go to parties?*

*Friend:                To meet a partner?*

*Guy:                    Why do they want to do that?*

*Friend:                To go to parties with.*

The circular logic of this exchange suggests the entrapment of the social rituals of party-going and coupling, rituals which are unable to be justified in any other terms but their own. This kind of absurdity, found at the heart of the problem of the sexes, will be familiar to the viewer of romantic comedies.

Guy's friends try unsuccessfully to match him up with women, but he is difficult to please. He repeatedly states, 'I don't want any girl. I want the *right* girl', and as the seasons pass, captured in stunning time-lapse photography, Guy seems more isolated and lonely than ever. Finally, in a seeming twist of fate, as he is doorknocking the neighbourhood trying to find the owner of a cat who is giving birth in his arms, he meets a woman who fits his picture of a prospective wife. Lizzie (Cate Blanchett) is beautiful, rich, witty and educated. With her golden hair and pale cashmere sweaters, she is elegant and sweet. Six weeks after meeting they decide to marry.

Guy's belief that he has found the perfect girl is echoed in his letter to Fong-hu, his Asian foster child. 'Dear Fong-hu,' he writes (and says in voiceover):



*'I never thought I'd say this, but I've finally found someone I want to spend the rest of my life with. I can't imagine ever needing anyone else. I feel so lucky because she's the most beautiful girl in the world.'*

Here is Guy's idealism spelt out. On his wedding day he repeatedly refers to Lizzie as 'the perfect girl', and of their meeting as 'magical' and 'preordained'. It is a stance the film refuses to let him, or the audience, sustain.

We are given the images we love to see in such comedies – the absurd first meeting, the sunny kisses on a picnic rug, and the smiling bride in creamy satin emerging from the church amidst a flutter of confetti. Yet each of these images is undermined by small details that tear away the veil of romance. The first meeting, prompted by the birth of kittens to the homeless cat, is followed by the detail that the kittens were all 'put down' shortly after their well-timed arrival; the kisses in the park are accompanied by the revelation that Lizzie's blonde hair isn't entirely natural; the bride, uncomfortable in the car from the church to the reception, admits that she feels like being sick. These details are just the beginning of a concerted disturbance of the audience's expectations of romantic comedy.

Weddings hold a particularly special place in the world of romantic comedies. As marriage becomes less of a socially required convention, the declaration of love, or the decision to live together, as in the case of *Catastrophes*, sometimes fulfils the function of the more old-fashioned wedding proposal. The spectacle of the wedding, however, or the drama of the marriage proposal, continues to tempt filmmakers. In the past, Hollywood has seemed compelled to finish its films, particularly romantic comedies, but also many other genres, with the promise of a wedding, or a glimpse of bridal finery to herald in the final credits.<sup>480</sup>

*The Philadelphia Story* (1940, George Cukor), for instance, is set around the days preceding a wedding, and concludes with the hurried decision of Tracy Lord (Katharine Hepburn) to walk down the aisle to meet Cary Grant, for the second time around. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953, Howard Hawks) a musical/romantic comedy, finishes with a splendidly tacky double wedding, wherein Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell flounce down the aisle in identical dresses. Not to be outdone, *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953, Jean Negulesco)

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<sup>480</sup> T. Sobchack & V. Sobchack write that 'The Romantic comedy usually will end with a reconciliation or a wedding – either on-screen or off (after the credits have ended).' Op.cit., p. 241.



concludes with a triple wedding extravaganza. *The Palm Beach Story* (1942, Preston Sturges) finishes with a wedding and the letters scrolling across the screen, 'And they lived happily ever after'. Contemporary audiences are perhaps more secretive and qualified in their enjoyment of weddings and their belief in the institution of marriage – they certainly need to be able to laugh at them, and perhaps this has always been the case. Nevertheless they are drawn to the spectacle and the pageantry, the grand gesture of commitment that most would love to believe in.

Yet for all its narrative centrality, the wedding is usually more of a suggested happening rather than being depicted at length or in great detail. Consider, for instance, *The Philadelphia Story*, which can only bear to represent the actual wedding ceremony with a farcical society gossip photograph. Or, in a contemporary example, *When Harry Met Sally* (1989, Rob Reiner) presents the couple four months after the wedding, sitting on a love seat, reminiscing about their wedding cake – 'coconut, with chocolate sauce on the side' – a continuing joke on Sally's finicky food habits.

There is something about the ceremony of a wedding that lends itself to brief and glossy depiction. Wright-Wexman has observed that there is a contradiction between the idea of romantic love as an all-consuming intense passion that is by its very nature short-lived, and its status as the cornerstone of lifelong monogamous marriage. She writes that:

*Hollywood has elided this contradiction through the convention of representing weddings (or the promise of weddings) as the culmination of its romantic-love fantasies; thus romantic love after marriage need not be portrayed.*<sup>481</sup>

*Lizzie* flouts this convention. It does portray a wedding, but not as a culminating blissful moment. Instead, the wedding is a realistic drawn-out evening entailing compromise, disappointment, social discomfort. (This occasions much incidental humour; the annoying crooning of the MC, the various pairings that occur over the course of the night, and the tense wincing of the wedding coordinator, whose loathing of brides is visible behind her fake smile.) Rather than using the wedding as a narrative device to close off the problem of romantic ideals, *Lizzie* uses it to

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<sup>481</sup> V. Wright Wexman, op.cit., p. 8.



open up the problem, to scrutinise the emptiness and constructedness of romantic love fantasies.

Perhaps the most blatant undermining of the romance between Guy and Lizzie can be found in the fact that throughout the wedding reception the groom keeps thinking of his ex-girlfriend, Jenny Follett (Frances O'Connor). While his bride gulps champagne, clumsily negotiating her troublesome satin train as she circulates among the guests, Guy is continually reminded of his previous relationship with the crassly free-spirited Jenny, the antithesis of the glossily urbane Lizzie. We are treated to lengthy flashbacks depicting the course of their affair from their first meeting in a crowded pub, through their disastrous overseas trip, their fraught and claustrophobic years of living together, and their calmly tragic breakup.

Several conventions of romantic comedy are being broken here. Not only is the wedding reception being shown in all its awkward detail, but the groom is obsessing about a woman other than the one he has just married! As we are taken through the details of the relationship between Guy and Jenny, we are confused. Should he have married this woman instead? Jenny is adorable and lively, funny and spontaneous. She is real, honest, playful and passionate, yet she drives him crazy with her irritating habits and her desire for a commitment he is unwilling to give. The incompatibilities are obvious, but so too are the vital qualities of honesty, a shared history and the ability to laugh at the absurd. The sweetness and energy of first love is depicted with a crazy screwball twist and the saturated colours of a nostalgic home movie.

*Lizzie* is not, however, a romantic comedy which sets up the lost partner as the one which the hero should have ended up with, thus underscoring the basic ideal of their being such a 'right' match. Or, using the same principle, a more traditional romantic comedy might have depicted this past relationship in terms of its blatant unsuitability, thus highlighting the 'rightness' of the current romance between Lizzie and Guy. Yet in many ways both Jenny and Lizzie are suitable matches. Sobchack and Sobchack have written that 'Genre films often seem unrealistic...because they separate things and people into that which we hate and



that which we love.<sup>482</sup> This film, however, defies such convention and divides our loyalties between the two women. It seems to treat Jenny more affectionately, with the flattering patina of nostalgia, yet Lizzie, flawed princess that she is, is by no means unlikable. Her multiple small dishonesties are balanced by a clear-eyed realism and a childlike amorality that defies us to see in her anything truly sinister.

The message here, one quite jarring to the ideals of romantic comedy, is that the love match we make largely depends upon meeting a generally suitable person at the right time of life. Eventually, this film seems to be saying, compromises will have to be made. Imperfect matches will take place, driven by the desperate need to escape the tarnishing glamour of the mid-thirties single scene, coupled with the biological urge to reproduce the family structure.

The idea of compromise is not completely foreign to the romance genres, finding particular expression in the comedies of remarriage where both partners must learn to accommodate each other, or change certain elements of their personality in order to be compatible. Despite these necessary adjustments, the basic idea remains that there is a 'right' partner out there, someone we were 'meant' to be with, fated to marry, a soul-mate who will complete us. *Lizzie* questions this whole idea, suggesting that marriage is, in the end, always a matter of compromising, of taking what comes along at the right time.

Lizzie herself expresses this perfectly where she explains to Guy why the letter he has read out to the guests – supposedly sent from his Asian foster child, Fong-hu – was in fact a fabrication, written by her mother. She says, 'It would have been perfect if that letter had arrived on time. But it didn't and we had to compromise. That's life...' In other words, the perfect partner doesn't always come along at the right time. In this case, Lizzie had just turned 30, and Guy happened to be there. Witness this exchange as the newlyweds tell the story of their meeting to some wedding guests:

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<sup>482</sup>T. & V. Sobchack, op.cit., p. 300.



*Lizzie:*                    *It was fate wasn't it darling?*

*Guy:*                      *You take one look at her and you know she's the one you want to be with forever. It was a magical moment. It felt preordained.*

*Ms'r Herger:*        *Yes, Lizzie's been planning it for years. She's been saying since she was ten years old that she would marry at 30.*  
*(Guy looks at Lizzie surprised, accusingly.)*

*Ms'r Herger:*        *How long after that did you decide to get married?*

*Guy:*                      *(looking over at Lizzie suspiciously) Six weeks.*

*Lizzie:*                    *(trying to laugh it off) Well you couldn't expect me to make a commitment like that to someone I knew!*

*Guy:*                      *(Thoughtfully) Yes.*

As Guy realises that Lizzie is a stranger, and that he was her compromised choice, he also realises that his conviction that he has found the perfect girl is based less on sound knowledge than on his determined ignorance. The film takes us directly from this scene to a flashback revealing that Guy's inability to commit to Jenny was precisely because he was so familiar with her, because they did know each other too well to sustain illusions of romance.

### **‘The magic’s gone...’**

Sitting in the dark, amidst Jenny's dirty clothes, Guy waits for her to come home. He asks her where she's been, to which she replies tersely and noncommittally, 'out'. He then confronts her with her annoying habit of 'resting' her clothes, leaving the once-worn items in a pile that is neither clean nor dirty. Here is the nitty-gritty of cohabitation, where standards of domestic cleanliness clash and clang with, one suspects, almost universal regularity. Illusions of the other's perfection cannot possibly survive in confined suburban spaces where the war must be waged eternally against mould and grime and dirty dishes.

There is a sense in which Jenny intuitively realises, right from their very first meeting, that Guy is a man who might not be able to cope with the full spectrum of reality in his relationships. Intensely attracted to him, she manages to



accidentally-intentionally bump into him, making him spill three beers all over his best mate. She holds out her hand, introduces herself, and asks him if they can 'just do away with all the other preliminaries.' He's taken aback by this direct sexual proposition, and asks if they shouldn't get to know each other first, find out if they have anything in common. Jenny slyly replies: 'Oh, see you're taking a big risk there. You might get to know me and find out you don't like me, and then you'll miss out on a fantastic root!' It's a joke that carries a premonition of Guy's inability to feel sexual attraction for someone he truly knows.

Several years into their relationship we see them, both with heavy colds and runny noses, sanding old furniture in their living room. 'When are we going to have sex again?' asks Jenny. 'Oh, I'm not keen, are you?' answers Guy. Jenny concedes that this lack of desire is 'normal' and 'inevitable' in a long-term relationship. She then jokingly proposes a solution: 'We'll abstain for six months and if during that time you want to have sex with me you give me \$100.' Guy agrees, and she looks crestfallen that he's taken her seriously. She then ups the stakes by adding that it will cost him \$75 for seeing her without her clothes on. The bizarre proposal implicitly acknowledges Guy's need to distance himself from seeing Jenny as she really is, to place himself one step backwards from true intimacy (through the pretence of prostitution) if he is to continue the relationship.

In another scene, Guy snaps at Jenny for reading the newspaper over his shoulder, saying that he can't concentrate on the story. Jenny says she'll tell him a story instead:

<i>Jenny:</i>	<i>Melinda went out with this guy right, and one day she decided she wasn't going to take any trouble at all, no makeup, nothing. Just be relaxed. And when she opened the door to him, he said, 'gee Melinda, you look horrible.'</i>
<i>Guy:</i>	<i>And what happened then?</i>
<i>Jenny:</i>	<i>I don't know. That's it.</i>
<i>Guy:</i>	<i>That's the most pathetic story I've ever heard in my life.</i>
<i>Jenny:</i>	<i>It's very lifelike.</i>
<i>Guy:</i>	<i>Well, I need more in more in my stories than that. It's why I read and you don't.</i>



The strange ‘lifelike’ story that Jenny tells Guy is another comment on the need to maintain illusions if romance is to be sustained. Significantly the two of them are walking around the flat naked, with not a scrap of mystery intact. Guy’s response to the story, that he needs more from his stories, also suggests that he needs more illusion in his relationship, and less ‘lifelikeness’.

Guy’s resistance to having children with Jenny is another manifestation of his inability to live life at close range. Instead, he carries a photograph of Fong-hu, the orphan child he has never met, but to whom he sends money whenever he feels guilty about his treatment of Jenny. Initially Guy’s attachment to this charity makes him appear a sensitive and tender-hearted man, yet by the end of his relationship with Jenny, it is revealed that this is yet another symptom of his need to maintain the ‘space’ in his life, which he so constantly craves.

The relationship ends with a flat acceptance that Guy and Jenny have ‘come to the end of the line’, yet as Helen Garner argues, the real reason lies in Guy’s ‘...inability, or refusal, to take the next step forward.’<sup>483</sup> He seems unable to move from fantasy to reality, getting ‘... jammed at the point where romance fades and where something sturdier and more ordinary needs to kick in if the whole arrangement isn’t to die.’<sup>484</sup> The film’s suggestion that sturdy ordinariness is a pre-requisite of real life relationships is at odds with the zany unreality and crazy spontaneity of the romantic comedy genre.

### **‘The thing I don’t want is a perfect marriage...’**

Guy falls in love with an illusion, embodied by Lizzie. Yet for all her deceit, Lizzie herself attempts to make Guy see her for what she really is. As they canoodle in the park, he looks at her as if she is a goddess, and asks her if she ‘came out of the sea.’ She smashes the fantasy gently but firmly. ‘No, I went to primary school. Then I went to high school, and my father told me I could be a doctor or a lawyer or a piece of shit!’ She tries to tell Guy that her hair is really ‘mousy’, but he covers her mouth, saying, ‘don’t tell me about it. We’ve got the rest of our lives. It will be boring if you tell me now.’ Not to be silenced, Lizzie starts giggling and telling Guy numerous facts he doesn’t want to hear – ‘my great

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<sup>483</sup> H. Garner, op.cit.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid.



great grandfather was transported for...’, ‘I lost my virginity at the age of...’, but Guy holds his hand over her mouth, playfully wrestling with her, and refusing to know who she really is.

Signs of Lizzie’s pragmatism are available to Guy quite early in their relationship. His gift to her of a picture book entitled ‘The Animal Kingdom in Love’ is professionally wrapped, complete with layers of expensive paper, ribbons and pot-pourri. She recognises that he has paid to have it wrapped and remarks how sweet this is. Guy is disappointed that she so easily guessed at the artifice. Lizzie then opens the book to a picture of two elephants with their trunks entwined. ‘Oh look,’ she says. ‘They’ve made a mistake. I think they’re fighting.’ Guy of course, would prefer to think the elephants, if not kissing, are at least ‘connecting’.

That Lizzie is prepared to cheat and lie in order to achieve her objectives is a nasty revelation, and something Guy only realises on the wedding day. Not only is the special letter a fabrication, but Lizzie’s medical degree has been won through a certain amount of cheating in exams, a fact which shocks Guy, and prompts him to exclaim, ‘But that’s cheating!’, to which Lizzie and her friend reply with an offhand acknowledgment, mildly surprised at his moral fastidiousness.

Lizzie is a realist, an artful and amoral pragmatist who nevertheless wants her new husband to see her and know her for what she is. After Guy’s talk about her being ‘the perfect girl’ she is compelled on the wedding night, as they settle into their hotel room, to spell out the reality the arrangement as she sees it:

*Lizzie: Darling, one thing I don’t want is a perfect marriage. That would be so boring wouldn’t it? Because well, people aren’t perfect are they? And I think this relationship has a better chance of survival if we acknowledge that we’re not perfect.*

*Guy: (slowly, as if in a trance) Yes. You’re probably right.*

*Lizzie: Good. I think we’re going to have a wonderful marriage Guy. (She lies on the bed, pulling out the tissues that have been stuffing her bra.) Look, we’re both independent people and we love each other. A lot. And you know that what we do, you know, with other people, it’s not*



*going to affect the marriage at all is it?*

*(cut to Guy, loosening his tie, as if in shock and needing air.)*

*Lizzie: Darling? You know Julie and Clive?  
Well they had other partners and well, it  
should've worked out marvellously, but  
the problem was they didn't trust each  
other enough. We're both adults, we're  
fully grown, and I think we should give  
each other a certain amount of freedom.  
Because I love you, that's a given.*

This is Guy's moment of reckoning. He stares desolately at his reflection in the glass windows overlooking the city lights. Surely Lizzie must know how absolutely devastating the romantic Guy will find this suggestion, yet she proceeds determinedly, perhaps sensing that it will take something so shockingly pragmatic for Guy to literally 'face up to himself' and to surrender his attachment to a soft-focus version of reality. Like many an Australian protagonist, he is brutally punished for his idealism and his individualism. He must be made to submit.

### **'You ask me if I'm happy...'**

The film might have left us here, with the disillusioned Guy wondering if perhaps he had married a monstrous illusion. Such a conclusion would have been in keeping with the genre's underlying assumption that there is a 'right' partner out there for everyone, suggesting here that Guy had disastrously failed to locate the correct woman, who presumably would be neither Jenny nor Lizzie. But we are allowed no such easy conclusions. In the next scene, several years have passed and Lizzie and Guy are taking their two small children on a trip to the beach. They load up their expensive family station wagon outside a beautiful old house. Lizzie, with a baby on her hip, is a tender and attentive mother, still slim and beautiful. Guy, helping his young son into the car with a bag of lollies, seems a loving and resigned family man. Standing at the beach the family are shown frozen as if in a photograph. Guy offers a voice-over in the form of a letter to Fong-hu, who is now grown-up:

*'You ask me if I'm happy. I don't know. The thing with happiness is that you don't realise when you've got it – you only remember it. Ask me in 10 years time.'*



It is this conclusion which confuses us. Is it a happy ending, or a sad one? We can't be sure, and evidently Guy himself can't offer a definite answer. Sobchack and Sobchack have argued that 'The genre film, by resolving conflicts easily, does not challenge the audience's values, as does tragedy.'<sup>485</sup> The conclusion of this film with its unresolved sentiments and its poignant questioning of the ideas of romance and happiness, suggest its anti-genre nature. Guy's heroism – and there is something quite heroic about him in this scene – lies in his obvious surrender to a reality that won't be squashed into either a romantic or a tragic mould. The resigned family man stance that Guy takes is not tragic, but stoic, and this is a blatant challenge to the ideals of romance and the genres that sprout out of it.

Algis Mickunas, writing about the differences between the philosophies exhibited in American versus European film, has described 'American philosophical pragmatism' as a philosophy perceivable even in the most grim American films. This philosophy is one which ultimately sees the world as a friendly and meaningful place, ready to be shaped by human intention and will, and exhibiting an unshakeable '...confidence in the ability to discern the true and the good.'<sup>486</sup> Mickunas contrasts this with the more abstract European philosophies, which concern themselves with questions not of how reality can be transformed and shaped, but of what constitutes reality itself.<sup>487</sup> When no answers are forthcoming, argues Mickunas, '...the European film is symbolic of the meaningless, of the impenetrability of life. One constantly awaits the message which never seems to come,'<sup>488</sup> and thus the world is not perceived as warm and friendly, but as 'cold and indifferent.'<sup>489</sup>

Guy's final position falls somewhere between these two extremes. The questions he asks – 'What is love?' 'What is happiness?' 'What is real?' – are not pragmatic. In keeping with the European philosophies described by Mickunas, Guy

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<sup>485</sup> T. Sobchack & V. Sobchack, op.cit., p. 235.

<sup>486</sup> Algis Mickunas, 'Philosophical Pragmatism and American Narrative Film', *Wide Angle* Vol.1, No.1, 1985, p. 11.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., p.11.



‘...constantly awaits the message which never seems to come’,<sup>490</sup> in a universe which is largely indifferent to his fate.

The world does indeed seem cold and indifferent in the second last scene, where Guy sees Jenny in the city street some time after his marriage. He is walking home from work wrapped in coat and scarf. The light is the icy blue of the middle of winter. He catches a glimpse of Jenny coming towards him, wearing a bright red coat. His eyes light up in recognition, in genuine delight at seeing her. She stares back at him, her face frozen and masklike, an older face than he remembers, and a face that has closed itself off after too many tears. In a moment she is gone, and he is left standing in the city square. An aerial shot shows pedestrians criss-crossing paths, their movements blurred, purposeful but ultimately meaningless. The moment is one of profound alienation for Guy, yet not entirely without meaning, for through it there is his insight into his own culpability, the ‘young years’ he has taken from this woman and wasted through his need to chase after the mirage of perfection.

Guy’s resignation in the next scene (the family tableaux at the beach), and his observation about happiness occurring only in memory, are in keeping with Mickunas’ description of the European cinematic philosophy, where ‘Any meaningful explanation is valid for a particular human formulation which has no ultimate meaning; it vanishes with the winds and the dust of tombs.’<sup>491</sup> The slow freeze-frame photography that accompanies the scene reinforces this idea of impermanence and the need for memory to affix any kind of significance or judgement.

Yet for all its similarities to the European existentialism described by Mickunas, this film’s conclusion is a peculiarly Australian version of triumph, for like the national tradition described in previous chapters, it stresses endurance and persistence, resilience and realism, a transcendence based on the acceptance of limitations. Guy’s demeanor in this concluding scene is perfectly reminiscent of Tom Ryan’s description of Australian cinema narrative as allowing the hero ‘...survival if he/she suffers the indignities without asserting resentment.’<sup>492</sup> As he

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid.

<sup>492</sup> Tom Ryan, quoted by G. Turner, *National Fictions*, op.cit., p. 58.



stands above the windswept beach, Guy must accept his position as stranded, like the Australian protagonists Turner describes, ‘...at the point of conflict between [himself], [his] social context, and the natural environment’.<sup>493</sup>

Musser has argued that ‘Genres are not constructed based on a film’s attitude towards its subject,’ giving the example that just because a film presents the frontier in an atypical way does not exclude it from being a part of the Western genre.<sup>494</sup> By this argument Musser would see a romantic comedy, like *Lizzie*, in which the belief in romance itself was not reinforced, as nevertheless part of genre. This view is fully compatible with the placing of this film as an anti-genre piece, for by so defining it we still locate it well within the sphere of influence of the genre. By arguing against the underlying assumptions of Hollywood romantic comedy, *Lizzie* is engaging in a dialogue with that tradition, but from within its own national tradition, a tradition suspicious of ‘love, doves, heavens above’ sentimentality, a tradition that prefers its heroes plain and honest, taking their truths undiluted and unadorned.

## **A Message from the Peripheries**

The Australian cinematic field is structured in such a way that our genre-type films emerge against a tradition which is not their own. Romantic Comedy in particular, seems incongruent with our national history, our (stereotypical) national character, and our traditional cinematic strengths. Everything we know about romantic comedy we will have learned at the cinema, watching (mainly) American films. Thus our own films must be a response, a reply to Hollywood. Whether that reply is congratulatory and celebratory, as with *Love and Other Catastrophes*, or a stinging rebuke of the ideology of the genre, as with *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, the fact remains that neither film can be properly understood without acknowledging its reference to the pivotal point of the genre, Hollywood.

Our genre films will always be a message from the peripheries, a unique hybrid of our own cultural values, our own history, together with that which we have absorbed from elsewhere. Perhaps it is in the domain of love that we can see most

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<sup>493</sup> G. Turner, ‘The Genres are American: Australian narrative, Australian film, and the problem of genre’, *Film Literature Quarterly*, Vol.21, No.2., 1993, p. 106.

<sup>494</sup> C. Musser, ‘Divorce, DeMille and the Comedy of Remarriage’, *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, op.cit., p. 309.



clearly how pervasive is the influence of Hollywood, and yet, ultimately, how independent and unique are the local Australian ways of making sense of the battle of the sexes.



## Chapter 6B: *Love and Other Catastrophes*, *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, and the Field of Australian Film

These two films have thus far been examined in terms of their narratives, and the particular forms of originality and cultural indebtedness available to Australian love stories. I will now take an industry focus and discuss the films and their directors with particular emphasis on their positions within the local and international cinematic fields, making reference to the concepts of *habitus*, symbolic and financial capital, and to issues of autonomy.

### ***Love and Other Catastrophes*: Media Frenzy and Misinformation**

*Love and Other Catastrophes* made only a modest amount at the Australian box office (\$1.64 million). However, together with the film's international sales of \$2.5 million, this represented a significant profit on the film's budget of \$500,000.<sup>495</sup> The film's position within the local cinematic field is therefore not without financial capital.

Yet *Catastrophes* also occupies a position rich in symbolic capital within the national cinematic field, possessing a significant '...degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour.'<sup>496</sup> Reviews were generally glowing,<sup>497</sup> often acknowledging that the film was 'rough around the edges',<sup>498</sup> yet praising its 'cheeky charm',<sup>499</sup> 'unflagging momentum',<sup>500</sup> 'freshness',<sup>501</sup> and 'sheer inventiveness'.<sup>502</sup> McKenzie Wark even went so far as to link the film to a discussion of his hope for the rejuvenation of the nation's universities!<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Mary Anne Reid, 'Put it on your credit card: *Love and Other Catastrophes*', *More Long Shots: Australian cinema successes in the 90s*, AFC & Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, 1999, p. 33.

<sup>496</sup> R. Johnson, 'Introduction', *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>497</sup> See 'Critical Response to *Love and Other Catastrophes*', Appendix II.

<sup>498</sup> Margaret Pomeranz, 'Clever Study of Campus Life', *Herald Sun*, Melbourne, 1/8/96.

<sup>499</sup> Barbara Creed, 'Light, infectious comedy is a local triumph', *The Age*, Melbourne, 1/8/96.

<sup>500</sup> Peter Crayford, 'A Glow all of its Own', Weekend Review, *Financial Review*, 2/8/96.

<sup>501</sup> T. Ryan, 'The Wonder Years', Agenda, *The Sunday Age*, Melbourne, 28/7/96.

<sup>502</sup> Vicky Roach, 'Review of *Love and Other Catastrophes*', *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 1/8/96.

<sup>503</sup> McKenzie Wark, 'Raw Material for Remodelling', *The Australian*, 5/2/97.



What is startling about the critical discourse surrounding *Catastrophes* is the fact that it seems unable to separate discussion of the film's textual qualities from discussion of its mode of production. The film's prestige, its symbolic capital, is thereby inextricably entwined with its production history.

A strong argument can be made that this small, cheap and much-discussed film played a significant part in altering the subsequent state of the low-budget area of the Australian cinematic field. The film's mode of production, along with its subsequent success in the international marketplace, went some way towards transforming the habitus of first-time filmmaking in this country. It contributed to a changed perception of what was possible, acceptable and desirable within the field; a perception which did not accurately or completely reflect the reality and the risks.

The story of the making of the film has been so often recounted that it has acquired an almost legendary quality. In her early twenties, and fresh out of film school, Emma-Kate Croghan was unemployed and on the dole. Together with a small group of friends and her then boyfriend Stavros Efthymiou, she decided to just go ahead and make a cheap, quickly assembled film that did not have to rely on or wait for funding approvals. Following a six-week scripting and pre-production period, the film was shot at break-neck speed in 17 days, on 16mm stock and for an initial credit-card assisted budget of \$45,000.<sup>504</sup> After showing a rough cut to the AFC the filmmakers then received \$500,00 to finish the film on 35mm and pay out the many deferrals.<sup>505</sup> Polygram, also impressed by the rough cut, offered source music for the soundtrack.<sup>506</sup>

While the film was bypassed for official selection in the 1996 Cannes Film Festival, Croghan and two of the film's stars were flown out to accompany their project to the marketplace, when on the eve of the event, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox purchased it for international distribution, for \$1 million.<sup>507</sup> A flurry of subsequent publicity surrounded this deal, focusing on the low-budget of the film and the extreme youth of the unknown director, who suddenly found herself courted by

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<sup>504</sup> Fincina Hopgood, 'Love and Other Catastrophes', *Cinema Papers*, August 1996, no.111, pp. 34-35.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

<sup>507</sup> M.A. Reid, op.cit., p. 40.



Hollywood royalty, such as Miramax chief Harvey Weinstein.<sup>508</sup> As Croghan herself has said of the period, 'I was on the dole before I went to Cannes, totally unemployable...two days later I was sitting on a yacht with Al Pacino'.<sup>509</sup>

The film's Australian release followed soon after the Cannes craziness. The Australian distributor (Newvision) had originally planned to release the film on a very small scale – 12 prints in total, 'but the press generated in Australia by the film's success overseas finally led Newvision to go out with 32 prints'.<sup>510</sup> The local advertising campaign played on the confusion surrounding its actual status at Cannes, claiming that *Love and Other Catastrophes* was 'the film that took Cannes by storm'.<sup>511</sup> The fact that another Australian film, *Love Serenade* (1996, Shirley Barrett), had actually been chosen for competition and had won the Palm D'or, was one of ironies of the period. *Love Serenade* failed to capture headlines in quite the same way.

That *Catastrophes* had been made for an initial sum of less than \$50,000 was part of the oft-repeated story of its production, and a fact that was noted in many reviews.<sup>512</sup> The less romantic fact that the film was actually finished with a substantial \$500,000 injection of AFC funding, often went unremarked, for it contradicted the central theme that had been adopted by most journalists: that 'Indie' cinema was alive and well in Australia; that instead of whingeing about budget cuts to the AFC, or submitting to its endless form-filling bureaucracy, filmmakers should use some initiative and in the words of Nike's slogan, 'just do it'.

To be fair to the team behind *Love and Other Catastrophes*, they were not responsible for this misinformation, stressing in every interview their luck, their desperation, and the amazing support and assistance that they had been given from many individuals and organisations. Numerous factors may have contributed to the skewed reporting of the film's funding and fortunes. Apart from the journalistic imperative for a good story, the political and economic climate of

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<sup>508</sup> Alison Boleyn, Interview with Emma-Kate Croghan', *Marie Claire Australia*, April 1999, p. 116.

<sup>509</sup> E.K Croghan, quoted by Bruce Newman, 'For an Australian Wunderkind, the Glitter of Hollywood', *New York Times*, 23/3/97.

<sup>510</sup> M. A. Reid, op.cit., p. 42.

<sup>511</sup> Evan Williams, 'The Art of Getting Fresh', *The Australian*, 3/8/96.



mid-1996 Australia must be considered. The film was released in July of that year, just several months after the Liberal/National Party Coalition had come to power in March. The mood in the Australian film community was one of anxiety and skepticism towards the government's promises to maintain financial support for the film industry. While funding in the 96/97 Budget was maintained, apart from the 2 per cent reduction in running costs applied to all government departments and agencies, the AFC's Special Production Fund was de-funded by half, and there was an announcement, days after the budget, that there would be an official review, headed by David Gonski, of all assistance to the industry.<sup>513</sup>

Amidst all the confusion about the future of the AFC and its State counterparts, the story of the making of *Love and Other Catastrophes* seemed a simple and straightforward one. Not only had a local filmmaker had a global success, but she had done it with an entrepreneurial go-getting determination that seemed to bypass the 'process' of state-assisted filmmaking. Croghan's film seemed to be a hopeful signpost heralding a revised means of autonomous production – that holy grail of the Australian cinematic field – that would survive regardless of national budget outcomes and the possible crippling of the AFC.

Another factor perhaps contributing to journalistic skewing of the facts surrounding the production of the film was the desire to link it up with a broader global trend towards low budget independent cinema. Croghan herself claimed that the film's mode of production had been influenced by American independent films such as *Clerks* (1994, Kevin Smith) and *The Brothers McMullen* (1995, Edward Burns),<sup>514</sup> and that she '...wanted to catch the same spirit that you get in American independent cinema – the work of filmmakers like Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch.'<sup>515</sup>

In a bid to connect *Love and Other Catastrophes* to this global trend, and thereby attach more symbolic capital to themselves and their stories, journalists glossed

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<sup>512</sup> For example, Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Sandy George, 'Overview, chronology, 1996', *Get The Picture*, op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>514</sup> E.K. Croghan, quoted in interview by Paul Kermizian, *Orange Source*, 3/5/97. <[http://source.syr.edu/OS\\_reviews/Interview/Emma\\_Kate\\_Croghan/emma\\_kate.html](http://source.syr.edu/OS_reviews/Interview/Emma_Kate_Croghan/emma_kate.html)> ([20/04/02]).

<sup>515</sup> E.K. Croghan, Interview on official *Love and Other Catastrophes* website, <[http://www.foxsearchlight.com/love/behind\\_the\\_scenes/croghan\\_interview.html](http://www.foxsearchlight.com/love/behind_the_scenes/croghan_interview.html)> ([20/04/02]).



over the actual intricacies of the film's funding arrangements and the involvement of the AFC in bringing it to fruition, for within this sphere of filmmaking and film reporting, the lower the budget and the lower the level of corporate or state funding – that is, the more autonomy it can be seen to have – the more symbolic capital can be attributed to the project.

These misrepresentations surrounding the film reveal the nature of the field and its extreme sensitivity to differing levels of autonomy. For while *Love and Other Catastrophes* was made with significant autonomy, only attracting its state funding and its corporate distribution sale, quite serendipitously, after the fact of its production, the press, in an attempt to inflate the film's symbolic capital, exaggerated what was already an astonishing story of low-budget inventiveness and luck.

### **The transformation of the habitus of Australian low-budget filmmaking**

It was suggested at the beginning of this section that *Catastrophes* was responsible for a shift in the perception of what was possible and desirable in the local cinematic field. It is difficult to prove that the much-reported success of this film set off a spate of low-budget 'credit-card' films. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence supports the hypothesis that while the trend was occurring internationally, its Australian manifestation was heavily influenced by this one film. Industry analyst Mary Anne Reid attributes the Australian trend toward credit card filmmaking to this one film, noting that in the AFC's 97/98 production survey, 'at least 11 feature films made for less than \$1 million had gone into production before full post-production finance or any distribution deals were secured.'<sup>516</sup>

Acclaimed animator and short filmmaker Sarah Watt has said this of the film:

*'It was a pretty scary thing to happen in the industry. It set off this whole thing of deferrals. [It] seemed to spark endless filmmakers just wanting to go out and make films that pay no one. And a lot of crew rely on getting paid to feed their children. And it's kind of set up this thing that making films is only for people without kids and without*

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<sup>516</sup> M.A. Reid, op.cit., p. 35.



*mortgages. It put the industry in a different place.*<sup>517</sup>

Critic Paul Harris, who cameod in the film as a favour to the makers, also perceives the trend as dangerous and potentially exploitative:

*'I reckon there's probably 30 credit card films – feature films – in Australia, and they're all languishing somewhere in post-production. They've shot the films, haven't got the money to finish them and get them out of the labs. They've been shown to distributors who just think that they're rubbish, or else that they're interesting but with no commercial potential. And these are people who have been inspired by the likes of Dov Simmons. You know, like the example of Love and Other Catastrophes – \$40,000. It's still a lot of money. Clerks. Even if you can do them, you can only do that once. Because you call in all your favours. You have to exploit people to do them, and then next time you've got to treat people properly.'*<sup>518</sup>

When a film like *Love and Other Catastrophes* is perceived to succeed so spectacularly – both economically and critically – and when so much attention is placed upon its mode of production, then the *habitus*, the 'feel for the game', is transformed to incorporate the model that produced such success. In a small and relatively insulated filmmaking community like Australia's, the success of such a film is capable of transforming the '...schemes of perception, thought and action...' <sup>519</sup> of the agents within that field, causing them to underestimate the true risks of such position-taking. As Bourdieu has argued, the products of cultural fields attain their greatest value when the arbitrary nature by which they gain recognition and consecration is misrecognised as pre-existent or inherent in the art itself.<sup>520</sup> It might be supposed that this imitation of the production model of *Love and Other Catastrophes* exhibits a classic case of such misrecognition.

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<sup>517</sup> Sarah Watt, personal correspondence with the author, 1/5/01.

<sup>518</sup> Paul Harris, personal correspondence with the author, 2/5/01.

<sup>519</sup> P. Bourdieu, 'Structures, Habitus, Practices', op.cit., p. 54.

<sup>520</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 74-81.



## Emma Kate Croghan: Wary Wunderkind

*‘Emma-Kate seems to have been breast-fed on movies.’* – Claudia Karvan<sup>521</sup>

Despite all the stories about this thin pale girl living on the dole and being ‘totally unemployable’, Emma-Kate Croghan actually possessed significant cultural and symbolic capital when she made her feature debut. A graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts Film and Television School, her precocity was such that she had been accepted into the program as one of the youngest entrants ever to be admitted.<sup>522</sup> While at the school, and before the age of 20, she made two award-winning short films, *Sexy Girls*, *Sexy Appliances*, and *Desire*. Then, after leaving the school she co-directed an AFC-funded documentary, *Come as You Are*, and worked in the Australian Film Institute’s distribution department as well as directing film clips.<sup>523</sup>

As she was keen to point out in most interviews, Croghan’s cinematic epiphany came at the age of six when she saw Francois Truffaut’s 1959 film, *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (*The 400 Blows*):

*‘I was too young to read the subtitles, so my mother read them out to me...Eventually the whole cinema gave up and they started reading them out aloud too. It really had an impact on me...that’s when the film obsession started.’*<sup>524</sup>

The fact that Croghan’s mother took her small daughter to a French double bill (the other feature was Truffaut’s 1961 classic *Jules et Jim*) signals an upbringing steeped in the accumulation of cultural capital. As Croghan describes it:

*‘I’m from a single-parent environment. My mother’s a librarian. She was a teenaged mum – she’s in her early forties – so she was at the tail end of the hippie thing. She was a leftist activist. Some of my first words were ‘U.S bases out’.’*<sup>525</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Claudia Karvan, quoted by Andrew Urban, ‘Croghan, Emma-Kate: Strange Planet’, <[http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/scripts/cinefile/Interviews.idc?Article\\_ID=2812](http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/scripts/cinefile/Interviews.idc?Article_ID=2812)> ([20/04/02]).

<sup>522</sup> B. Newman, op.cit.

<sup>523</sup> E.K. Croghan, Interview on official *Love and Other Catastrophes* web site, op.cit.

<sup>524</sup> E.K. Croghan, quoted by Alison Boleyn, *Marie Claire*, op.cit., p. 116.

<sup>525</sup> E.K. Croghan, quoted by Howard Feinstein, ‘Class Act: Exploring the Screwball Student Life’, *New York Village Voice*, 1/4/97.



Croghan's mother's activism and involvement in the radical Melbourne arts scene of the 1970s (she knew the people making films at the legendary Pram Factory)<sup>526</sup> was an education in itself, revealing to the young child the possibilities of creating a life around such pursuits. Her bohemian childhood, always surrounded by films, books and new music,<sup>527</sup> equipped her with the competence to understand and value such cultural products, and when she attended the Swinburne Community School – a 'hippy school' – her '...desire to take photographs and make Super-8 films was rated highly'.<sup>528</sup> As Croghan recounts it, 'I was told "you can do anything that you want"',<sup>529</sup> though presumably the emphasis was on creative pursuits.

That Croghan aligns herself with the more autonomous pole of the cinematic field is supported by the filmmakers she cites as inspiration: not only Truffaut, but American independent directors Jim Jarmusch, David Lynch and Spike Lee. She also admits to having '...an affinity for the gay scene' and '...a camp sensibility', which locates her somewhere outside the mainstream, though as she was quick to point out to a New York reporter, Australian culture itself tends towards such humour.<sup>530</sup>

Croghan's choices subsequent to the success of *Love and Other Catastrophes* have marked her as a wary protector of her autonomy, a strategy that is yet to bear significant fruit. While she was offered several projects at Cannes, following her sparkling debut, she deferred the best of the offers until after she had made another AFC-funded film in Sydney:

*'I didn't want to be a director for hire without any control. I was very wary of being... "chewed up and spat out"!' <sup>531</sup>*

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<sup>526</sup> Stephanie Bunbury, 'Same Girl, Different Planet', *The Sunday Age*, Melbourne, 10/10/99.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

<sup>528</sup> Ibid.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> E.K. Croghan, quoted by Howard Feinstein, op.cit.

<sup>531</sup> E.K. Croghan quoted by Alison Boleyn, op.cit., p. 116.



Croghan's second film, *Strange Planet* (1999) was another ensemble romantic drama/comedy, this time shot with an FFC-assisted budget of \$4.1 million.<sup>532</sup> As Croghan has said of her brush with the festival circuit:

*'It wasn't until I was in Sundance and I saw all those people schlepping around desperately trying to get people to go screenings, and unable to finish their films that I realised how lucky we'd been...In Australia, filmmaking has always been about making the film, but people from L.A., even young filmmakers, are obsessed with the deal.'*<sup>533</sup>

The logic of this career move – making another film in Australia – seemed to be one of consolidating her symbolic capital by working within the protected yet autonomy-promoting environment of a state-funded film. *Strange Planet* sparked a media repetition of stories about Croghan's previous success, yet failed to capture the public imagination on its own terms. It was deemed a modestly enjoyable work lacking the same energy and coherence of *Love and Other Catastrophes*.<sup>534</sup> What the later film actually lacked was a mythical production story of hardship and luck. While *Strange Planet* attempted to latch itself to the zeitgeist of pre-millennial angst, the first film, through its 'back story', had succeeded so much better in capturing the spirit of the era, with its preoccupation with miniscule budgets, overseas recognition and overnight success.

Croghan's next project, and her current one to date, was the deal she had signed onto at Cannes in 1997, but deferred until after the making of *Strange Planet*. While she was hot on the festival circuit with her first feature, Croghan was approached by Jersey Films, the production company responsible for such high risk successes as *Pulp Fiction* (1994, Quentin Tarantino), *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol, 1997) and *Get Shorty* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1995). She was asked to choose a book she would like to film, and chose science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*. Jersey bought the rights to the book and waited while Croghan made her other film, then in 1999 flew her to LA to begin work on the project.

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<sup>532</sup> Paul Pottinger, 'Two Years on Another Planet', *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 9/10/99.

<sup>533</sup> E.K. Croghan, quoted by Bruce Newman, op.cit.

<sup>534</sup> For example, Jake Wilson criticises the film for its lack of plot, it's 'strained hipness and blithe self-congratulation' with 'all the wit of a tampon commercial'.  
<[http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/print/article\\_view.asp?Article\\_ID=2704&Section=Video\\_files](http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/print/article_view.asp?Article_ID=2704&Section=Video_files)> ([20/04/02]).



Very little has been heard from Croghan in the subsequent years, though it is assumed the film will emerge at some stage. She declined to be interviewed as part of this thesis, citing a hectic schedule as her excuse. One of the most recent records of her whereabouts is a small snide piece in Melbourne's Sunday Age of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2000. Accompanying a picture of Croghan looking down her nose at the camera is the following caption:

*Locally bred cinematic gun Emma-Kate Croghan lives in the Big Apple these days but, of course, would have fond memories of life in the Yarra village, wouldn't she? Don't bet on it. 'She doesn't consider herself a Victorian anymore,' Croghan management told startled organisers of the Vision 21 Youth series who invited her to join a cluster of Under-30 achievers. 'Emma's based in New York now,' said management. 'She hasn't been in Melbourne for several years and is not planning on returning in the near future.' Hey, don't hurry, babe.*<sup>535</sup>

The offense that was taken to Croghan's refusal to participate in a local honour is perhaps justified. After all, the small state-supported Australian cinematic field has invested a great deal in educating and promoting the successes of its first-time filmmakers, and the national community as a whole generally takes much pride in the international successes of local heroes. While there are strong arguments to suggest that this tends towards unhealthy proportions – that a local film or filmmaker needs international validation in order for to be deemed worthwhile at home – there is a valid aspect to the expectations that the nation makes of its artists; that they at least acknowledge the geographical and cultural place from which they come.

Croghan herself has noted that within the international cinematic field 'You're only as good as your last film, so you are not afforded the same license to fail, in a way, as you were during the old studio era.'<sup>536</sup> The Australian cinematic field is notoriously slanted towards first time filmmakers. Second and third chances are rarely given, and having already had two films funded, it is possible that there were few opportunities open to Croghan. As she has stated, 'the idea is just to keep working. A simple objective, but not easy to fulfil.'<sup>537</sup> The risks of her

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<sup>535</sup> Sunday Age, 23/4/00, p. 26.

<sup>536</sup> E.K. Croghan, quoted by Paul Pottinger, op.cit.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.



trajectory are that she will spend years tied to a project that never reaches completion (a frequent fate of fated first timers), or reaches completion and fails to impress internationally. If this is the case, Croghan, having already ostracised her home audience, will be doubly regarded as a pariah. These are the difficulties facing transnational filmmakers, who must simultaneously claim for themselves a certain autonomy from any particular nation, genre or industry, while still retaining links with those structures and positions through which they have acquired their initial symbolic and financial capital.

### ***Thank God He Met Lizzie: Distribution Woes***

*'If it was a normal romantic comedy it ought to be able to get up in the marketplace...the only reason [the AFC] put money in there was because we broke all these rules; it was an anti-genre piece. Otherwise they would have had a lot of people to answer to if they'd funded a [conventional romantic comedy]. That's not what they're there for.'* –  
**Cherie Nowlan**<sup>538</sup>

At the time of its financing, much was made of the fact that *Thank God He Met Lizzie* was the first film to be made as a co-investment between the New South Wales Film and Television Office and the Australian Film Commission, and that this deal had been initiated by Jonathan Schteinman, who was involving REP and the Becker Group as the film's distributors.<sup>539</sup> This rather dull production information, highlighting '...the first time there was a market attachment to an AFC film',<sup>540</sup> actually holds the key to a fascinating tale of a battle between the imperatives of the autonomous (aesthetic) and the heteronomous (commercial) sectors of the Australian cinematic field. The film itself is a manifestation of the field at that particular instant (1996-97) when new and difficult links were being attempted between the publicly funded film institutions and the privately run sectors of the industry.

Director Cherie Nowlan has spoken at length about the difficulties of her relationship with producer Schteinman, and with the distributor (REP and Richard

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<sup>538</sup> C. Nolan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>539</sup> 'AFC/NSWFTO Co-invest in Feature Film *Thank God He Met Lizzie*', *AFC Media Release*, 3/4/96.

<sup>540</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.



Becker), whose financial clout was used in an attempt to change the film's conclusion.<sup>541</sup> Nowlan has commented that REP:

*'...came on board probably for the wrong reasons...it was a very good deal financially for them. They were going to get their money back pretty quickly, but, you know, they wanted a conventional ending.'*<sup>542</sup>

The pivotal hotel room scene, where newly married Guy confronts the collapse of his romantic ideals, was deemed too depressing and 'emasculating', and the push was for a happier and sweeter ending. This scene, perhaps the most important one in the film, was the first scene to be penned by screenwriter Alexandra Long,<sup>543</sup> and was essential to the integrity of the story. As Nolan has argued, 'if I changed the ending, the whole infrastructure of the film, the narrative, fell apart.'<sup>544</sup>

This highly charged conflict, which Nowlan has described as a 'Cuban missile crisis',<sup>545</sup> was ultimately resolved in the artists' favour only because of the AFC's involvement. As Nowlan has said:

*'Fortunately, Lizzie's main funding came from the Australian Film Commission – which wasn't investing in a commercial film, but one aimed at subverting the rules of the genre [of romantic comedies]. So they stuck by me, and we were able to resolve the crisis.'*<sup>546</sup>

Apart from the fact that the AFC were interested in making an anti-genre film, their allegiances were with the director and writer<sup>547</sup> whose new talents they had been nurturing in preceding small projects.<sup>548</sup> The general practice of directors and writers signing over their rights to the producers of a project means that if the AFC had not been involved, Nowlan could have been fired from her own film. Instead, she was able, finally, to retain the important components of the story's conclusion, and to claim for herself the possessory credit (a film by...).

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid.

<sup>543</sup> Jeremy Eccles, 'Heading in a New Direction', *Canberra Times*, 29/11/97.

<sup>544</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>545</sup> Jeremy Eccles, op.cit.

<sup>546</sup> Nowlan quoted in Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Nowlan has said in various interviews that the AFC's allegiances were with her and Long. For example, see Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>548</sup> Previous to *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, the AFC had funded a short film, *Lucinda 31* (1994) directed by Nowlan and written by Long.



Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that Nowlan was ‘punished’ by the distributor for her willfulness. A very limited publicity and advertising budget (of about \$200,000<sup>549</sup>) was allocated to promoting the film. This sum allowed for no television advertising, and could not take advantage of the rapidly accelerating national and international profiles of the film’s stars, Blanchett and O’Connor in particular. The film was then released in the difficult pre-Christmas weeks of the year when audiences are busy shopping. In this short period the film had to make all its money, before the Boxing Day onslaught of blockbuster films vying for screens and pushing off any product not performing competitively. Despite these difficulties, in its first week in cinemas, the film was second only to the Nicholas Cage action thriller *Airforce One*, and it had the second highest screen average.<sup>550</sup>

Perhaps as a result of these marketing and timing issues, *Thank God He Met Lizzie* made a gross Australian box office of only \$0.9million.<sup>551</sup> Made on a modest budget of \$2.25million, which did not even allow for it to be shot on 35mm, this film does not occupy a significant position at the heteronomous pole of the cinematic field.

Neither did the film garner the symbolic rewards of significant critical acclaim or industry awards. *Lizzie*’s only awards went to Cate Blanchett, who won the 1997 AFI award for best performance by an actress in a supporting role, and also the Film Critics Circle of Australia award for supporting actress. Screenwriter Alexandra Long, whose work was not nominated gave the following sarcastic explanation:

*I wrote in the romantic comedy genre and I wasn’t really thinking of the AFI awards when I wrote it at all, and if I had been, I would have wrote (sic) about a handicapped person in prison and I would have been assured of one.*<sup>552</sup>

This is no doubt a jibe, not just at the winning author, Jan Sardi, whose original screenplay, *Shine*, focused on the mentally disturbed David Helfgott, but also a comment on the perceived tendency of Australian films focusing on society’s ‘losers’ and ‘weirdos’. Long’s comment about the genre of romantic comedy not

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<sup>549</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> *Screen International*, ‘Australia’, 11/12/98, p. 26.

<sup>552</sup> A. Long, quoted by Ellie Prodromou, *Revolver*, 26/11/97, p. 54.



being taken seriously is an important one, for it highlights an unspoken hierarchy of genres in which some are deemed more worthy of critical attention than others. As has already been noted, the particular context of Australian cinema and Australian culture has not, thus far, proved particularly conducive to much serious and/or comic exploration of romantic love.

This particular cultural *habitus*, combined with the generally low symbolic status of the romantic comedy genre, perhaps contributed to the many cool critical responses of predominantly male film reviewers,<sup>553</sup> who wrote about the film without really noticing or valuing its anti-genre elements. David Stratton, for example, dismissed it as ‘...a slim romantic comedy...too thin and predictable to be of much interest internationally’,<sup>554</sup> while Jim Schembri characterised it as ‘...a neat little number...as romantic comedy dramas go...’.<sup>555</sup> Michael Bodey identified in the film ‘...a flaccid script...’, ‘charmless, enervating’ direction and numerous technical inadequacies, conceding that it might be enjoyed by some ‘insecure’ viewers.<sup>556</sup>

Reviews and articles by female writers, lesser in number than those by male writers, were almost unanimously positive about the film, their validations often drawing on personal experience and social observations.<sup>557</sup> It might be argued that part of the *habitus* of film criticism, the valuing of the ‘pure aesthetic’, devalues such personal reflections, preferring instead a more abstract display of cultural capital, and a greater readiness to confer symbolic capital upon those texts which allow for such display.

Significantly, the film gained positive recognition from those agents equipped with the cultural capital to recognise its anti-genre, and thereby oppositional, status. Brian McFarlane, in the film’s entry in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, noted that ‘...its originality lies in starting where romantic

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<sup>554</sup> D. Stratton, ‘Review of Thank God He Met Lizzie’, *Variety*, June 16-22, 1997.

<sup>555</sup> J. Schembri, ‘Review of *Thank God He Met Lizzie*’, *The Age*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Melbourne, 21/11/97.

<sup>556</sup> M. Bodey, ‘Hopeless Romantics Queue Here: Thank God He Met Lizzie’, *The Age*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, Melbourne, 20/11/97.

<sup>557</sup> For example, see reviews by Sandra Hall, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <<http://sydney.citysearch.com.au/E/E/SYDNE/0000/19/05/>> ([20/04/02]); and Louise Keller, <[http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/scripts/cinefile/Reviews\\_Archives.idc?Article\\_ID=603](http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/scripts/cinefile/Reviews_Archives.idc?Article_ID=603)> ([20/04/02]); or



comedy has most often ended'.<sup>558</sup> Similarly, Tom Ryan, a reviewer and academic whose intense interest in the romantic comedy genre draws on the work of philosopher Stanley Cavell, saw much to commend in the film. He noted its subtleties and complexities, the way 'It plays some entertaining and very clever games with the traditional elements of romantic comedy,' deeming it one of the best Australian films of the year.<sup>559</sup>

In both its production and narrative elements, *Thank God He Met Lizzie* illustrates some of the most important conflicts occurring in the contemporary Australian cinematic field. Among these issues, a few of which have been briefly discussed above, are the autonomy of the creator and the role of the Australian Film Commission in protecting and fostering that autonomy, together with the confusion surrounding the symbolic worth of locally made generic films. Emerging at the crux of these debates, this film itself seemed to suffer in both symbolic and economic terms, unable to be fully recognised as either 'art' or 'commerce', perhaps to be later recognised as a small but significant turning point in our culture's readiness to confront the contradictions of romance and monogamy.

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articles by Helen Garner, op.cit., and Ruth Hessey, 'Frannie Goes to Hollywood', *Metro*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21/11/97.

<sup>558</sup> B. McFarlane, 'Thank God He Met Lizzie', *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, op.cit., p. 491.

<sup>559</sup> T. Ryan, 'Movie Reviews: *Thank God He Met Lizzie*', *Applause*, *The Sunday Age*, Melbourne, 23/11/97.



## **Cherie Nowlan: ‘Autonomy: it’s what you can negotiate.’**

Now in her mid-30s, Cherie Nowlan grew up in Singleton, a country town about two and a half hours’ drive from Sydney. She describes herself as being ‘from a working class rural family’,<sup>560</sup> and attributes her love of cinema to her time at the local Catholic school, when her English teacher would regularly take the class to see films:

*‘I was learning to see that film could achieve the kind of depth that literature can, and he really played an important part, I suppose, in opening my eyes to that possibility.’<sup>561</sup>*

Nowlan’s important vocation-forming memories are of seeing *Star Wars* and having it deconstructed in terms of the hero myth, or of being shown *Great Expectations* and *Apocalypse Now*, and of being taught to take such entertainments seriously.<sup>562</sup> In Bourdieu’s terms, this ‘opening of the eyes’ can be described as a childhood inculcation of cultural capital, whereby Nowlan was equipped with the empathy to value cinema, and the competence required to decipher its codes and symbols.

Nowlan’s first job out of school was as an entertainment journalist, a position which allowed her to be at the very least ‘in the world’ of film, if not completely ‘of’ it.<sup>563</sup> After years of working on the outskirts of the industry as a journalist, publicity writer and television researcher, she eventually did a short course at the Australian Film, Television and Radio school. What she learnt there was probably less significant than who she met, for it was there that she first began collaborating with writer Alexandra Long, a fellow student of the school.

Nowlan’s circuitous part-time route to filmmaking she describes as being dictated by financial necessity:

*‘I just didn’t have the money [to go to the AFTRS full-time] ...because even though you get a stipend, I don’t have family in Sydney so I couldn’t live at home and go to school, which a lot of students do. And Sydney’s an*

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<sup>560</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

<sup>562</sup> C. Nowlan, ‘Take Two with Deborah Niski’, Applause, *The Sunday Age*, Melbourne, 1/3/98.

<sup>563</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.



*incredibly expensive city to live in, so it was never an option for me to do that.*<sup>564</sup>

Nowlan's position upon entering the cinematic field can therefore be seen as poor in both in economic and cultural capital, yet through her strategy of being 'in' the world, she made social contacts which eventually allowed her access to the means by which she could creatively participate in filmmaking. She describes her method in this way:

*'You don't have to be born with a silver spoon in your mouth...I've been inventive. I researched the idea of directing – I asked lots of questions and, if I knew someone who knew someone, I'd always try to meet them and was never put off by a negative response.'*<sup>565</sup>

Nowlan's first major project was directing an ABC, BBC and FFC financed documentary, *God's Girls* (1991), focusing on the nuns who had taught her at school. She was able to do this due to the many contacts she had made while working as a researcher at the production company Kennedy Miller. She pitched her idea to producer Glenys Rowe, the wife of director Chris Noonan, who was then involved with Kennedy Miller, and Rowe liked the idea and set in motion the financing and pre-production infrastructure.

One of Nowlan's short films, *Lucinda 31* (1994-95) came out of a scriptwriting collaboration with Alexandra Long and this AFC funded short film was selected, in 1996, to screen at the prestigious New Directors, New Films festival in New York, presented by the Museum of Modern Art Film Department and the Film Society of the Lincoln Centre. Coinciding with the MOMA screening, was the AFC announcement that it would fund *Lizzie*, suggesting that the screenwriting/directing pair had just had a sharp rise in their 'stock value'.

While *Thank God He Met Lizzie* did not provide Nowlan with much financial capital – she still rents a home, makes television commercials in order to pay her bills, and says that as an Australian director you'll be 'living like a student till you're very old'<sup>566</sup> – it did provide her with the symbolic capital to gather resources for her next feature project, a film version of the novel *Dreamtime Alice*

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> C. Nowlan interviewd by Lisa Dethridge, 'Calling the Shots', *Cleo*, March 1999, p. 82.

<sup>566</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.



by award-winning author Mandy Sayers. The eminent Australian producer Jan Chapman (*The Piano*, *Holy Smoke*) has signed onto the project as co-producer with Nowlan, and the AFC has committed to script development funding.<sup>567</sup>

That Nowlan has insisted on being co-producer of her next project is a direct result of her negative and conflictual experience working on *Lizzie*. She has said that:

*'...as a result of that experience, for instance, my next project...I would only split the rights with the producer on that, because I found the book. It's my relationship and my project, and I'll maintain a producing role...I will maintain ownership of that script so I am in effect executive producer. In other words, I can't be fired from my own film. Because that's what I'm trying to protect.'*<sup>568</sup>

In the interview conducted for this research, Nowlan was passionate and candid about the problems of interfering 'money folk', yet she was also careful to acknowledge that all investors in a film, whether it be producers, distributors or the AFC, have their own particular, and rightful, imperatives and responsibilities:

*'...you have to aim at getting a hundred per cent of your vision on the screen but you probably won't get it, but you can just try and get as much as you can, and accept that until you can make the film entirely on your own, with your money, then you're going to have to play by those rules.'*<sup>569</sup>

The collaborative nature of filmmaking, together with the patchwork of government and private interests involved in Australian filmmaking, mean that that the kind of cultural field we are examining here is one where the director must constantly, on each and every new film, enter complex negotiations regarding the conditions of his or her own autonomy.

What this particular case highlights is the important and determining role that the film producer plays within the Australian cinematic field. The producers to which Nowlan aspires to work are people with interests in small, partially state-funded Australian films which are more likely to win awards and screen in platform release in arthouse cinemas than to make millions of dollars in the multiplex

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<sup>567</sup> AFC 1999/2000 Annual Report, 'Industry Assistance', Appendix 7.

<sup>568</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.



arena. These are people like Glenys Rowe (*Feeling Sexy*), John Maynard and Robert Connelly (*The Boys*, *The Bank*) and Jan Chapman. As Nowlan has stated, these are generally the kinds of producers who work with the ethic of protecting the director and writer's vision, even when this may prove commercially risky:

*'...they'll be on your side fighting the distributor, who will always want you to go for the easiest route, go for the cheap shot, make them feel comfortable, and naturally make their dollar back.'*<sup>570</sup>

It is these agents, who Nowlan describes as '...these good producers that everyone wants to work with',<sup>571</sup> whose role within the field, and whose methods of maintaining relative autonomy could be fruitfully explored in further research.

Like Nowlan, many other Australian filmmakers have chosen to produce or co-produce their own films, attesting again to the importance of the role of producer in protecting the directorial vision. Other producer/filmmakers included in this study are Clara Law, Working Dog and Rolf de Heer – whose latest experience directing a film he was *not* producing, 'almost turned me off filmmaking forever'.<sup>572</sup>

Nowlan's experience of working with the Australian Film Commission adds to the body of evidence suggesting that the public institution is more likely to protect artistic autonomy than to significantly curb it. While the AFC gave Nowlan final cut of the film – 'I would accept no less of a government funded film',<sup>573</sup> – it also placed certain restrictions upon her. The most significant of these was the fact that she had to surround herself with a certain proportion of experienced crew rather than first-timers.<sup>574</sup> New filmmakers working with the AFC are allocated a project co-ordinator, and in this case it was Sonia Armstrong, and later, Philippa Bateman, both of whom Nowlan describes as 'incredibly supportive'.<sup>575</sup> While there were disagreements and fights, it was Bateman who ultimately came in and

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<sup>570</sup> Ibid.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid.

<sup>572</sup> R. De Heer, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>573</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.



protected the director's right to conclude the film according to the original narrative.

As a working director trying to make a living – ‘at the end of the day you’ve got to pay for your funeral’ – Cherie Nowlan illustrates the position of the director whose interests are a complex mix of a desire for autonomy, together with a desire to reach and influence a broad audience. While she speaks hopefully of the ways in which new technologies might make the process cheap enough to enable directors to work without interference, she is not one of those rarefied creators who aims her films only at that small group of other cultural producers. Her guiding belief seems to be that the ‘mainstream’ audience is capable of understanding and appreciating films that are difficult, idiosyncratic and that are not necessarily aimed right at the 16-24 year old male. Her conviction is that the artist must lead the moneyman. As she has said of *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, ‘REP Distribution....is now very fond of it. I think the marketing men act out of fear in cases like this; but the audience is often ahead of the gatekeepers.’<sup>576</sup>

## **Chapter 6: Summary**

### **Narrative Elements**

As Australian romantic comedies, *Catastrophes* and *Lizzie* are by their very nature radical within the tradition of Australian cinematic narrative. We have, however, seen evidence of the continuation of the tradition in the particular ways that these films rework the imported genre, inflecting it with local accents, and organising their material in such a way as to acknowledge this culture's suspicion of romantic love and happy endings. Such hybridisation can be seen as a model by which the stories of the peripheries operate in relationship to the stories of the centre, a relationship of unequal cultural flow, which nonetheless offers particular kinds of limited freedom. This is the freedom to represent oneself, to twist the patterns of the internationally dominant culture back into the local dialect, and thereby use the act of representation to question one's own ways of making meaning.

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<sup>576</sup> Nowlan quoted in Jeremy Eccles, op.cit.



## Industry Elements

A constrained yet significant autonomy is also in evidence when we examine the films and their directors in terms of their positions within the local and international cinematic fields. The kinds of autonomy able to be negotiated by both Croghan and Nowlan were highly dependent upon the built-in protections of the state infrastructure. Without discounting the risks taken or the talent required to bring these projects to their completion, it can be seen that these particular films, and many like them, would not exist without the relative independence of the small Australian cinematic field, with its emphasis upon symbolic returns rather than financial ones. In connection with this field, a *habitus* has evolved in which filmmakers like those discussed so far (Kokkinos, Curran, Nash, Parsons, Croghan and Nowlan) aim to tell their stories with small budgets and a large degree of creative freedom.



## Chapter 7A: Globalisation and ‘Universal’ Myths in Australian Cinematic Narratives

*...we are, in the late-twentieth century, witnesses to – and participants in – a massive, twofold process involving the interpenetration of the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism – Roland Robertson*<sup>577</sup>

*The greater the ephemerality, the more pressing the need to discover or manufacture some kind of eternal truth that might lie therein. – David Harvey*<sup>578</sup>

In Fredric Jameson’s theory, works of art activate certain gestures in response to conditions laid down by the historical context.<sup>579</sup> This context, this ‘historical moment’ does not merely dictate what can and must be said, but rather provides a set of external circumstances to which there can be varied responses, but responses within limits.<sup>580</sup> In the previous chapter one response by Australian cinema to Hollywood’s global dominance was illustrated: that of engaging in a dialogue with Hollywood genre, taking on the other culture’s forms, while at the same time transfiguring them within the local context. Similarly, this chapter will explore another possible response to the historical context of a globalised filmmaking and film-watching culture: That is, the conscious and overt activation of certain ‘universal’ myths or motifs within the narrative structure of a film, together with the partial or complete erasure of local or national markers.

The two films, Chris Noonan’s *Babe* (1995) and Rolf de Heer’s *Bad Boy Bubby* (1994), each articulate particular forms and expressions of the universality/particularity interpenetration written about by Robertson. They exhibit two differing ways of transcending the national by appealing to the universal in their search to discover, or perhaps manufacture, in Harvey’s words, ‘some kind of eternal truth’. Both films constantly and consciously push for expanded audience accessibility, avoiding, for the most part, any direct

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<sup>577</sup> Roland Robertson, ‘Social Theory, Cultural Relativity and the Problem of Globality’ in ed. Anthony D. King, *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, Macmillan Education Ltd, Houndsmills, 1991, p. 73.

<sup>578</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1989 p. 292.

<sup>579</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, sixth edition, 1995.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.



confrontation with particular historical, national or ethnic realities. Both films, through their narrative and production strategies exhibit a successfully oblique navigation of the paradoxes of their historical moment in the mid 1990s.

These radically different films share an adherence to the basic ‘coming-of-age’ plot so prevalent in earlier Australian cinema,<sup>581</sup> yet unlike many Australian coming-of-age narratives, they present moral structures that stress transcendence, the importance of the individual, and the primacy of ‘becoming’ over ‘being’. Unlike so many Australian narratives of the past, these stories are quite opposed to a model of the world where survival is all, resistance is useless and ideals are to be surrendered to reality. In many respects, these positive depictions of individual agency and triumph are enabled precisely *because* the films avoid direct confrontation with the historical, ethnic and national realities out of which they emerge.

This requires a questioning of their status as national narratives, and a careful interrogation of the authenticity of their proposed models of individual freedom and emancipation. In what ways do these films function to avoid confrontation with historical, ethnic and national realities through a focus on what is ahistorical, transnational and universal? Are these authentic models of freedom and resistance to be appropriated at will by audiences of any nationality, and what might be the limitations of such narrative strategies? If, as Levi-Strauss has argued, myths serve the purpose of providing logical models capable of overcoming contradictions,<sup>582</sup> then what contradictions are these particular narratives striving to overcome? And how successful are they?

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<sup>581</sup> For an overview of coming-of-age themes, see Felicity Cogan, ‘Rites of Passage’, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, op.cit., pp. 411-414.

<sup>582</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’, *Structural Anthropology*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 229.



## ***Babe: Coming of Age in Nowhere-land***

*And what, on the contrary is becoming more and more important is that we should learn to see through all the differences to the common themes that have been there all the while, that came into being with the first emergence of ancestral man from the animal levels of existence, and are with us still. – Joseph Campbell<sup>583</sup>*

It is significant to note that both the producer George Miller and director Chris Noonan of *Babe* are Joseph Campbell enthusiasts. They altered the original story (from the eponymous children's book by English author Dick King Smith) in accordance with Campbell's narrative principles.<sup>584</sup> Campbell's influence is easily perceived when one starts looking for it. The story quite obviously follows the trajectory of the hero who comes of age, and in doing so, it stresses the universal nature of its structure so strongly that it shies away from any kind of spatial or temporal particularity.

David Harvey has argued that a nostalgia for common values is one psychological response to time space compression and sensory overload. This 'Excessive simplification ... either in the presentation of self or the interpretation of events',<sup>585</sup> is thus neither apolitical nor ahistorical, emerging from a very particular kind of anxiety. A narrative which makes direct claims to 'universality', as does *Babe*, is claiming for itself a power that seems above politics and beyond the criticisms of history. Yet it is necessarily deeply embroiled in the ideology and the economics of its day.

We shall first look at this appropriation of universal myths, and then examine the film's use of landscape, for it is in this area that it represents an enormous leap away from the kinds of films we have previously seen emerging from the Australian cinematic field.

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<sup>583</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live by*, 1993, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, p. 24.

<sup>584</sup> Chris Noonan, quoted in interview with Scott Murray, 'Life Lessons', *Cinema Papers* No.107, December 1995, p. 54.

<sup>585</sup> D. Harvey, op.cit., p. 286.



## **The Coming of Age Narrative**

*Babe* tells the story of a piglet who rises above his destiny as Christmas dinner ham. This little pig refuses to accept the given order of the farmyard. He learns to round up sheep, employing a method of tact and diplomacy rather than aggression and intimidation. Overcoming numerous obstacles – a hostile sheepdog, a malicious cat, and an existential crisis – Babe becomes so good at his new job that he wins the national sheepdog trials. In the process he manages to break down the prejudices and hatred that previously existed between the sheepdogs and the sheep of the Hoggett Farmyard.

The film begins with a scene showing Babe as one of many suckling piglets nestled against a sow. He is an unindividuated, baby animal. He does not even have a name, as his mother calls all her offspring ‘Babe’. In order to fulfil his destiny, the piglet must be separated from his mother, he must create his own identity, and he must discover the true nature of the world in which he exists.

The reality of this world is essentially unpleasant. The farmyard has a rigid hierarchy, one in which a small pig ranks lowly. The dogs and the cat occupy the upper strata, being allowed inside the house with ‘the master’, Farmer Hoggett (James Cromwell). Babe, continually meeting with the attitude that ‘pigs are definitely stupid’, must stand outside, gazing in the window with the other lesser creatures like the ducks and sheep. The reason given for this exclusion, ‘That’s the way things are’, becomes a repeated phrase in the film, a taunt which inflames Babe’s desire to effect change.

The most sinister aspect of Babe’s world, however, is the fact that he exists to be eaten. For a long time he manages to avoid facing this reality, euphemised as it is by the mythology that pigs are taken away in trucks to ‘a perfect place...a place so wonderful no pig ever came back.’ The Hoggett farmhouse is quaintly reminiscent of the gingerbread house in the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel. The pretty little house contains warning signs such as meat hooks, a cleaver, and a plaque on the wall which reads, ‘What you eat today walks and talks tomorrow’, which might just as easily read, ‘What walks and talks today, you eat tomorrow’. Like the witch in the tale of Hansel and Gretel, Esme Hoggett (Magda Szubanski) is out to fatten up the little pig. Setting down a bowl of special food for Babe, she leers at him, ‘Who’s going to grow up to be a big fat pig? You are!’ The camera



zooms in unsympathetically on her own fat face, and we know that she has plans to use him for her culinary purposes, and her own 'fattening up'.

If we are left in any doubt about Babe's intended fate, the three little field mice who announce each scene, clarify it for us. 'Pork is a nice sweet meat', they cry in their humourously shrill voices. Esme will later echo this phrase as she plans Christmas dinner, but Babe unknowingly escapes the table, being bypassed in favour of poultry. As his friend Ferdinand, the duck, laments the loss of Rosanna, the unlucky piece of poultry, Babe begins to see the nastiness of farm life, but still seems naïve and blinkered as to how it affects him.

It is only when it is spelt out for him by the deliciously nasty cat that Babe confronts the reality of his fate. In a soft, lisping voice she tells him that:

*'Pigs don't have a purpose... Why do the bosses keep a pig? The fact is that animals that don't seem to have a purpose really do. The bosses have to eat. It's probably the most noble purpose of all when you come to think about it... sooner or later every pig gets eaten. That's the way the world works.'*

His innocence lost, Babe runs out into the rain. Shivering in a graveyard he realises that his entire family has probably been eaten. The most shocking thought of all is that even the whimsical and kind Farmer Hoggett eats pigs. It is here that Babe becomes adult, for he must acknowledge the reality, yet find some way to transcend it.

It is through his relationship with Hoggett that Babe is able to overcome his depression and anxiety. Hoggett rescues the pig from the graveyard, takes him inside the farmhouse and bottle-feeds him. He comforts the disconsolate animal by singing and dancing to him. This unembarrassed performance by the usually taciturn man reestablishes Babe's trust in the farmer. Presumably, the emotional investment displayed by the man to the pig is so great that it is almost inconceivable that he would want to eat the pig. Certainly, he has eaten pigs before, and will possibly eat them again, but this particular pig is too special for that. Babe will never escape the knowledge that pigs are for eating, but in this moment of communion, while he watches Hoggett dance for him, he is able to find hope for himself.



In this coming of age narrative, our central character must not only confront the grimness of his species' situation, he must also find an alternate purpose for himself. We see this situation mirrored in the less successful attempts of Ferdinand the duck to escape his place on the dinner table by avoiding tasty plumpness (through the cultivation of anorexia!) and performing the wake-up function of a rooster. Apart from providing comic relief, the story of this duck, with his whiny New York accent and Woody Allen anxiety complex, serves to foreshadow Babe's own attempts to escape 'the way things are'. Unfortunately for Ferdinand, even a rooster is not indispensable, and can be replaced by an alarm clock, a turn of events which provokes Ferdinand's anguished speech to Babe:

*'No sooner do I discover my gift than they bring in a machine to do the job. The treachery of it – a mechanical rooster!...I suppose the life of an anorexic duck doesn't amount to much in the broad scheme of things, but Pig, I'm all I've got!'*

Looking in the farmhouse window at the roasted carcass of his friend Rosanna, Ferdinand is told by a cow that 'The only way you'll find happiness is to accept that the way things are is the way things are.' To this he replies, 'The way things are stinks!' The onlooking Babe is inclined to agree.

For Babe, finding a more meaningful purpose to his existence involves the taking on of the role of sheepdog, and transforming it into something congruent with his own set of values and beliefs. Perhaps the best indication of Babe's emerging maturity is his rejection of the sheepdogs' attitude towards the sheep. This involves questioning and ignoring the advice of his best friend Fly, the maternal dog who adopts Babe when her puppies are taken away.

Fly tries to help Babe learn her sheep-rounding technique. 'You have to dominate them', she tells him. 'Make them feel inferior – insult them, bite them. Whatever it takes, bend them to your will.' Babe, however, has already heard the sheep's opinion of dogs, or 'wolves', as they call them, and realises that there are at least two sides to each story. He has 'promised himself he would never think badly of any creature ever again.' When he initially tries to emulate Fly's gruff, demanding method, the sheep laugh at him. It is a style that does not sit well with his personality and nature, and they tell him that 'all a nice little pig like you need do



is ask.’ Consideration and diplomacy are integral to Babe’s unique method of sheep-rounding.

Thus in the true style of the coming of age story, Babe must leave behind his mother (both his real mother, and the quasi-mother, Fly), and must exchange innocence for difficult knowledge. Through a painful process of learning, he becomes an individual with his own set of values, and a unique way of dealing with problems and challenges. He forges for himself a place in a world where he is able not only to escape a lesser fate, but to usefully fulfil an important function. When he wins the national sheepdog trials and farmer Hoggett quietly praises him, saying ‘That’ll do, Pig, that’ll do’, we realise that the ‘babe’ has truly come of age.

### **The Hero Story**

The other universal narrative which this film draws upon, is that of the hero, the chosen individual who possesses unique abilities to bring about change and to improve the lives of his or her fellows. The early scenes in the film are accompanied by a narration that establishes the story as one about a hero:

*‘This is a story about an unprejudiced hog and how he changed our values forever. There was a time, not so long ago, when pigs were accorded no respect except by other pigs. They lived their lives in a cruel and sunless world’.*

The position of the narrator is unspecified. If Babe changed ‘our’ values forever, then who are ‘we’? In the mythical world from which this narrator speaks it is implied that Babe’s own triumph was transferred in some way into a benefit for all pigs. How this is so is left a little hazy. In this mythical universe, did Babe open the way for more pigs to become ‘sheep-pigs’? Were pigs regarded with greater respect after Babe’s win? Were they still primarily raised for human consumption? In spite of these unanswered questions, the story insists that Babe’s achievements were able to transform the status of pigs in general.

The hero, Joseph Campbell notes, is often endowed with special qualities even during the early stages of life.<sup>586</sup> In the beginning sequences of the film, the narrator tells us that, ‘of the thousands of animals in the piggery that day, one was chosen.’ Though the narrator admits that there were no obvious reasons why this

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<sup>586</sup> J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, 1949, p. 319.



particular pig was selected – ‘perhaps it was because he was sad and alone and therefore easier to catch’ – there is still the sense that Babe was a pig with a destiny and a mission. A series of lucky coincidences leads to his final achievements.

Not only is he chosen from many other pigs, to be a prize at a county fair, but Babe’s meeting with Farmer Hoggett is also characterised by the narrator as fraught with significance: ‘The pig and the farmer regarded each other, and for a fleeting moment something passed between them, a faint sense of some common destiny.’ Though Hoggett admits that he doesn’t keep pigs, he wins the baby animal in a game that requires him to guess the pig’s weight. Luck, or some other higher force, conspires to put Babe in the right place and the right time to fulfil his special role.

This destiny is to question the existing order, to challenge the hierarchy, and its inherent inequalities and misconceptions. Rex, the fiercely proud and territorial sheepdog, presents one of the greatest obstacles for Babe in challenging the status quo. In the hierarchy of farm animals, Rex is the supreme authority, the prime upholder of the philosophy of ‘every animal to its proper place’. Babe’s attempts to break into sheep-rounding are therefore extremely threatening to the dog, who finds it insulting to watch a pig performing a dog’s role. Rex says to Fly:

*‘You and I are descended from the great sheepdogs. We carry the bloodline of the ancient Bahoo. We stand for something, and today I watched in shame as all that was betrayed.’*

In order to change the way things are on the farm, Babe must either defy and defeat Rex, or win him over to the new way of operating. Ultimately, Rex’s own proud resistance brings about his downfall, for in anger he fights with Fly and bites his master. A new, humbled Rex is able to cooperate with Babe, making a last-minute mission to find out the secret sheep password that allows Babe to win the trials.

The conclusion of this film brings presents Babe as the hero reconciler. Having overcome numerous obstacles, he has brought together a number of opposing forces and created harmony between them. Not only has he proven that pigs are good for something other than bacon, but he has persuaded both dogs and sheep to



reevaluate their prejudices regarding one another. This is best demonstrated in the final exchange between Rex and the sheep. Rex politely requests the password, accepting the sheep's request to 'treat us civil, no biting, [and] never use the password against any sheep.' It is here that he finally accords them a respect that he has never before shown. The sheep too must unlearn their mistrust and outright dismissal of 'wolves' as 'brutal savages'.

The other major reconciliation brought about by Babe is between animal and human. Tense silence accompanies the final scenes of the film, the competition in which Hoggett and Babe work in unison to round up the sheep. The cooperation between them is a uniting bond, where Hoggett's risk-taking trust pays off. This culminates in the final moment wherein Hoggett and Babe stand quietly side by side while the crowd cheers in the distance. It is a moment of harmony. The cheering crowd is not what matters. Rather, the triumph exists in the vindicated trust between the pig and the man.

It is possible, in this one small moment (and perhaps it is the only moment of this kind) to identify a particularly Australian inflection in the way Babe's triumph is depicted. The soaring music retreats into the background, as does the crowd in the stadium, giving their 'standing ovation'. The two central figures are presented as small, still and quiet. The narrator tells us that Farmer Hoggett 'knew exactly what to say'. His terse praise follows out of barely opened lips: 'That'll do pig. That'll do.' It is this wry understatement, this backing away from an explicit articulation of victory, that points us toward a traditionally Australian way of organising narrative closure. While other cultures may perceive Babe's conclusion as 'quaint' or delightfully 'un-American', an Australian audience is given the opportunity to read this defining moment of the text as 'theirs', a signpost to the meanings preferred by their culture – a culture where winners are well advised to adopt a humble pose and a low-key approach to their own success.

The fact that this film uses the myth of the hero reconciler is certainly relevant to its status as a global narrative. What better myth to use in a global context, than one which questions and defeats prejudice? It is not difficult to extrapolate from this simple children's story an allegory about harmonious race relations, about tolerance, acceptance of difference, and the importance of communication.



Another allegory one might draw – and drawing a long bow perhaps – is that *Babe* is a myth about the need for creative re-skilling in a global economy that requires a flexible labour force! As Liz Ferrier has argued in passing, Babe’s ‘warm fuzzy’ managerial approach is in keeping with the corporate ethos of the 1990s, with its attempt to achieve productivity through ‘consultation and co-operation, and the devolution of responsibility to workers’.<sup>587</sup> Seen as a metaphor both for racial integration and workplace diplomacy, this narrative stresses the need for individual solutions to what could be seen as quite clearly collective problems.

Tara Brabazon has argued that the protagonists of films like *Muriel’s Wedding*, *Babe* and even *My Brilliant Career* are successful only ‘through being hyperindividualistic’.<sup>588</sup> She writes that:

*Collective solutions to their problems, reaching beyond specific concerns with class, gender or species, were not pondered. These outcomes make the political field of these films highly ambivalent.*<sup>589</sup>

In the world of *Babe*, by making one little pig a ‘hero’, numerous contradictions are seemingly overcome. A cruel hierarchical structure is legitimised by the mobility of one lucky pig who manages to become a member (albeit a ‘polite’ one) of the carnivorous and exploitative elite. If the structure of this myth is transferred out of its fairytale universe, it is one which offers a limited kind of hope that lies only in the possibility of individual self-renovation.

Fredric Jameson, at the conclusion of his book, ‘Postmodernism’, tries to imagine a new kind of political art that transcends the national and the local:

*...the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say to its fundamental object – the world space of multinational capital – at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at*

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<sup>587</sup> Liz Ferrier, ‘Vulnerable Bodies: Creative Disabilities in Contemporary Australian Film’, *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, ed. Ian Craven, Frank Cass, London, 2001, p. 68.

<sup>588</sup> Tara Brabazon, ‘A Pig in Space? Babe and the Problem of Landscape’, *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, op.cit., p. 153.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid.



*present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spatial scale.*<sup>590</sup>

*Babe* makes no claims to being a piece of political art, yet with its attempts to invoke the ‘universal’ moral structures of myth, it must be interrogated in terms of these claims to power. The film’s attempts to evade geographical, social and ethnic specificities while utilising a ‘deep’ hero story, suggest an implicit kind of ‘global cognitive mapping’. Yet by avoiding the real, and its specific dimensions of power inequality, the film slips from grasp, failing as inspirational text for both individual and collective subjects.

### **Nowhere-ville**

Although in many respects an Australian film, *Babe* is an example of one of numerous new films that are difficult to classify in national terms – a trend which will be discussed a little later. Based on a book by English writer Dick King Smith, *Babe* is directed and produced by Australians, shot in country New South Wales made to look like rural England, with actors both Australian and American, and made with US financial backing.<sup>591</sup> These conditions of production and distribution together with the narrative content and style make this film a prime illustration of the operations of global narrative.

It is interesting, in terms of globalisation, to hear producer George Miller speak of how the film came into being:

*‘In 1985, I was flying to London – my third trip in a matter of months – to record the score of Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome with the London Philharmonic. By sheer luck, I awoke bolt upright over India. I surfed the audio and came across the Children’s Program. A woman was reviewing children’s books...’*<sup>592</sup>

The idea for this film is conceived in the air, in neither one place nor another. In many regards this might be seen as a symbolic precursor for the project and the way it operates as a transnational text.

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<sup>590</sup> F. Jameson, op.cit., p. 54.

<sup>591</sup> S. Murray, interview with Chris Noonan and George Miller, ‘Life Lessons’, *Cinema Papers*, No.107, December 1995, pp. 8-10 & p. 53.



The look of the film is decidedly 'fairytale'. George Miller has actually stated that this was intentional, that he '...wanted to shoot the film as if it came out of the pages of a storybook.'<sup>593</sup> The farmyard is definitely English in flavour – no Australian sheep farm would ever be so tiny or lush. The house, already observed as reminiscent of the Hansel and Gretel fairytale, is quaintly pretty. This use of a fairytale setting makes the film at once recognisable to all those children (and adults) around the world who have been raised on Disney, Grimm's fairytales, and other European folklore. Though this requires some cursory experience of Western children's literature, it is a device that allows a broad range of audience sectors to plug in to the story.

But where do Australian audiences plug in to this fairytale landscape? Brabazon argues that if Australian cinema has traditionally been, in Gibson's words, 'under the spell of some spirit of the land', then *Babe* represents a definite breaking of this spell.<sup>594</sup> The film's landscape '...is a metonymy for a significant shift in Australian films' and a '...complex denial of Australian landscape traditions'.<sup>595</sup> This denial, while opening up a potentially fertile imaginative space, is also a denial of the desire of Australian audiences to recognise themselves or their geography on the screen. This is not a film *for* them. They are dissolved into a global audience, where their attempts to claim any kind of symbolic or cultural ownership of the text will seem merely quixotic.

The use of a pig as central character also operates in such a way as to avoid audience specificity. Babe is a young male animal, yet as a piglet, he exhibits no real gender, class or race characteristics. The use of real animals in the film allows for this generality, even more than in animation, where animals are often drawn with distinctly human qualities, to parody particular types or personalities. Babe, with his good-natured little voice and undefined personality, is a character who draws in audience sympathy and alienates no one.

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<sup>592</sup> G.Miller quoted in op.cit., p. 8.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>594</sup> T. Brabazon, op.cit., p. 155. Brabazon is referring to Ross Gibson, 'Cinema Natura: Landscape In Australian Feature Films', *Framework*, No.22/23 (Autumn 1983), pp. 26-29.

<sup>595</sup> T. Brabazon, op.cit., p. 155.



But perhaps the best way of understanding the manner in which this film operates as a global narrative is by looking the issue of accent. The accents of the characters in this film are diverse and unplaceable. Some are almost American. Others are English, while Magda Szubanski sports a peculiar Irish-tinted lilt. (Ironically, it is Szubanski who gives the Australian audience a small way of taking ownership of the film, with her status as a familiar and popular Australian comedian.) It is with the issue of accent, that we see just how important audience demographics can be to the national ‘flavour’ of a film. It is worth quoting Miller at length on this feature:

*‘Given the large budget, the studio [Universal Studios] wanted the film accessible to American children. Initially, they said they didn’t really mind what the accents were as long as they were accessible. Unfortunately, during the first part of production, the accents were too thick. When the studio started to get nervous about the film, they heard some of the accents and said, “We can’t understand it.” So I had to go over and negotiate the level at which they would work. What we should have had was British accents. Dick King-Smith comes from Yorkshire, and the story is set in England. But we didn’t want to shoot it in Britain, or in the United States. We wanted to shoot it where we live. Of course, had we not had the accents as neutral or as clear as they are now, we certainly would not have ended up with 1800 cinemas in the middle of American summer. We would have been a nice little children’s film with a platform release, probably opening in 300 or 400 cinemas. The film would never have earnt its substantial budget back.’<sup>596</sup>*

This raises an interesting point about globalisation and cinema. All too often, for an Australian film, reaching a ‘global’ audience means simply reaching the all-important US audience. To reach this audience it is often necessary for filmmakers on the peripheries to significantly alter the national flavour of the films they produce. Certainly it exemplifies Jameson’s model of the aesthetic being a response to the limits set by the historical and economic context. In the issue of accent, we see a direct appeal to a ‘universality’ which is merely the ‘particularity’ of a large and important market, an approach imposed upon a film for purely economic reasons.

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<sup>596</sup> G. Miller, quoted in op.cit., loc.cit.



*Babe* then, is an example of a film that presents itself as coming from nowhere in particular in its attempts to appeal to almost anyone, anywhere. Its use of a narrative which contains several universal myths, together with its storytelling strategies that avoid locality, make this an interesting example of the way in which the artistic response can directly negate issues of national origins, while being all the time incredibly conscious of doing so, and of the need to do so. It is this need to do so which is troubling. *Babe* signifies a shift in Australian cinema away from representation of any kind of specificity in either the national or local sense, precisely for purposes of capturing broad and economically significant audiences.

### ***Bad Boy Bubby: Oedipus in Adelaide***

Like *Babe*, *Bad Boy Bubby* tells a story with obvious roots in the mythic narratives of western culture. This time the familiar structures are those found in the stories of the ‘wild child’ and in the Oedipal legend. Like *Babe*, *Bubby* transcends his disadvantaged origins, achieving success within a location that is at once strange and familiar. As with *Babe*, any obvious local or national markers are erased from view. An initial examination of this film’s ways of appropriating the mythic narrative structures will then be followed by a discussion of the film as an example of a relatively recent and uniquely Australian narrative tradition: the story of the creatively disabled hero.

### **The Myth of the Wild Child**

The occurrence of the ‘wild child’ has been reported in various cultures and at different times in history. It is embodied in stories as varied as Rudyard Kipling’s Mowgli tales, the Tarzan stories, and films like Werner Herzog’s *The Enigma of Kaspar Houser* (1974), Francois Truffaut’s *L’enfant Sauvage* (1969), and more recently Michael Apted’s *Nell* (1994). The children in such stories have grown up outside of normal human society; sometimes being reared in the jungle by wolves, other times having been imprisoned in suburban basements by psychotic parents.

Some might argue that the fascination of these cases lies with their ability to suggest answers to the nature/nurture debate that continues to underlie much research in psychology and sociology; our eyes fix upon the wild child as he or she encounters the world because we feel it may suggest to us why we are the way



we are, and what the boundaries are between the innate and the social. Equally interesting, however, is a reading of such films as offering audiences a vivid metaphor for the confusion they feel at the rapid social, economic and cultural transformations that must now be navigated in a rapidly globalising world. The wild child's experience of a confusing, desperate, accelerated, and often unsuccessful search for meaning and identity in a new world can be seen as an allegory for the way even 'normal' people are struggling to make sense, struggling to navigate their accelerated journey from innocence to knowing. We see a peculiar version of this journey in Rolf de Heer's cult film *Bad Boy Bubby*.

'Bubby' (Nicholas Hope) is a thirty-five year old man who has spent his entire life in the damp basement of a deserted warehouse. His existence consists of being alternately punished and rewarded by his cruel and hideously twisted mother Flo (Claire Benito). She beats him, forces him to stare at the wall for endless hours, and has sex with him. She keeps him a prisoner by donning a gas mask each time she walks out the door, telling him that the air outside is dangerous and will kill him if he leaves. For the first twenty minutes of this film, the audience is trapped with Bubby in his concrete prison, a classic experience of the 'cinema of cruelty'. The harsh lighting, the sounds of dripping taps and the close focus upon Bubby and Flo's unhealthy-looking naked bodies and unmade-up faces enhance the claustrophobia of these scenes. This is hell.

In a strange way, however, this is also a paradise for Bubby. His mother pours hot milk over his shredded white bread and sugar, and he eats with pleasure. He gets to sleep in her bed, fondling her enormous breasts while she has sex with him and lovingly tells him what a 'good boy' he is. Bubby's life is not complicated by any difficult decisions, for his entire existence is organised for him, and his needs are satisfied, albeit in the most rudimentary way, by 'Mom'.

The unexpected arrival of Bubby's 'Pop', Harold (Ralph Cotterill), intrudes upon this warped relationship between mother and son. Harold returns after thirty-five years of unexplained absence, and wishes to resume a relationship with Flo. He is surprised, and not altogether thrilled, to learn that he has a son. Pop wants Mom all to himself, and finds his son's infantile mimicry unsettling. The development of his parents' new and bawdy relationship means that Bubby is thrown out of his mother's bed and suddenly forced from his sanctuary prison into the outside



world. In anger and bewilderment at his exclusion and abandonment he cling-wraps his drunken parents to death, then leaves the basement in exploration of a world he does not know or understand.

This is a world of cars, trees, pizza and people, a world of endless possibilities, both exhilarating and terrifying. Bubby is a weird and stunted creature shoved from his nest far too late. His journey is not going to be easy, and he may never be 'normal'. The Salvation Army girl who affectionately tells him he is 'just a big weird kid' is closer to the truth than she realises. Bubby is an unsocialised being, a wild child who gives the audience the perfect vehicle through which they can explore the random nature of subjective experience. His journey illustrates the seemingly random ways in which society operates to punish and reward its participants.

The film employs several artistic strategies to emphasise the fragmented and subjective nature of Bubby's experience. De Heer, who has said that his main character was 'someone who lacked a cohesive visual index', employed 31 different directors of photography to film the individual scenes of Bubby's experience.<sup>597</sup> This has a startling and slightly unsettling effect, highlighting the confusion and bewilderment of Bubby as he encounters the world. It also allows the viewer to freshly perceive each new experience, thereby identifying with the character as he sees things for the first time.

Another innovative technique used to foreground subjectivity can be found in the film's utilisation of 'binaural' sound. A pair of miniaturised radio microphones and transmitters were fixed into Hope's hair, so that every scene was recorded in stereo sound, from his perspective.<sup>598</sup> The discovery of sound is integral to Bubby's experience of the world. After leaving the excruciatingly barren sound environment of the basement, he is confronted with a cacophony of sounds, both harsh and exquisite. Bubby is naturally musically oriented. He is transfixed by music and able to improvise to it with the band he joins. The effect of the binaural sound is to place viewers inside Bubby's aural perspective, inviting them to share his discovery of sound.

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<sup>597</sup>A. Dzenis, Film Review of *Bad Boy Bubby*, *Cinema Papers*, October 1994, No.101, p. 63.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid.



These techniques, together with a narrative showing Bubby's social and moral evolution, suggest that the self is a product of outside forces and experiences, the result of social interaction and mediation. When he emerges from his basement, Bubby is the epitome of the Tabula Rasa, the blank-slated giant infant. He has knowledge of a few things, such as cockroaches, cats and the concepts of punishment and reward, but apart from this scanty information, he is an innocent. What he becomes in the outside world is a direct result of the things that happen to him, the people he meets and the way they treat him. The film refuses to present the world as either a good or bad place, suggesting instead that no such totalising generalisations can be made. De Heer says that:

*'The world is funny and tragic, ugly and beautiful, spiteful and forgiving, loving and hopeful, honest and hypocritical. That's also how Bubby finds it and how it deals with him. The world, or rather the people within it, teach Bubby how to be.'*<sup>599</sup>

It could be argued then, that this particular version of the wild child story is intent on stressing the importance of environment and experience upon the formation of identity and personality.

The story of the wild child is, in many regards, merely an exotic version of the 'coming of age' narrative. While the wild child operates with a severe handicap, he or she must go through the basic steps outlined in the coming of age story. These steps involve undergoing certain rituals or ordeals in order to come into maturity; the development of self-knowledge; and the development of a set of coherent moral values. Central to Bubby's formation as an effective and unified subject, is his adoption of an intelligent moral structure. Taught by his mother that 'Jesus is watching you' and that his actions are punishable by a cruel god, he is terrified when he comes upon a crucifix statue in a church. Despite the fact that the church is in a state of incomplete renovation, the atmosphere immediately signals to Bubby that he is in a terrifying and holy place. The light shines golden through a stained glass window, and a pipe organ is playing with piercing, insistent loudness. Fumbling his way up to the organist, Bubby tells him, 'Jesus can see everything I do and he's going to beat me brainless.'

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<sup>599</sup>Director's statement in press kit, quoted in Ibid.



The organist (Norman Kaye), who is also a nuclear scientist, sees that Bubby is an individual in need of moral assistance. He takes him on a tour of a nuclear plant, and standing overlooking the huge tubes and machines, explains to Bubby, what is a strangely barren yet empowering philosophy. He delivers this sermon in a quiet voice:

*'See, no-one's going to help you Bubby, because there isn't anyone out there. No one. We're all just complicated arrangements of atoms and sub-atomic particles. We don't live, but our atoms do move about in such a way as to give us identity and consciousness. We don't die. Our atoms just rearrange themselves. There is no God. There can be no God. It's ridiculous to think in terms of a superior being, an inferior being maybe, because we who don't even exist arrange our lives with more order and harmony than God ever arranged the earth. We measure, we plot, we make wonderful music. We are the architects of our own existence. What a lunatic concept to bow down before a god who slaughters millions of innocent children, who slowly and agonisingly starves them to death, beats them, tortures them, rejects them. What folly to even think that we should not insult such a god, damn him, think him out of existence. It is our duty to think god out of existence. It is our duty to insult him. Fuck you god! Strike me down if you dare, you tyrant, you nonexistent fraud. It is the duty of all human beings to think god out of existence. Then we have a future because then and only then do we take full responsibility for who we are. And that's what you must do Bubby. Think god out of existence, take responsibility for who you are.'*

This rather didactic little polemic is interesting in itself. What the film makes of this philosophy is somewhat unclear. Certainly, the conclusion suggests that Bubby has utilised these principles to a certain degree. This speech is important in helping him to shed the harmful religious baggage of his childhood. It is through the principle that he is responsible for his own actions that Bubby learns that though he cannot control everything that happens to him, he has choices regarding the way he responds to his circumstances. Though his existence in the basement was pitiful and deprived, it was accompanied by a complete absence of responsibility. The humanist principles explain to Bubby the double nature of the liberation of living in the world, and in human society; that freedom must be accompanied by self-restraint, personal responsibility and difficult choices. Where



the basement environment was easily negotiated, and in its way, less stressful, the outside world is exhilarating but dangerous.

Perhaps the most important moral lesson Bubby learns is that it is wrong to kill people, no matter what they do to you. Having cling-wrapped to death his own parents, his girlfriend Angel's parents, and an unfortunate cat, he has come to view this as a solution to the cruelty inflicted upon him. Taken gently aside by one of the band members who have befriended him, Bubby is shown pictorial representations of the many racial groups in the world who have persecuted and been persecuted. It is explained to him in simple language the pointlessness of killing. 'No matter what they do to you,' he is told, 'don't become like them. It's not worth it.'

The message here for the viewer is not so much an admonition against violence, although that principle is inherent, but about the choices we have regarding who we become. Just because we are treated with ugliness, violence and cruelty does not mean that we must become like those who inflict these things upon us. Bubby demonstrates how easy it is to mimic mistreatment in his handling of his first cat. The way he treats the cat is an exact re-enactment of the way his mother treats him. He even dresses as his mother to punish the cat, and repeats her phrases of admonishment word for word. As the story progresses Bubby learns that mimicry is not the only way to behave – copying someone else's behaviour may not be the correct way of dealing with a situation. He begins to develop a real compassion for cats, where previously they were only a means for him to exert control, existing as he did in a situation of otherwise complete powerlessness. Bubby's transforming attitude towards animals reveals his progressive journey away from being animalistic towards a genuine humanity.

In one of the most moving and surprising moments in this film, we realise that this 'big weird kid' has made an important step towards becoming truly human; he has learnt to tell his story. Bubby is adopted by a struggling rock band and proves a promising addition to their repertoire. Against the backdrop of their music he creates a spontaneous narrative which draws heavily on his unique ability for mimicry. Combining phrases of praise and insult that he has received, Bubby is able to make sense of these, and pass judgement about the cruelty he has received. While he howls and shouts and sings we have the sensation that Bubby



has crossed the line between being a passive, imitating, recipient of experience, to being the creator of meaning in his own life. His songs are a way of creating coherency among the chaos of subjective experience, and they help him to stabilise his sense of identity.

Interestingly, it is when he creates a story about his life, bringing together the various threads of his experience, the unusual connections and unique insights into the twisted nature of everyday life, that Bubby becomes something of a cult hero. It is his ability to create a commentary on his life that sets him apart and makes him special. Though the young, rowdy pub audiences don't completely understand what Bubby is saying, they sense authenticity in his monologues. The visceral poetry Bubby throws out to them captures the diverse spirits of the oppressed and the oppressor, making him the charismatic channeler of unspeakable social truths. Bubby's talent also brings the band a level of financial success, allowing him to pay his way legitimately instead of robbing banks.

### **The Oedipal Narrative**

*Bad Boy Bubby* is a film that has obvious and close ties to the classic Oedipal narrative, the story by Sophocles of a man who cannot escape his destiny of killing his father and marrying his mother. Bubby's attachment to his mother is intense and complex and it is the advent of his father that disrupts the relationship and impels him to explore the world outside. After killing his parents, Bubby tries to take on the identity of 'Pop', and after a number of adventures finds sanctuary with a woman who is really the good-fairy version of his own witch-like mother.

Joseph Campbell, drawing heavily on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, speaks of the Oedipal complex, calling it the 'tragicomic triangle of the nursery'. He writes that it is:

*...the son against the father for the love of the mother. Apparently the most permanent dispositions of the human psyche are those that derive from the fact that, of all animals we remain the longest at the mother's breast... Thus the first object of the child's hostility is identical with the first object of its love, and its first ideal (which thereafter is retained as the unconscious basis of all images of bliss, truth, beauty and perfection) is that of*



*the dual unity of the Madonna and Bambino.*<sup>600</sup>

The parallels between such a description and Bubby's own fixation with uniting with the mother figure and overcoming the father figure are obvious. The basic narrative structure however, differs from the story of Oedipus, as told, for example, in Pasolini's *Edipo Re* (1967). In that story, the son's desire for his mother, and killing of his father, results in a tragic resolution wherein Oedipus gouges out his eyes and wanders desolate in the knowledge of what he has done. Bubby however, manages to destroy one version of the Oedipal relationship, in order to set up another one in which he is compensated for the damage done to him by his natural mother. The most hideous kind of mother-son relationship is replaced by a quasi-adult relationship in which Bubby receives proper nurturing and protection.

As strange as it seems, Bubby's grotesque mother is in many ways 'retained as the unconscious basis of all images of bliss, truth, beauty and perfection', for he cannot escape his early imprinting and is captivated by women who resemble his mother. Large, blonde women with big breasts are the only ones he wants, and he rejects a number of attractive women because of their 'tiny tits'. His happiest, most loved moments have been while he is fondling his mother's breasts, and it is a formative experience he may never overcome. His attachment to Angel (Carmel Johnson) is initially based on the fact that her breasts match the blueprint set for him by his mother, and upon seeing them he states, 'Them be perfection... They be beautiful... like Mom.'

Bubby's relationship with Angel bears special attention. He has not been out of the basement for long before he begins to glimpse her in numerous places, through a shop window, in a pizza parlour, at an Indian restaurant. Bubby is attracted immediately to this woman who bears a remarkable likeness to his mother. When he finally meets her, it is while she is in her nurse's uniform taking care of severely disabled people. With her firm, maternal manner she takes him in to the hostel, giving him a bed and letting him join in with the group's activities. She gently persuades him to drop his 'Pop' persona and let her see the more vulnerable Bubby. She allows him to see her breasts if he will 'be Bubby'. She does this, ostensibly, in her role as a mental health professional concerned with

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<sup>600</sup> J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, op.cit., pp. 5-6.



seeing the 'real' Bubby. Yet it is curious that in order to have a relationship with Angel, Bubby must again be reduced to his infantile persona.

The romantic relationship that develops between Angel and Bubby is, necessarily, skewed. Angel is a mature, socially adept, professional woman, while Bubby will always be an odd scarred child. There is a sense of some equality, however, when it becomes apparent that Angel too, has been the victim of cruel parents. The scene in which she takes Bubby to her parents' house for dinner, is slightly surreal in its treatment of these self-righteous, religious people. They are so ugly in their twisted rage towards their daughter who has, for unknown reasons, disappointed them terribly. A gold crucifix glows on the crimson curtain behind them as they direct their anger towards Angel's modestly plump weight. Her mother tells her, 'God doesn't like fat people. Fat people are an abomination,' while her father becomes so angry he tells Bubby, 'She's a fat slut.' In this scene Angel becomes the child again, and it is Bubby who defends her against the attacks. Bubby's unique perceptions of physical beauty allow him to love and reassure her, to help her overcome her insecurities and poor self-esteem. There is a sense that such reassurance is a reciprocal element of the relationship, allowing it to expand beyond the mother/son roles which, for the most part, define the partnership.

The other significant element of the Oedipal narrative – the killing of the father – is also a recurrent theme in this film. In its most literal expression, Bubby kills his 'Pop' in anger at the exclusion from his mother's breast and bed. It is interesting too, that Angel's parents must be killed in order for her to be free. Though Bubby is taken aside and told that this is by no means an appropriate response to any kind of cruelty, the humour of the implied murder gives tacit approval to the act, suggesting that maybe some parents deserve to be cling-wrapped! Certainly, the death of her parents seems to free Angel to fully participate in her own Oedipal narrative – that of pairing with a son-figure who also 'mothers' her own delicate ego.

In addition to slaying his biological father, Bubby must also kill off the adopted persona he takes on when he becomes Pop. At one stage he returns in desperation to the basement. Having been bashed, raped and abused he comes back in search of a refuge, feeling defeated and suddenly aware of his status as a misfit. Lying in the chalk outline of his mother's corpse, drawn by the police when they found her



suffocated, he searches for comfort, saying ‘Bubby don’t fit no more out there.’ His solution is to abandon his own identity and take on that of Pop. Donning Pop’s clothes, sticking hair on his face, and imitating his gruff voice and mannerisms, Bubby feels confident to face the world once more.

The problem with this is that Bubby can never completely become Pop, and though Pop’s toughness may protect him from being so easily hurt, it is Bubby’s qualities of childlikeness and gentleness that make him truly lovable. He must learn that identity is not as simple as taking on the costume of another person, rather it is a matter of using one’s own experiences and knowledge to create an authentic self. Pop must be rejected, exorcised, and this is achieved through a mixture of Angel’s gentle insistence, and the creation of the musical narrative through which Bubby seems to expel the demon of Pop.

The other father figure that Bubby must slaughter is that of the Christian god. Crucifixes have been used to terrify and subdue Bubby. His mother has told him that the beheaded crucifix on their kitchen wall can see everything he does and will punish his wrongdoings. He is continually admonished that upon leaving the basement, ‘If the poison don’t get you, then God will!’ The nastier aspects of Christianity are also suggested by the fact that Pop arrives wearing a minister’s dog collar, and admits that he is a part-time preacher. The narrative implausibility of this fact seems to suggest that the film is merely trying to reinforce the connection between the jealous, threatening father, and the influence of religion. As unsatisfactory as the humanist organist’s sermon may be, it is perhaps the simplest way for Bubby to deal with the harsh religious imagery that has so tormented him. To think God out of existence, to kill the idea of him, is Bubby’s method of taking control of his own life. ‘Fuck you God!’ is also the appropriate defiant response to Angel’s parent’s twisted theology. The negative paternalism inherent in the kind of religion Bubby has been brought up with requires him to kill off this father figure in addition to all the others he has slain.

This particular Oedipal narrative resolves its dilemma by replacing the bad mother with the good mother. Oedipus may not be able to escape the destiny of marrying his mother, but he can find his way back to the paradisaal garden to the ‘dual unity of the Madonna and Bambino.’ The final image in the film shows Bubby playing under a sprinkler with his own two children. Angel sits to the side, holding a



tabby kitten, watching over them, the mother of two infants and one child-man. This family idyll occurs on a tiny patch of green lawn and trees in the middle of a junk-yard, which exists at the foot of a huge factory sign, the letters of which spell 'Boral Plastics'. This is the house where Angel's parents used to live, before they were mysteriously, mercifully, cling-wrapped to death. It has been transformed into a fragile oasis, shabby and imperfect yet resisting the barren industrial wasteland that threatens to engulf it. It is paradise reclaimed. The film can now conclude because now Bubby has found a safe place to be and someone to take care of him. He has found the mother/lover to heal the wounds of his tragic childhood, he has his own children, and he has found the means to express himself through his music.

### **Creative Disability: A Happy Ending, Australian-style?**

Liz Ferrier has identified a subgenre of recent Australian films (predominantly from the 1990s) in which an artistic or creative protagonist, disabled either physically, mentally or socially, must overcome enormous obstacles (usually including bad parenting), eventually finding success and social recognition through their creative performance.<sup>601</sup> Ferrier includes *Bad Boy Bubby* in her discussion, which also draws on films as disparate as *Sweetie* (1989, Jane Campion), *Proof* (1991, Jocelyn Moorhouse), *Strictly Ballroom* (1992, Baz Luhrmann), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994, Stephen Elliot), *Muriel's Wedding* (1994, P.J. Hogan), *Cosi* (1996, Mark Joffe), *The Piano* (1993, Jane Campion) and *Shine* (1996, Scott Hicks). In these films, which often draw on popular genre conventions, the disability of the protagonist is actually constitutive of their creativity; they succeed because of it, not in spite of it, and their success does not rescue them from the conditions which set them apart.<sup>602</sup>

While acknowledging that the 'embattled artist' motif is not unique to Australian film narratives, Ferrier notes that the Australian variants of such stories reveal particular patterns that are embedded within the Australian narrative traditions dealing in madness, alienation, disablement and the grotesque.<sup>603</sup> These

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<sup>601</sup> Liz Ferrier, op.cit.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid.



contemporary films rework those traditions in such a way as to make them accessible to wider audiences. The protagonists, for instance:

*...are still relatively passive, compared with American action heroes, and are presented as powerless against the forces of nature and society, but they succeed in their own way, sometimes becoming marketable commodities themselves.*<sup>604</sup>

The successes achieved by these characters, and the upbeat conclusions such successes allow for the films, may seem out of keeping with the tradition of downbeat or ambiguous resolutions. Upon examination, however, these successes are revealed to have far less narrative significance than the disabilities themselves, which are central to the ontology and the creativity of the characters. When success comes to these characters, in terms of a wider audience for their performance, and the economic rewards this entails, it is always as an incidental byproduct of the characters' (usually compulsive) creative activity.

While *Bad Boy Bubby* may seem to set the outer limit point within the group of films, we can see that it does indeed fit the pattern: a badly parented protagonist, vulnerable and damaged, is able, through his creative ability, to gain recognition and a wider audience. He succeeds because of his disadvantages, his weirdness, and does not transcend his Oedipal complex. Bubby is allowed his happy ending because he remains, essentially, weird and damaged. This is an upbeat conclusion – Australian style.

### **Arthouse Cinema and the Universal Narrative**

This film manages, unlike *Babe*, to retain a distinctly local accent while gesturing towards a universal mythic structure. While not iconically Australian, there is no doubt to an Australian audience, that this is our culture, albeit seen from a skewed outsider's (Bubby's) perspective. Not only is there a protagonist who creatively acts out his marginalisation, as discussed above, but this weird/disabled Australian hero, upheld for sociological scrutiny, also participates in a certain tradition of the national cinema.

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<sup>604</sup> Ibid., p. 65.



Tom O'Regan, writing of Australian film in general, has observed this 'othering of the Australian' wherein the local audience is invited to play anthropologist to its culture.<sup>605</sup> He writes:

*Every feature of Australian storytelling discussed so far 'fits' to some degree this othering of the Australian: its situation between melodrama and the art film, its centring types and social observation, its freaks and monsters, and its subsidiary stream of excoriations of Australian lifeways. All these turn on establishing relations of alterity between the audience and what is on-screen.*<sup>606</sup>

*Bad Boy Bubby* fits this categorisation well, for it does not allow the audience an easy and uncomplicated self-recognition, yet there is a direct dialogue between the film and the local (national) audience. The film compels its audience to observe the bizarre spectacle of this particular wild child – this freak and his monstrous mother. It then asks its audience to question the culture Bubby encounters – 'our culture', 'us'; and also to question the film's representation of it. In its very complexity, this film's relationship to Australian culture is intense and passionate – sometimes passionately disapproving. This 'othering' of Bubby, and of the Australian culture he must learn to live in, can therefore be seen to be participating in a very particular tradition by which the national cinema speaks to the nation, seen in films as diverse and seemingly dissimilar as *They're a Weird Mob* (1966, Michael Powell), *Muriel's Wedding* (1994, P.J. Hogan), *Don's Party* (1976, Bruce Beresford), *Crocodile Dundee* (1986, Peter Faiman) and *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972, Bruce Beresford).

Filmed in Adelaide, *Bubby* offers a view of that city which avoids any easy identification – nowhere to be seen are the cathedrals and parks, the genteel suburbs, or the festive Glenelg beach. Instead we see back streets, deserted docklands, industrial wasteland, and out-of-the-way pubs and restaurants. De Heer has said of the film that it is:

*'...neither consciously or unconsciously Australian – or not Australian. It began to come to me when I was living in places like Pyrmont and Ultimo in Sydney – and several of the scenes were conceived for Sydney locations. So it*

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<sup>605</sup> T. O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, op.cit., p. 250.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid, p. 250.



*grew like that.*<sup>607</sup>

The invitation is there (as it is in all Australian films), however, to try to locate, to attempt identification of the location.

The same applies in the kinds of characters who are presented. Most recognisably Australian are the ocker blokes in the band Bubby sings with, the aggressive macho policeman, and the aboriginal women who are being harassed by the police when Bubby is taken to the police station. This is, however, a film that delights in subverting stereotypes; the church organist is an atheist, the Salvation Army collectors dig into their money-tins to buy pizza, and the girl with cerebral palsy is attributed an overt sexuality. This film does contain elements of Australian society that are iconic, but there are also many examples of the iconoclastic. It is this playful and energetic dialogue between the strange and the familiar, which makes *Bubby* so engaging for a local audience.

Interestingly though, this is a film that slots quite well into a European arthouse tradition, a fact that has led O'Regan to note in passing that '*Bad Boy Bubby* indigenizes the Eastern European art film.'<sup>608</sup> An Australian/Italian co-production, *Bad Boy Bubby* manages to operate both as a specifically Australian text and as an arthouse film with appeal for audiences more likely to seek a 'foreign' film. Its sometimes European 'feel' is no doubt contributed to by the use of a number of Italian cinematographers, who have employed the use of incredibly long takes in constricted urban contexts. Although *Bad Boy Bubby* appropriates universal narratives such as the Oedipal story, and the 'coming of age' story, and although it uses cinematic strategies which align it with European 'alternative' cinema, the fact remains that this film is able to retain its local accent, both in the literal and figurative senses.

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<sup>607</sup> Rolf de Heer, interviewed by Andrew L Urban in *Cinema Papers*, 101, October 1994.

<sup>608</sup> T. O'Regan, op.cit., p. 214.



## Chapter 7B: *Babe*, *Bad Boy Bubby* and the Field of Australian Film

I will now situate these two very different films within the national and global cinematic fields, attempting to identify the differing amounts and kinds of symbolic and financial capital they have accumulated. The directors of these films will also be discussed in an effort to position them within the field, and we will again see how the cinematic field, more than any other cultural field, requires its participants to have an explicit concern with the financial aspects of their creation.

### ***Babe*: Economic and Critical Success**

*Babe demonstrated the feasibility of Australian global filmmaking at the high-end of the spectrum utilising the digital 'revolution'. It showed that it was possible to make a universal story while retaining creative control, in spite of having to make concessions to North America and international audiences. – Tom O'Regan & Rama Venkatasawmy*<sup>609</sup>

*Babe* was extremely successful at the international box office, grossing more than US \$240 million in its first year.<sup>610</sup> The film's appeal was broad, proving itself popular with adults, children, and even such difficult audience segments as the gay population and the young adult sector.<sup>611</sup> It is a film which illustrates the ability of the new global narratives to transcend locality, albeit through the established Hollywood vectors of promotion and distribution.

The only film in this study to qualify as an international blockbuster, *Babe* occupies an important position within the Australian cinematic field, a position of both economic and critical success that is rarely occupied, yet always present as a desired and aimed-for possibility. In its comment on the film, 'The Oxford Companion to Australian Film' mentions another international blockbuster, *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), linking the two films in terms of their

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<sup>609</sup> T. O'Regan & R. Venkatasawmy, 'A Tale of Two Cities: *Dark City* and *Babe: Pig in the City*', *Twin Peaks: Australian & New Zealand Feature Films*, ed. Deb Verhoeven, Damned Publishing, Melbourne, 1999, p. 193.

<sup>610</sup> Rick Thompson, 'Babe' entry in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, op.cit., p. 25.

<sup>611</sup> C. Noonan, *Cinema papers*, op.cit., loc.cit.



local and international popularity/economic success, and noting the nine-year gap between them.<sup>612</sup>

The gross *Australian* box office of *Babe* was \$36 776 544, while that of *Crocodile Dundee* was \$47 707 045.<sup>613</sup> These represent the second and third highest grossing films of all time in Australia, following closely on the heels of *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), which had an Australian box office gross of around \$55 million.<sup>614</sup>

Unlike *Titanic* and *Crocodile Dundee*, *Babe*'s accrual of huge financial capital was not accompanied by a (relatively) low degree of symbolic capital – the usual scenario for blockbuster products. Almost without exception, national and international critics gave the film lavish praise. Paul Byrnes of the Sydney Morning Herald called it '...the most charming, witty and beguiling Australian film of the year – for any age group.'<sup>615</sup> The New York Post's Michael Medved also named *Babe* 'The year's most enjoyable film, witty sophisticated and wildly inventive.'<sup>616</sup> Despite the fact that children's films are usually overlooked in the Academy Award nominations, *Babe* received 7 nominations and was awarded one Oscar for Achievement in Visual Effects in the 1996 ceremony. Other awards included those from the Film Critics' Circle of Australia for Best Director and Best Music Score; a Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture in the music or comedy section (1996); and was named the Metro Choice Australian Feature Film at the 1996 Australian Teachers of Media Awards.<sup>617</sup>

The position *Babe* occupied in the international cinematic field was therefore one combining a high degree of consecration together with an extremely rich sum of financial capital. This is a difficult combination to deliberately achieve, for to be recognised by the more autonomous sectors of the cultural field requires that a text sublimates its explicit pursuit of political or financial capital. Yet for a film to achieve international blockbuster status, it must usually be made with a degree of

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<sup>612</sup> R. Thompson, op.cit.

<sup>613</sup> 'Top 50 films of all time', *Get The Picture*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, op.cit, p. 220. Figures as at 31 June 1998. Figures not adjusted for inflation.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid.

<sup>615</sup> Paul Byrnes, 'Babe the pig, a real heartbreaker', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7/1295, p. 14.

<sup>616</sup> Michael Medved, *New York Post*, quoted on media release 1995.

<sup>617</sup> For a full listing of *Babe*'s awards, see Appendix II.



such overt calculation. For example, the targeting of particular audience segments, the use of large budgets, big name popular actors and the explicit tapping of reliable genre conventions do not guarantee success, but they are usually necessary ingredients.

Within the global cinematic field, the films that manage this delicate balancing act of richly reaping both symbolic and financial rewards, tend to originate from the peripheries – both geographically and symbolically. These films may actually hail from the far regions of the world cinematic mainstream, or alternatively, their ties with ‘Hollywood’ may actually be quite strong, with their *appearance* of autonomy being (mis)recognised and allowing them to benefit symbolically.

In the case of *Babe*, the film’s ties to Hollywood money were significant, and played important roles in raising the film’s substantial budget (in excess of US\$25 million),<sup>618</sup> and in the way it was marketed, particularly in the US, where adult audiences were not targeted as successfully as in Australia and the UK.<sup>619</sup> As has been previously mentioned in this chapter, Universal Studios dictated a re-voicing of the film in order to make it accessible to American children, and in the interests of attaining an American ‘G’ rating (much more stringent than an Australian ‘G’ rating), forced numerous small dialogue changes. For example, the words ‘hell’ and ‘damn’ were excised from the script.<sup>620</sup>

Yet despite these interferences, by all accounts *Babe* was made with significant autonomy, thanks in large part to location factors and to the assertiveness of Australian producers Kennedy Miller. As Noonan says:

*‘We were at a huge advantage working as a non-American production company, particularly shooting it in Australia. During the shoot not one Universal executive visited the set. I am sure quite a few of them would have liked to come out here for the holiday, but Doug Mitchell [producer for Kennedy Miller], who was basically in charge of dealing with Universal, successfully deflected their attempts. I don’t quite know how he did it, but I was*

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<sup>618</sup> The figure mentioned by Chris Noonan in AFI Forum/Interview with Paul Harris, February 1997. The Budget for *Babe* is put at US\$30 million by the *Internet Movie Database*: <<http://us.imdb.com/Business?0112431.html>> ([28/03/01])

<sup>619</sup> C. Noonan, ‘Makin’ Bacon: Babe’, in *Second Take: Australian Film-makers Talk*, edited by Raffaele Caputo & Geoff Burton, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1999, p. 242.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.



*very grateful he did. Their interferences with us very rarely amounted to anything more than an annoyance, and there were no major changes to the film...it influenced details around the edges, but nothing that really changed the film. We were very lucky. If you've read any of the books about people dealing with the studio system you'll know that we got out of it very, very lightly. I think that was due to [George Miller's] relationship with Tom Pollock...*<sup>621</sup>

It was in his work on another Universal picture, *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) that Miller established contact with Pollock. Noonan's mention of Miller's relationship with this studio executive is a signifier of Miller's enormous accumulated social and symbolic capital gathered over the years through his work directing and producing in Australia and Hollywood.<sup>622</sup> One of the major players in the Australian cinematic field, Miller's production company, Kennedy Miller Productions, is one of the few companies with the resources and connections to attempt big budget films that do not rely heavily on state financing.

As Bourdieu has argued, 'There are economic conditions for the indifference to economy which induces a pursuit of the riskiest positions',<sup>623</sup> and in the case of *Babe*, George Miller's economic and social position within the international cinematic field allowed him to undertake this expensive project which had no guarantee of returning on its investment. The film's risk-taking use and development of new technologies (Animatronics and Computer Generated Images), together with its employment of notoriously difficult live animal actors contributed to its symbolic status as a 'groundbreaking' piece of cinema.

The making of *Babe* entailed so many risks that it could not find a 'completion guarantor' – an insurer against the possibility of the film not getting made. (The studio eventually had to undertake this function itself.) As with investments of all kinds, the greater the risk, the greater the potential pay-out. To be doing something new and untried in a creative sense is to lay claim to the frontiers of the field, frontiers which necessarily gesture towards the more autonomous pole of

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<sup>621</sup> Ibid.

<sup>622</sup> Miller's Credits include as director: *Mad Max* (1979), *Mad Max 2* (1981), *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome* (1985), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992). As producer: *The Year My Voice Broke* (dir. John Duigan, 1987), *Dead Calm* (dir. Phil Noyce 1989) & *Flirting* (dir. John Duigan, 1991).

<sup>623</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 40.



the cultural field. When *Babe* was revealed to be a non-genre film, defying audience segmentation and pushing the limits of filmmaking technology, it fulfilled many of the criteria necessary for it to be deemed not only a financial success, but also worthy to accumulate the spoils of symbolic success.

In terms of the local industry, *Babe* changed the field in terms of what was perceived as possible or desirable within it. As O'Regan and Venkatasawmy have argued, the film not only 'helped kick-start an Australian special effects industry', but its success played a large part in establishing a production mode colloquially referred to as 'Hollywood Downunder'.<sup>624</sup> We now see locally shot studio financed films such as *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001), *Dark City* (Alex Proyas, 1998), *Mission Impossible* (John Woo, 2000), *The Matrix* (Andy & Larry Wachowski, 1999) and of course, the sequel to *Babe*, *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998). Putting aside the question of how 'Australian' these films really are, such productions have become a significant part of the local industry, occupying positions which did not exist before the original *Babe* demonstrated the possibilities of such modes of production.

The particular nature of symbolic success and its relationship to autonomy can be demonstrated through a comparison of *Babe* with its sequel, *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998). This later film was directed by George Miller, and made with a budget nearly three times that of the original (US\$80 million).<sup>625</sup> While utilising the same technologies and central character, this film failed to excite the dominant critics or to make substantial financial profits. This was a darker, scarier film with a controversial 'G' rating, with observers doubting whether it was actually suitable for children.

Quite apart from the film's dystopian tone and overblown style, I believe that the relative failure (in symbolic terms) of this film results from the perception that the sequel was made primarily for profit – a perception that was encouraged by Chris Noonan's refusal to direct and thereby 'flog' the product. As Los Angeles Times Critic Kenneth Turan wrote:

*This sequel is more elaborate, more calculated and more*

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<sup>624</sup> T. O'Regan & R. Venkatasawmy, op.cit., p. 187.

<sup>625</sup> 'Business Data for Babe: Pig in the City', *The Internet Movie Database*, <<http://us.imdb.com/Business?0120595>> [(15/03/02)].



*self-consciously dark than its deservedly loved predecessor. Part of this comes from the inevitable Hollywood reflex to throw money at the follow-up to a success.*<sup>626</sup>

This element of overt calculation is an integral part of the phenomenon of sequel filmmaking or 'franchise filmmaking'. As such, sequel products are at odds with the appearance, or the reality, of a 'pure aesthetic', and are less likely to be recognised by the more autonomous sectors of the field. Where the first film so aptly and freshly demonstrated an alternative to the heteronomous values of 'Hollywood' family films, the second *Babe* film was spoken of in terms of its 'loss of innocence'<sup>627</sup> and 'lack of heart'.<sup>628</sup> These references can be seen as the identification and recognition of the intrusion of heteronomous values. It is the perception of such values, whether or not they reflect the reality, which matters in terms of recognition by the field.

### **Chris Noonan: 'Once you're in bed with the movie moguls, you open yourself up to some terrible diseases!'**<sup>629</sup>

Chris Noonan grew up in Sydney, the son of an author and a book reviewer, both of whom encouraged his precocious filmgoing and filmmaking:

*'I first went to the Sydney Film Festival when I was 16, and the legal age (for admission) was 18.'*<sup>630</sup>

The teenager attended this festival to accompany his prize-winning short film, *Could It Happen Here?*, a spoof on school life filmed at North Sydney High. He later joined the Commonwealth Film Unit and attended the Australian Film and Television School, along with contemporaries Gillian Armstrong and Phil Noyce. After years making documentaries and shorts with Film Australia, Noonan was recruited by Kennedy-Miller studios. Here he wrote and directed various television projects such as *The Cowra Outbreak* (mini-series, 1985), *Vietnam*

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<sup>626</sup> Kenneth Turan, 'Review of *Babe: Pig in the City*', *Los Angeles Times*, 25/11/98.

<sup>627</sup> Ibid.

<sup>628</sup> Louise Keller, Review of *Babe: Pig in the City*, *Urban Cinefile*, <<http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=1835&s=Reviews>> ([15/03/02]).

<sup>629</sup> Chris Noonan, An AFI conversation hosted by Paul Harris, Melbourne, February 1997.

<sup>630</sup> Don Groves, 'Hogging Spotlight', *Variety*, 18-24/9/95, pp. 45-46.



(mini-series, 1987) and *The Riddle of the Stinson* (tele-feature, 1988). *Babe* was Noonan's first feature film, and a project that took seven years to bring to fruition.

Now in his late 40s, Noonan is very much the product of an Australian cinematic field established both to represent the nation and to foster the filmmaker as artist, along the lines of European national cinema: a cultural field structured in the manner of a *field of restricted production*. The qualities of this field are reflected in Noonan's citing of favourite films like Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum* (1979) and in his admission that most of the films he likes are '...films that lots of people haven't heard of and many people haven't seen...' <sup>631</sup>

Chris Noonan's refusal to be involved in the second *Babe* film is indicative of a disposition more oriented towards autonomous cultural production than the disposition demonstrated by George Miller *at that particular historical moment*. The resulting friction and breakdown of association between Noonan and the Kennedy-Miller studios can be characterised in terms of a struggle over the 'imposition of the legitimate mode of cultural production' <sup>632</sup>, with Noonan advocating the practice of filmmaking that is not, at its base, profit-motivated. At an AFI forum in Melbourne, in February 1997, Noonan was reticent to speak of the conflict, noting Kennedy-Miller's 'highly litigious tendencies' <sup>633</sup>, but he did make the following comment about the sequel:

*'Why flog it? It's a perfect story, complete as it is. The only motivation for making a sequel, at least from the Studio's perspective, is money.'* <sup>634</sup>

This is not to imply that Miller himself was overtly motivated by profit motives in making the sequel. The evidence suggests that he takes his role as 'storyteller' very seriously, and that he is an ardent supporter of the national film industry. <sup>635</sup> Miller has been very vocal about his negative experience of *lack of autonomy*

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<sup>631</sup> C. Noonan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>632</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 41.

<sup>633</sup> Cherie Nowlan expressed a similar carefulness about 'going on the record' regarding Kennedy-Miller, reinforcing the impression that this production company wields significant economic, legal and symbolic power within the national cinematic field.

<sup>634</sup> C. Noonan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>635</sup> In April 2001, Miller was appointed AFI patron, and made the following statement: 'Culture drives economies. By our shared narratives, our culture, we declare ourselves to the world and, to this end, there is no more potent force than the moving image.' Quoted in *Filmnet Daily* 4.033 Monday/Tuesday April 3, 2001.



when making *The Witches of Eastwick* for the Warner Bros studio in 1986.<sup>636</sup> Yet his subsequent choices of project, including the current production of yet another *Mad Max* sequel, suggest that he lacks a certain ‘feel for the game’ that would prevent him from orienting himself towards such obvious threats to his symbolic capital.

Noonan, on the other hand, in the years following *Babe* has been remarkably protective of his symbolic capital, and of his autonomy. He has rejected the many offers that have come his way from major studios (including directing *Saving Private Ryan* and a number of other ‘Monster’/animal Pictures) and the piles of scripts that have been sent to his office for consideration. His success with *Babe* has enabled him to focus on his own production company, which he runs along with his wife, long-time Australian producer Glenys Rowe. In this capacity Noonan has undertaken projects such as assisting artist Davida Allen in her directorial debut *Feeling Sexy* (1999), while he has been deciding what to do next.

Noonan’s approach has been highly cautious – ‘I have a lot on offer to me... you know, having had a big success, I now have more to lose with a sort of lacklustre film.’<sup>637</sup> Yet this caution is in the service of producing something ‘...that will be startling or that will be very audacious.’<sup>638</sup> His repeated criticisms of the many scripts (more than 150) that have been offered to him include the charges that they lack ‘adventurousness’ and ‘boldness’;<sup>639</sup> that they are in fact artistically too cautious. These statements suggest that Noonan is highly aware of his changed position within the international cinematic field, and that he is intent on properly investing the acquired capital (symbolic, social and financial) made on *Babe* into a product that again maximises specifically symbolic profit.

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<sup>636</sup> For example, Miller has said of his experience on *The Witches of Eastwick*: ‘The so-called producers were deal makers, packagers and politicians. They were not filmmakers. It was a grotesque experience, organizationally, creatively and morally and caused me to lose all desire to direct films.’ Miller quoted in *Babe: Pig in the City* official web site, ‘The filmmakers’, <<http://www.babeinthecity.com/behindthescenes/crewgeorgemiller.html>> ([15/03/02]).

<sup>637</sup> C. Noonan, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid.

<sup>639</sup> C. Noonan, ‘An interview with Chris Noonan’, *Hollywood Scriptwriter*, <<http://www.hollywoodscriptwriter.com/noonan.html>> [(2/05/00)].



Noonan's caution, his 'reluctance to jump' into compromises, also extends to working with studios. He has spoken of 'false starts' that he has made in the years following *Babe*:

*'There have been a couple of things that I loved the look of, but when I started speaking to the people in the studios who had the pictures I realised the direction I wanted to take them and the direction the studios saw as the best way to go were divergent. I was wary of getting into a problem. So now I'm writing my own...'*<sup>640</sup>

The protection of one's autonomy as a filmmaker in the global cinematic field is so often characterised as a fight to resist the entanglements of 'Hollywood' and the 'studios', while simultaneously allowing for the fact that Hollywood finance is required for certain aesthetic undertakings – such as the expensive effects-laden *Babe*.

This is a difficult tightrope to walk. Noonan, while intent on maintaining autonomy from the studios – and on maintaining the *appearance* of autonomy – must necessarily keep open the possibilities for collaboration and financing that also have the potential of curbing his autonomy. His latest project, for instance, is *Rule of the Bone*, a coming of age story set in Jamaica and the United States, based on the novel by Russell Banks. Noonan and producer Barry Mendel (*The Sixth Sense*) having purchased the rights to the book, will need to link up with a studio if they want to raise a budget significant enough to employ high production values, use 'name' actors and extended location shoots.

A certain disdain for Hollywood is part of the dominant habitus of Australian filmmaking, which, in general, aligns itself with the more autonomous pole of the world cinematic field, the subfield of restricted production. This disdain, along with horrified fascination was expressed by Noonan when he was the guest speaker at the previously mentioned AFI Forum in February 1997, conducted by Melbourne critic Paul Harris. Noonan regaled the industry-literate audience with anecdotes illustrating his surreal experiences in Hollywood, of clichés that seemed too mild for the reality, joking that 'once you're in bed with the movie moguls, you open yourself up to lots of terrible diseases.' He told of a movie executive

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<sup>640</sup> C. Noonan, quoted by Gary Maddox, 'New film helps Noonan put that pig behind him', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday 27 January 2000, p. 12.



who couriered over an expensive Mont-blanc pen to Noonan's writing suite, accompanied by the note 'just so you can write down all the great ideas of the projects we're gonna do together'; and of the post Oscar Governor's ball, where tables laden with food and alcohol sat untouched by the celebrity guests who were too scared of fatness, of inebriation, and of being photographed with their mouths full. Noonan remarked that Hollywood seemed 'a very abstemious place – in public at least,' a place where cigar-chomping movie moguls have been replaced by celery-munching ones.

Despite these comic revelations, and his very public wariness of studios, Noonan's practical disposition – his notion of himself as a 'commercial artist' (more on this later), leads him to refuse to burn bridges with Hollywood. In several publications he has remarked on how surprised he was to find so many people that he liked within the studio system:

*'A number of them are really serious filmmakers. I guess I had this image of caricatured moguls, puffing cigars and being very rude. But I haven't found that.'*<sup>641</sup>

While such statements do not necessarily suggest conflict or contradiction in Noonan's approach, they do suggest that he must be constantly engaged in a delicate balancing act involving the competing imperatives of symbolic and financial capital gains, a balancing act about which he is quite candid:

*'When you're really doing it well with films, you can make art. When you're doing it really well you can do art and commerce together. And that's the balance that I'm constantly seeking to make – the balance between art and commerce. It's the essential conundrum of the film industry I think.'*<sup>642</sup>

This conflict between imperatives arose often in the interview with Noonan conducted by myself in March 1997 (see Appendix I). At one point I asked Noonan if he considered himself to be an artist, to which he replied, 'Well, you know, a commercial artist I guess':

*'[Film] is just such an expensive medium. That's the conundrum. It's a medium that in many ways logically*

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<sup>641</sup> C. Noonan, 'Interview with Chris Noonan', *Hollywood Scriptwriter* <<http://www.hollywoodscriptwriter.com/noonan.html>> ([06/05/02]). Similar sentiments are expressed by Noonan in Don Groves, 'Hogging Spotlight', *Variety*, 18-24/9/95 pp. 45-46.

<sup>642</sup> C. Noonan, Interview, Appendix I.



*lends itself to huge corporations making these risky investments. You know, unlike resources like coal and iron and that sort of thing you can produce, it's incredibly speculative as an investment, so it requires organisations with huge backing, either the backing of huge corporations or the backing of government to do that investment.*

*It's a very expensive medium to work in, and I believe that really you have to endeavor to make films that will recoup their money. I think – maybe it's just my Protestant work ethic – but basically I believe that...film-makers owe it to the people who put their money into films, to try and make films that will repay those investors. I mean, that is a good idea not just from an honour point of view, but also from the point of view of when you next come to want to make a film – you know, if your investors haven't been burnt then you're in a good position.<sup>643</sup>*

Dancing on the tightrope strung tautly between art and commerce, Noonan seemed genuinely thoughtful about the compromises that were necessary and the ways in which these compromises might be justified and negotiated. For example, when asked about being forced to change the accents in *Babe* in order to make them more palatable for US audiences, he admitted that initially he was very upset, but that:

*'...in the final analysis, at least I found a way of justifying it, in that they aren't 'American' American accents, and the neutralising of the accents in some ways made it more of a story-book world, a fantasy world, than as it had been planned – to be a British world, so this made it more in the realms of the imagination. And I didn't mind that in the end. In fact, it also meant that [the film] penetrated further into the rest of the world, and that's not a bad thing. So you know, there's an up side and a downside. In the purely purist art sense I would have preferred to have retained the original accents that we'd done a lot of work on, and which more purely expressed the original story, but at the same time, the new accents put it into another realm, so you know, I think that's all right.'<sup>644</sup>*

These are the thoughts of someone grappling with the implications of a loss of autonomy upon the creative process, and finding that the reality, in this case, was palatable, and inadvertently served the work.

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<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid.



Yet Noonan's concerns about threatened autonomy extend beyond the limits of the studios' influence on individual projects or directors. More than any other director in the sample contained by this thesis, he articulated direct concerns about globalisation, the retreat from public life of governments, and the increasing concentration of distribution and exhibition power within the world cinematic field:

*'One of the effects of globalisation is to concentrate the power of the distributors of film. And all through Europe, and throughout the world really, with a few notable exceptions of some big markets, the American distributors, or the American dominated distributors do dominate the marketing of films internationally. And that means that the bigger they get, the more natural advantages they have because they can spend up big on a marketing campaign and then just use it again and again and again in different countries with maybe some minor adjustments...there's a lot of investment in the marketing campaign of a film and if you can amortise that investment over a lot of territories, then you can market very effectively and get very elaborate campaigns together in markets that don't really promise the returns for such an elaborate campaign.*

*The other thing about the size of those American distributors is that they very often, in the territories that they distribute to, have strong links to the exhibitors as well, so in many ways they can control what films get shown in cinemas. And when I was in France last year, there was a lawsuit going on where someone was suing UIP (United International Press] in the European court, for the practice of excluding local films. In other words, saying to exhibitors, if you want Titanic, you'll have to take these other ten films and show them. So you know, using their muscle and their access to what are international blockbusters, and using that muscle to flood the market with other product. So the bigger they get, the more powerful they get. I mean, that's real globalisation, real economic globalisation of the cinema market.'*<sup>645</sup>

While he does not feel a responsibility to reflect Australian concerns in his work – unless it is funded by the Australian taxpayer – Noonan has a passionate belief in the ongoing support of a national film industry, arguing that, 'It's part of what we are as Australians now, that we are a country with a film industry.'<sup>646</sup> He is

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<sup>645</sup> Ibid.

<sup>646</sup> Ibid.



emphatic that government support is 'absolutely essential', 'In the context of any nation other than the United States...if any sort of national identity in cinema is going to survive',<sup>647</sup> yet sees rather gloomy prospects for such continued support:

*'I'm fairly pessimistic about the direction of the role of government in national life. It seems to me that there's a broad trend internationally which we find, and individual countries find, very hard to resist, for government to shrink, for government to withdraw from various areas that they've been involved in. When they start withdrawing even from healthcare, education - what you would consider as the core purposes of government - you've got to wonder whether government is going to continue to support a film industry here. So I think there's likely to be, in the long term, a withdrawal of government support from the film industry...'*

Noonan sees this as a disturbing tendency, '...not just from a film industry point of view, but from a cultural point of view, from a view of the welfare of the people and the survival of democracy.' He continues:

*'I think that it's dangerous times that we live in, and what's likely to happen is that, if the trend continues, and I see no sign of it abating, and all kinds of barriers to any government of any nation resisting the process of globalisation, you know, you can see how much countries get punished for the resistance to globalisation - just look at Asia at the moment - then I think it's very likely that government subsidy of the film industry is going to decline. And then you see Fox and other American studios slowly courting the Australian film scene. And I think very likely what we'll find over time is the corporations, where real power in the international film scene resides, will slowly start to take over some of the functions of government in terms of film financing. And that could be a very dangerous thing. On the other hand, maybe they'll be extremely clever and say the reason we're coming in here is because we want that local flavour and maybe they will foster it. But there is the real danger that we'll just become more and more and more Americanised in our output, because those people selecting which films get made don't have those sorts of cultural imperatives at the forefront of their minds.'*

It is interesting that these attitudes are expressed by the director of the most commercially successful film among my sample, and that such cultural

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid.



nationalism should be advocated by the director of the least 'Australian' film. These apparent contradictions express, however, the complexities of the field of Australian film, and the conflicts that define its *habitus*. Noonan's position within the Australian cinematic field is illustrative of the way in which the cinematic field, more than any other cultural field, defies any easy dichotomies of popular/commercial success versus critical acclaim. Yet his strategies and position-takings illustrate the high value placed upon symbolic capital and on the maintenance of relative autonomy within this domain.

### **Bad Boy Bubby: Cult Success**

As Scott J. Knight has written, 'The central factor in the determination of a cult movie is the presence of a devoted audience that frequently re-experiences the work.'<sup>648</sup> *Bad Boy Bubby* holds the position of a cult classic within the Australian cinematic field, and within the international arthouse field more generally. Its devoted audience manifest themselves in a strange collection of facts: The film has spawned numerous fan-sites on the Internet, and seems to inspire cinema studies students to write about it at length; Despite a modest box office success in Australia (just over half a million dollars), the film has been a video hit and was per unit sold one of the most profitable videos of its year of release; In Norway the film was the second highest grossing film of the year, and ran for 12 months.

Like the previously discussed film *Head On*, *Bad Boy Bubby* draws much of its symbolic power from its marginal status, its restricted 'R' rating and its low-budget (\$880,000) independence. With its bizarre, shocking and controversial subject matter it is a direct affront to the 'good taste' of bourgeois tastes, or 'even the most liberal of sensibilities'<sup>649</sup>. In the words of critic Paul Byrnes, the film is '...a splenetic outpouring of emotions in which polite modes of representation have no place.'<sup>650</sup> In the manner of Bourdieu, this film holds a position of consecration within the national and international cinematic fields.

Despite its extreme and confronting subject matter, the film was not neglected by the mainstream or by consecrated critics, who recognised it as an important and

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<sup>648</sup> Scott J. Knight, 'Cult Films', *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, op.cit., p. 92.

<sup>649</sup> 'The Vulture: Bad Boy Bubby', *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, Saturday, 10/08/96, p. 7.

<sup>650</sup> Paul Byrnes, 'Innocent Loose in a Mad Land', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday 28/7/94, p. 20.



generally successful work of art. Critics like the *The Age*'s Neil Jillett admitted that he found the film 'shocking, disgusting, silly, pompous, exploitative and cruel', but concluded that it was 'extraordinary', and that it '...stays in the mind and encourages you to look at the world in a new light.'<sup>651</sup> The *Australian*'s David Stratton named it a film 'not to be missed',<sup>652</sup> while Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* called it 'a tremendously ambitious film that succeeds triumphantly'.<sup>653</sup> *Le Monde* went so far as to write that the film was 'Voltaire's *Candide* gone 'grunge'...Dostoevsky's *Idiot* remade by the Rock Generation.'<sup>654</sup>

The film was also given recognition through various festivals and awards. It was a sensation at the Venice Film Festival in 1993, where it won the Festival's Jury Prize, the Jury Prize from the Italian Cinemagoers' Association (CIAK), and shared the FIPRESCI (International Film Critic's Award) along with Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*. Amazingly, the film also won an award from the International Catholic Organisation for Cinema and Audio-Visuals (OCIC). Peter Malone, one of the jury members on this committee, has written that this decision was an agonising one, with some members finding the film too 'ugly', 'bestial' and 'unethical' for the Catholic award.<sup>655</sup> Ultimately it received a bronze Catholic award, for as Malone has argued, it could be seen as a depiction of evil, forgiveness and redemption.<sup>656</sup>

It is perhaps this aspect of the film, its ultimate morality and essential humanity, which makes the shocking and subversive elements more palatable to the conservative, and even religious critics and commentators. While these agents do not employ the judgement criteria of those exemplifying the 'pure aesthetic', their form of 'interest' (morality *and* aesthetics) in the case of this text, coincides with the judgements of those who value the avante-garde elements of the film.

In its position in the global cinematic field, *Bad Boy Bubby* therefore reveals itself to be open to an odd collection of systems of value. What all these systems

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<sup>651</sup> Neil Jillett, 'Critic's Choice: Bad Boy Bubby', *The Age Entertainment Guide*, Friday 29/7/94, p. 5.

<sup>652</sup> David Stratton, *The Australian*, Friday 26/8/94, p. 18.

<sup>653</sup> Kevin Thomas, 'Movie Review: Bad Boy Bubby', *The Los Angeles Times*, weekend edn., 27/11/97.

<sup>654</sup> *Le Monde* review quoted by Anne Susskind, 'Bringing Up Bubby', *HQ*, July 1994, p. 78.

<sup>655</sup> Peter Malone, 'A De Profundis Film', Introductory essay, *Screenplay of Bad Boy Bubby*, Currency Press Ltd., Sydney, 1996, p. 11.

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 11-12.



possess is a shared participation in the restricted sub-field of production, with its pursuit of symbolic capital, a sub-field that gestures, in differing ways, towards 'the economic world reversed'.

## Rolf de Heer: Global Arthouse Auteur

*'In between career moves and films for other people I'd keep coming back to [Bad Boy Bubby], not because it had some higher end purpose, but because I was interested in exploring these ideas, exploring the nature of cinema and what I love about it. So, in that sense it was a work of passion from an early stage, because **it was being worked on for its own sake, not for any other reward.**' – Rolf de Heer<sup>657</sup>*

*'[Bad Boy Bubby] speaks most strongly of the things I care about. **I took no account of the audience.**' Rolf de Heer<sup>658</sup>*

Director Rolf de Heer, occupies an important position in the field of Australian filmmaking. A director of small but ambitious low-budget films (including *Epsilon* (1995), *The Quiet Room* (1996), and *Dance Me to My Song* (1998)) de Heer's work tends to break with the traditional themes and preoccupations of Australian filmmaking, while garnering critical interest both at home in the AFI Awards,<sup>659</sup> and at the international festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Berlin.<sup>660</sup> He is an increasingly consecrated auteur whose idiosyncratic work is defiantly low-budget.

De Heer's films have also been modestly successful in the commercial sense, the result of a direct strategy to retain autonomy. Speaking of *Bad Boy Bubby*, the director has made the seemingly contradictory statement: 'In fact, it's as commercial as a film with a much bigger budget. I insisted on a low budget to make it *more* commercial.'<sup>661</sup> He explains it in this way:

*'I guess it's one of my theories of filmmaking. People say this is commercial and that isn't. Well, I'm sorry, being commercial is returns weighed against outlay. So anything*

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<sup>657</sup> R. de Heer, 'From the Writer/Director', Introductory essay, Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>658</sup> Rolf de Heer, quoted by in Anne Susskind, 'Bringing Up Bubby', *HQ*, July 1994, p. 78.

<sup>659</sup> *Bad Boy Bubby* won four AFI Awards in 1994. See Appendix II.

<sup>660</sup> Commissioner notes on de Heer, *Australian Film Commission Annual Report 1997/98*.

<sup>661</sup> R de Heer, interviewed by Andrew L Urban in *Cinema Papers*, 101, October 1994, p. 73



*is commercial if the budget is low enough.*<sup>662</sup>

More explicitly than any other filmmaker in my sample, De Heer has articulated an economic model for maintaining autonomy. Like Chris Noonan he has a sense of financial duty to pay back his investors, yet manages this obligation through owing very little:

*'It's a capital intensive field of endeavour and you owe, in a sense, the people who put the money up, you owe at least a half chance to get some of it back. That's for me a sort of a starting point. So you think, okay, how much ought this film cost in order to give it a chance to be commercial? You could make exactly the same film for 5 times as much money, and it's as fifth as much commercial.'*<sup>663</sup>

Time and again De Heer associates creative freedom with low budgets. Speaking of *Bubby*:

*'The idea was to make a very low-budget film, in which I could say anything and do anything: complete creative freedom, really trying to be bold and brave. I toyed with that for a few years and it became the sort of script that I never thought I'd make. But it was liberating to do.'*<sup>664</sup>

Of a later film, *Epsilon*, De Heer has made similar comments: 'I felt it should be low-budget so we could *try* things rather than *do* things.'<sup>665</sup> Again he is equating creative freedom with minimal levels of indebtedness. What is interesting in both statements, is that De Heer speaks as though making a film on a small budget was a matter of choice rather than necessity, a deliberate creative decision. And yet, in both interviews lack of money and the worries associated with it, were constant preoccupations. One way of understanding this contradiction is to see the way in which de Heer takes his financial restrictions and re-interprets them as creatively enabling, filtering the lack of wherewithal through the logic of the artistic field.

This 'making a virtue of necessity' is perfectly illustrated by the use of the 31 different directors of photography for *Bad Boy Bubby*. Initially this strategy was undertaken for financial reasons, yet ultimately it was a way of expressing the

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<sup>662</sup> R.de Heer, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid.

<sup>665</sup> R de Heer, interviewed by Andrew L Urban in *Cinema Papers*, 104, June 1995, p. 15



disjointed and confusing nature of Bubby's experience, so that 'When a slightly bigger budget was found, it still remained an appropriate artistic strategy.'<sup>666</sup>

De Heer actually rejected an increase in budget when it was offered to him halfway through the shooting of *Bad Boy Bubby*. The Italian producer, Domenico Procacci, impressed with the work he'd seen thus far, offered to extend the film's budget. De Heer found the experience crippling:

*'Now, for a week it was extraordinarily difficult to shoot because suddenly there were no limits. It took me the week to realise [the reason we were previously doing so well with the film] was because we were doing it the way that we were, and this opening up of it was the thing that began to paralyse us. Because suddenly you can begin to shoot more. And the whole thing had been running on certain disciplines, and once the disciplines disappear, you've got nothing.'*<sup>667</sup>

This striking anecdote underlines a recurrent theme in De Heer's career: an inner-directedness that places him in opposition to the normal logic of the market, a logic that would see a bigger budget as necessarily a good thing. As the comments at the beginning of this section reveal, De Heer even distances himself from any notion that he might take account of an audience while producing a film, or that he might be making a film for 'a higher purpose'. In his own words, success is having freedom, and freedom is the ability to make a film 'for its own sake, not for any other reward'.<sup>668</sup>

Yet part of this freedom, this ability to work inside the subfield of restricted production, involves, for De Heer, a acute sensitivity to the economics of his art. As we have seen, he has taken the basic principle of commerciality and turned this into a rationale for low-budget filmmaking. He has also performed the role of producer on nearly all of his films, a role which requires him to be constantly integrating the financial aspects of a project into the artistic ones. He speaks about this as being a good thing 'because you're not having to answer to somebody else. You already know what those constraints are and you've decided what they

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<sup>666</sup> A. Dzenis, Film Review of *Bad Boy Bubby*, *Cinema Papers*, October 1994, No.101, p. 63.

<sup>667</sup> R. de Heer, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>668</sup> R. de Heer, 'From the Writer/Director', *Screenplay of Bad Boy Bubby*, op.cit., p.7.



should be.’<sup>669</sup> This kind of autonomy allows him to singlehandedly filter the constraints of the market into the fabric of the work, reinterpreting them through an aesthetic logic.

The usefulness of this model of production became clear to De Heer working on his recent film, *The Man Who Told Love Stories* (yet to gain an Australian release) where he was for the first time, just performing the role of director and not that of a producer:

*‘Yes, it’s interesting with this...film I’ve learnt a lot more about [autonomy]. Because of the way that I’ve made a number of films where I deal with all the aspects of it, and they all feed into each other seamlessly – the producing, directing, the writing, are all the same thing. When you separate those functions it’s just a lot less efficient. For example, on the film that I’m doing at the moment, it was just catastrophe after catastrophe. It was incredibly difficult. And it’s almost made me want to give up making films. And it’s largely because ridiculously stupid decisions were made by people who place ego above the film. Their own ego above the film. People who can’t know, and you have to forgive them for this, because they can’t know as well as I do, how this stuff fits together, and why these decisions have to be made and how things fit together in a particular way...They can’t make those kind of balances in the way that I can make them if I make them myself. And, for example, on this particular film it’s a French producer I haven’t worked with before. Now you know, they’re used to working with directors who don’t put it all together in the way that I’ve learnt to do, and therefore they have to watch those things and make their own decisions and keep control of it. Now that’s the worst possible thing you can do with me doing it. Because I jack up. I think ‘this is ridiculous! This is what we’ve got to do and this is why...’ And so it was a really quite difficult experience of waste and stupidity. It meant I couldn’t do certain things that I felt had to be done, because all the money’s been wasted on something I didn’t want in the first place. And so in that sense, autonomy is incredibly important, because making a film is so hard, and without it it’s that much harder, and it’s just not worth it. I think I’d rather go and sit and write a book or something.’<sup>670</sup>*

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<sup>669</sup> R. de Heer, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>670</sup> Ibid.



It is clear that in conjunction with his preoccupation with autonomy, De Heer takes himself seriously as a cinematic artist. He admits that the question, 'Is it cinema?' was taped to the wall while he was working on *Bad Boy Bubby* as a reminder to himself to fully utilise the medium. This question, stated famously by Bazin as 'What is cinema?' is one which signifies participation within a certain serious and aesthetic cinematic tradition, a tradition with its roots firmly planted in Europe with its auteur filmmakers.

De Heer's connections with Europe are significant in describing his position within the Australian cinematic field. Born in Holland, his family moved to Sydney while he was a child. Trained at the Australian Film and Television School, and working in this country with predominantly Australian actors and a substantial proportion of government film financing, De Heer's links are nonetheless strong with a network of European producers, cinematographers and festivals. *Bad Boy Bubby*, for instance, was an Italian Australian co-production, and its Italian producer Domenico Procacci also put up half the budget of de Heer's next film, *Epsilon*.<sup>671</sup> The various prizes and nominations which de Heer's films have received have been from prominent European festivals. *The Quiet Room* and *Dance Me to My Song* were selected for official competition at the Cannes International Film Festival. While these awards offer little fame and popular acclaim in comparison to the Academy Awards, they have far greater status in the domain of symbolic capital.

De Heer's possession of such symbolic capital has no doubt played a large part in his appointment as a commissioner of the Australian Film Commission, a three year position dating from May 1998. Like so many Australian film directors before him (Peter Weir, for instance) De Heer's prestige within the national cinematic field is highly dependent upon his performance in the international cinematic field, and it is after such awards are bestowed that these filmmakers are really recognised in their home countries. It is here that we see one example of the way in which the transformation of the global cinematic field – the proliferation of film festivals providing a circuit of exhibition and recognition for arthouse, independent as well as Hollywood films – has influenced the Australian cinematic

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<sup>671</sup> R. de Heer, interviewed by Andrew L Urban in *Cinema Papers*, 104, June 1995, p 15.



field, and the positions of the agents within it. For De Heer, not only has his network of European connections helped to finance, publicise, exhibit and award his work, but it has also provided him with the symbolic capital to operate as a key figure within the Australian cinematic field, while retaining a certain amount of artistic autonomy.

De Heer appears to be one of the ‘prophets’ of the field, exemplifying the autonomous, (as opposed to heteronomous) principles of hierarchisation operating within the field. His work reveals that he is prepared to take risks, and to move outside the predefined boundaries of commercial filmmaking. His films also exemplify the ability of filmmakers occupying such positions (autonomous, with linkages to the global arthouse field) to simultaneously explore the universal, along with the particular. That his strong links with the Australian film funding bodies have not hindered his autonomy, suggests that being answerable to such bodies, and being closely involved in their operations, need not compromise the autonomy of a filmmaker, nor their possession and accumulation of symbolic capital.

Perhaps the most illuminating aspect of this brief study of De Heer and his mode of operation within the cinematic field is the manner in which autonomy, in this cultural domain, is reliant upon skilful manipulation of financial capital. The auteur filmmaker cannot pretend to have ‘no head for business’, but must instead be a shrewd accountant of both his symbolic and financial capitals. The ‘pure aesthetic’ of the most autonomous of cultural producers in other fields cannot be wholly indulged in by the filmmaker who must always make some forays into the world of investments, budgets and returns. That De Heer has managed to balance these competing imperatives, all the while maintaining his symbolic status and producing significant works on minute budgets, points towards some useful strategies that Australian filmmakers may employ in maintaining their autonomy and ‘telling their own stories’.



## Chapter 7: Summary

### Narrative Elements

*Babe* and *Bad Boy Bubby* each offer hero stories that consciously avoid location of those heroes within a national or local context. *Babe*'s themes of transcendence and individual triumph are shown to be possible precisely because they occur in a 'no-time' and 'no-place'. Alternatively, *Bubby*'s form of 'becoming' is shown to be rooted in a relatively recent, but quite particularly Australian narrative tradition of 'creative disability'. He is allowed his 'happy ending' precisely because he retains the marks of his suffering.

### Industry Elements

In terms of financial success these two films occupy positions at opposite poles of the cinematic field, yet both were critically well-received. The directors of both films have stated their high valuing of creative autonomy, yet Noonan's experience of working with Universal Studios suggests the pressures upon autonomy that are presented by such production strategies. In an entirely different model of international financing, De Heer has shown the possibilities for autonomy that might lie in co-productions with other small national cinemas. Mirroring his film's narrative theme of 'creative disability' De Heer has also revealed the artistic possibilities of working within the constraints of small budgets.



## Chapter 8A: Home-making in the Global Era

*[W]e are witnessing not so much the death and burial of 'local cultural originality,' as their rehabilitation, affirmation, and renewal in disjunctive phases and local reassertions. – R. Wilson & W. Dissanayake<sup>672</sup>*

Associated with globalisation is a persistent preoccupation with feeling 'at home', or as David Harvey describes it, 'the search for secure moorings in a shifting world.'<sup>673</sup> While a cosmopolitan elite may fancy themselves as 'world citizens' or global vagabonds – at home both nowhere and everywhere – the evidence suggests that for most people, the concepts of locality, ethnicity and geographical specificity become even *more* important in the context of a 'shrinking' globe. This is demonstrated in the numerous desperate and passionate struggles of peoples around the world who are fighting to hold onto, or to recreate, a disappearing sense of home, whether this be at the national, regional or personal level.

The ability to control space plays a part in all forms of power, economic, social, political or physical.<sup>674</sup> The most powerful individuals and groups not only possess the ability to move rapidly from one space on the globe to another in order to achieve their goals, but they also exercise control over the utilisation of particular spaces, and the material outcomes produced by them. At the other end of the spectrum are those homeless and displaced individuals and groups who have neither the knowledge nor the capital to move around and maximise their position in space. These are those unlucky people who cannot claim even a single 'place' in which they are legally entitled to live. It could be said then, that the difference between the powerful and the powerless in a globalised world is the difference between being at home everywhere and being at home nowhere.

One of the central tensions at the heart of globalisation is the conflict over space, played out between the imperatives of capital, with its need for flexible accumulation, and the imperatives of individuals and groups who desire

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<sup>672</sup> R. Wilson & W. Dissanayake, 'Introduction', in *Global Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, R. Wilson & W. Dissanayake (eds), Duke Uni. Press, Durham, 1996, p. 3.

<sup>673</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, p. 302.

<sup>674</sup> As Harvey notes, 'We owe the idea that command over space is a fundamental and all-pervasive source of social power in and over everyday life to the persistent voice of Henri Lefebvre.' *The Condition of Postmodernity*, op.cit., p. 226.



continuity and attachment to the particular spaces which they inhabit.<sup>675</sup> As Harvey has noted:

*...there are abundant signs that localism and nationalism have become stronger precisely because of the quest for the security that place always offers in the midst of all the shifting that flexible accumulation implies.*<sup>676</sup>

This quest for security, and its attendant anxieties about displacement and disorientation, are constant themes in the cinematic narratives that emerge from contemporary national cinemas.

By definition a 'national cinema' is bound up in notions of cultural value, of self-representation. As Tom O'Regan puts it, national cinemas are a particular type of cinema; they '...partake of a broader "conversation" with Hollywood and other national cinemas', and they '...carve a space locally and internationally for themselves in the face of the dominant international cinema, Hollywood.'<sup>677</sup>

Existing within this precariously carved out space are numerous filmmakers intent on making cinema that is undeniably local and specific, films that insist that they come from a particular place, a specific place in space that is significant and worthy of cinematic treatment; a place that is somebody's home. When that home happens to be in Australia its representation occurs against a particular cultural backdrop with its own interpretations of homelessness, dispossession and ownership.

## Home-making in Exile

The history of Australian national cinema is of visually making this country our own, of depicting the history, the landscape and the people in such a way as to take possession of them; of allowing a sense of being at home in a place, where, it could be argued, there is a lot of ambivalence about our *right* to feel at home. As filmmaker and writer Ross Gibson has argued, '...non-Aboriginal Australia is a young society, under-endowed with myths of "belonging".'<sup>678</sup> The persistent

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<sup>675</sup> It should also be noted that one of the other central conflicts associated with globalisation is between different groups making historical and cultural claims to the same geographical space. We see this in a multitude of examples, from Kosovo and Turkey to East Timor, and in the land rights disputes currently occurring here in Australia.

<sup>676</sup> D. Harvey, op.cit., pp. 305-306.

<sup>677</sup> T. O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, op.cit., p. 1.

<sup>678</sup> R. Gibson, 'Ch.2: Formative Landscapes' in S. Murray (ed.), *Australian Cinema*, op.cit., p. 45.



attempt to possess our geographical space and to tell our own stories, is a distinguishing feature of Australian cinema, and reveals a profound sense of unease with the idea of this place being home. It is an unease evident in so many Australian films of the last thirty years, whether this be in the depiction of a harsh and alien natural beauty (for example, the weirdly unknowable landscape of Peter Weir's 1975 *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) or through the narrative use of soul-numbingly bleak and isolating urban social environments, like that seen in *Romper Stomper* (1992, Geoffrey Wright). Despite such diverse settings and stories, our cinematic narratives recurrently revisit these themes of displacement, alienation and homelessness – both physical and spiritual.

It is unsurprising to find such themes dominating the earlier films of Australia's 1970s cultural renaissance. This was, after all, a period obsessed with the search for national identity and the need for Australian culture to assert itself against perceived cultural imperialisms, of both of the US and British varieties. What is surprising, however, is that these themes persist even after the passing of more than thirty years. Recent films exploring an *absence* of home include *Floating Life* (1996, Clara Law), *Bad Boy Bubby* (1994, Rolf de Heer), *Vacant Possession* (1996, Margot Nash), *Dead Heart* (Nicholas Parsons, 1996), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998, Richard Flanagan) and *Head On* (1998, Ana Kokkinos). These films illustrate the fact that Australian cinematic storytelling continues to be drawn to themes of homelessness and dislocation; the difficulties of making oneself at home on this continent, and in this culture.

While there are strong similarities between the subject matter of these contemporary films and their predecessors, there has, however, been a dramatic transformation in the specific *kinds* of homelessness explored. Speaking of globalisation, Harvey observes that 'Everything, from novel writing and philosophising to the experience of labouring or making a home, has to face the challenge of accelerating turnover time and the rapid write-off of traditional and historically acquired values.'<sup>679</sup> The old problems of dislocation and lack of identity have by no means disappeared in Australian culture or Australian film, but in addition, Australians now face a new set of challenges in their continuing

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<sup>679</sup> D. Harvey, op.cit., p. 291.



attempts to create for themselves homes in which they are comfortable, secure and hopeful – or to put it in Prime Minister John Howard’s strangely sinister language, ‘comfortable and relaxed’.

This chapter will discuss two films dealing with the problems of being at home in contemporary Australia. *The Castle* (1997, Working Dog) will be examined as a film that can be read as suggesting the need to re-value the ordinary Australian suburban experience in order to protect homes against the advances of a capital-driven and dislocating globalisation. The second film, *Floating Life* (1996, Clara Law) will be discussed in relation to the conundrum for settler cultures in creating new homes and new identities within the Australian suburbs, while retaining necessary and fertile connections with their cultures of origin.

The films and their filmmakers, Working Dog and Clara Law, will then be discussed in terms of their positions within the local and global cinematic fields.

### ***The Castle: Re-valuing Home***

This strikingly simple film can be read, on a number of levels, both textual and extra-textual, as responding to globalisation through the reassertion of the strong, simple (some would say retrogressive) values of home. In this narrative that home happens to be a tacky suburban bungalow, resting on lead-infested soil, right next to an airport runway. The occupants, the distinctly unsophisticated Kerrigan family, consider their dumpy house to be a castle, and, in the course of the story, a castle under siege. When a multinational corporate project attempts to compulsorily acquire the land and thereby cheaply expand their operations, the Kerrigans are forced to defend the humble, and ultimately unquantifiable, virtues of their home.

The film begins with a black screen and a gradually layered soundtrack. As the credits appear (simple white letters on black background) the soft chirping of birds begins to be audible. The sounds of children playing in the distance are added to this, then the low hum of a lawnmower and the barking of dogs. The benign buzz of a Sunday afternoon in suburbia.

The teenage Dale Kerrigan (Stephen Curry) appears on screen, a broad freckled face speaking deadpan to camera:



*'My name is Dale Kerrigan and this is my story. Our family lives at 3 Highview Crescent, Coolaroo.'*

A shot of the unprepossessing house frontage, complete with lawn, letterbox and weatherboard exterior. Dale continues:

*'Dad bought this place fifteen years ago for a steal. As the real estate agent said, "location, location, location". And we're right next to the airport. It will be very convenient if we ever have to fly one day.'*

A shot of the airfield and of a plane roaring above the Kerrigan's television aerial is accompanied by the voiceover:

*'Dad still can't work out how he got it so cheap. It's worth almost as much today as when we bought it. Our crescent was going to be the heart of a major housing development, but it never got up. They reckon the planes put people off. Them and the power lines.'*

We are treated to a shot of huge power towers hovering above the house.

*'Not Dad. He reckons power lines are a reminder of man's ability to generate electricity. He's always saying great things like that. That's why we love him so much.'*

This introductory sequence continues with hyperbolic and repetitive observational humour, the kinds of jokes that operate through the embarrassing delights of recognition. We learn that the parents, tow-truck driver Darryl (Michael Caton) and his wife Sal (Anne Tenney) 'adore each other'; that the only tertiary qualification in the family is the hairdressing certificate 'from Sunshine TAFE' earned by daughter Tracey (Sophie Lee); that Wayne (Wayne Hope) the eldest son, is in jail for armed robbery ('He got caught up with the wrong crowd. He didn't mean to rob the petrol station. Now he's sorry.');

that they have four greyhound dogs, a boat and a lot of bad-taste memorabilia. The central point reinforced throughout this sequence is that the impossibly naïve family may not understand much about real estate values, but that they love their home and care deeply for each other. As Dale states, 'of course there were ups and downs, but all in all...a happy home. Dad called it his castle. One day in June a knock on the door was to change all that...'



## Inversion of the Values of Capitalism

*'I think to portray suburban families as always miserable and dysfunctional is patronising. To portray them as aspiring only to come into the inner city for a better quality coffee, that they love the inner-urban life that in Sydney and Melbourne characterises the 'cool' life, I find that patronising.'* – **Rob Sitch**<sup>680</sup>

Inverting the values of capital is a fundamental strategy for people trying to create and maintain homes for themselves. Home, even if it is only a state of mind and a few familiar objects imported into successive environments, always requires some kind of fidelity to the past, with an inherently sentimental insistence upon some conjunction of material and non-material elements. Genuine homemaking must not only resist, to some extent, the notions of instantaneity and disposability, the imperatives of flexible accumulation,<sup>681</sup> but must also evade clever attempts to commodify these nostalgic yearnings for permanence and attachment. As Darryl Kerrigan repeatedly states, 'you can't buy what I've got.'

While the spiritual values of home transcend the realm of commodities to be bought and sold, they are nevertheless highly attached to particular physical realities. This is emphasised when Wayne tries to comfort the family with the idea that he loves the house only because of the family it contains, and 'wherever they go I'll love as long as it has them in it.' While this is a noble sentiment, and contains some truth, it fails to comfort Darryl as he packs up his poolroom. Forlornly handling his photographs and trophies he makes an outrageous observation to his wife:

<i>Darryl:</i>	<i>I'm really startin' to understand how the Aborigines feel.</i>
<i>Sal:</i>	<i>You been drinking?</i>
<i>Darryl:</i>	<i>Well, this house is like their land. It holds their memories. The land is their story. It's everything. You just can't pick it up and plonk it down somewhere else.</i>

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<sup>680</sup> Rob Sitch, quoted by Jim Schembri, 'Simple family, or family of simpletons?', Saturday Extra, *The Age*, Melbourne, 22/3/97, p. 13.

<sup>681</sup> D. Harvey, 'Ch: 17: Time-Space Compression and the Postmodern Condition', op.cit.



It can be argued that this identification of the Kerrigans' situation with Aboriginal dispossession and Mabo, generously allows the dispossessed 'middle-Australian' an intelligence and empathy not evidenced in the Hansonite<sup>682</sup> uprising of the mid 1990s. Instead of turning against other less powerful groups, Darryl finds it within himself to imagine himself allied with the Aborigines and their irreducible relationship to homeland.

The inversion of the values of capital requires not only an assertion of the values of things which can't be bought – memories, history, attachments – but also an assertion that these values are attached to and entwined with material things and physical space. As Lefebvre writes, drawing on Bachelard:

*The House is as much cosmic as it is human. From cellar to attic, from foundations to roof, it has a density at once dreamy and rational, earthly and celestial. The relationship between Home and Ego, meanwhile, borders on identity. The shell, a secret and directly experienced space, for Bachelard epitomizes the virtues of human 'space'.*<sup>683</sup>

While flexible capitalism might find some convenience in emphasising the non-material and therefore transportable values of home, there is something inhuman and exploitative in the expectation that these be simply packed up and 'plonked down somewhere else'.

It seems that the creators of *The Castle* have made the Kerrigan family home appear as aesthetically *unappealing* as possible in order to reinforce the idea that the value of home has nothing to do with 'good taste' or expensive luxury. The fact that the house is evolving in an inelegant and ramshackle way – new patio, talk of a mezzanine extension, the addition of a granny-flat cum greyhound shelter – belies the fact that these things are genuine expressions of creativity, of the family crafting for itself an environment that expresses its own life-world. The Kerrigans are determined, in their own ingenuous way, to imprint their small part of the world with their very particular values. Unfazed by their lead-contaminated soil and by the obstruction of their skylines by high-voltage power lines, not only at home but also at their Bonnie Doon holiday house, they *like* the aeroplanes

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<sup>682</sup> Referring to Pauline Hanson and the One Nation political party.

<sup>683</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p. 121.



landing in their backyard ('beautiful machines', says Darryl, as the lumbering metal birds roar above his roof); They *like* their mother's gruesome handicrafts ('You should open up a shop!'), and their sister's hideous hairstyle. (Here I am imposing my own values of taste, and I think it is the objective of the filmmakers to force us to re-examine the subjective nature of such values.)

A classic scene occurs at Bonnie Doon as the family sits eating their evening BBQ of charred steaks. The newly married Tracey is the first member of the family to have been overseas, having just returned from her Thailand honeymoon with Con (Eric Bana).

*Darryl: I bet they don't have places like this in Thailand. I'm curious. Now I know it's unfair to compare any place to Bonnie Doon, but why would I want to go there instead of here?*

*Tracey: It's for young people dad.*

*Darryl: I know that Trace.*

*Con: It's the culture Darryl. The place is full of culture.*

*Tracey: Chockers.*

*Con: Something for everyone...at the hotel where we stayed there was this one TV with kickboxing 24 hours a day!*

Later, reiterating his point against the annoying buzzing of the mozzie-zapping light, Darryl states contentedly that, 'They haven't got a place like this in Bangkok...the serenity.'

In this exchange there is a rebuttal of the idea that travel 'overseas' is a universal desire, that being elsewhere is always more fulfilling than staying at home. There is also humorous observation that the foreign 'culture' one consumes as part of the tourist experience usually has more to do with extending the pleasures of the familiar than with encountering the truly new. Writing of the contradictions of



tourism, Dick Hebdidge has noted that ‘On the one hand, the need for national markets and the impetus to travel demand that national characteristics, “different ways of life” be accentuated’, while at the same time ‘...trouble-free touring (complete with every modern convenience) and the construction of homogenous “modern” markets require the suppression of national differences and traditional cultures.’<sup>684</sup> When Tracey and Con talk about their trip they seem most excited and involved when they are speaking about the ways the travel experience affects their everyday concerns – hairdresser Tracey comments that your hair loses moisture when you fly and that you can buy ‘the most beautiful satays’ for less than \$5.00; Con comments on the ‘value for money’ when purchasing electrical goods, the airline food and the in-flight entertainment.

The film seems entirely approving of Darryl’s preference for staying at his ‘home away from home’ in Bonnie Doon. Similarly, Tracey and Con’s international ‘adventures’ are revealed to be merely extensions of the pleasures of being at home. They are not, however, condemned for this; their youthful enthusiastic embrace of the minute and homely comforts of travel are celebrated even as we laugh at them. Here again there is an inversion of the values of capital, whereby the highly priced ‘authentic’ cultural experience pursued by wealthy tourists is not necessarily of any more worth – or necessarily any more authentic – than the experience of the bargain honeymooners travelling for the first time.

It is in *The Castle*’s loving treatment of kitsch-ness that it reveals exactly how radical a film it is, signalling a dramatic shift in popular Australian cinema, for it gently yet firmly resists the tendency so prevalent in our film comedies of taking Australian kitsch and turning it into something cheap, dirty and a little bit cruel. Previous cinematic depictions of Australian suburbia have been dominated by presentations of it as alien, grotesque, or at the very least, boring and ugly.<sup>685</sup> Going back into film history and looking at the kitsch comic routines of Dame Edna and the 70s ‘ocker’ comedies, a distinct self-loathing is evident amidst the

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<sup>684</sup> Dick Hebdidge, ‘Ch.10: Object as Image: The Italian Scooter Cycle’ *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Martyn J. Lee, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 2000, p. 146.

<sup>685</sup> As Stephen Crofts has argued, affectionate depictions of suburbia are far more prevalent in Australia’s popular television than in film. Crofts makes many links between *The Castle* and a television aesthetic, noting also the use of warmly loved TV actors Michael Caton – ‘Uncle Harry’, from *The Sullivans*, and Anne Tenney – ‘Molly’ from *A Country Practice*. S.Crofts, ‘*The Castle*: 1997’s “Battlers” and the Ir/Relevance of the Aesthetic’, *Australian Cinema in the 1990s*, ed. I. Craven, op.cit., pp. 159-174.



energetic and often hilarious celebration of our national culture. More recently, films like *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliot, 1994), *Muriel's Wedding* (P J Hogan, 1994) and *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992) have continued to represent our culture in ways which, though in many respects affectionate, are still bitingly critical, dismissive of the family, and skeptical of the ability for happiness to be found in the ordinariness of suburban existence.

Even the more serious and multicultural films of the 1990s are, on the whole, remarkably 'CBD-centric'. As Christos Tsolkias has remarked of films like *Say a Little Prayer* (Richard Lowenstein, 1993), *Moving Out* (Michael Pattinson, 1983) and *The Heartbreak Kid* (Michael Jenkins, 1993), 'Suburbia, if it is referred to at all, is place to escape from...a neat-lawned and 1/4 acre-blocked version of hell'.<sup>686</sup> Tsolkias continues:

*The outer limits of suburbia remain uncharted on [Australian] film. They appear as symbolic moments of alienation and then disappear as the narrative unfolds in the inner city or in the spaces of the bush.*<sup>687</sup>

Clara Law's *Floating Life* is noted as an unusual exception to this rule; presumably at the time of writing Tsolkias had not yet seen *The Castle*, which defiantly cries out the virtues of the city's outer limits.

With its particular brand of self-mocking humour and obsessive ethnographic detail stressing the unbeautiful outspreads of Melbourne, *The Castle* has an obvious heritage in the tradition of kitsch comedy, yet it charts life in the outer suburbs in such a way as to acknowledge the superficial ugliness while also stressing an authentic warmth and revealing a genuine belief in the unquantifiable preciousness of ordinary experience. In contrast to its predecessors, this film exhibits an affectionate acknowledgment that, while it may seem gauche and unsophisticated, suburbia is nevertheless where most Australians live. It is ours, and it is real, and we may be in danger of losing it if we are not prepared to assert the importance of its humble values, values that are here represented by that delightful museum of kitsch, the Kerrigan pool-room.

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<sup>686</sup> Christos Tsolkias, 'Aleka Doesn't Live Here Anymore: some musings on suburbia, migration and film', *Cinema Papers*, No. 117, June 1997, p. 30.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.



## Home as Private Museum

Harvey argues that the rapid change and movement associated with globalisation gives rise to the desire to create, through the home, ‘...a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overloading of consumerist culture and fashion.’<sup>688</sup> The home, he argues, ‘...becomes a private museum to guard against the ravages of time-space compression.’<sup>689</sup> *The Castle* illustrates this beautifully, for a private museum is an exact description of the Kerrigan poolroom. Any important gifts, trophies or photographs immediately go to the poolroom. It is the ultimate private exhibition space. A museum of kitsch, yes, but a shrine to the values of family, home and the familiar and therefore a space of resistance against the values of instantaneity and disposability. It is no wonder then that at the proud heart of the poolroom rests the sacred object of the homemade pool table.

To call the Kerrigans non-consumers, however, would be a mistake. Among the treasures in this castle are many material ones. The family loves its possessions, owning five cars, a boat and a huge television aerial. They make joyful inventories of their acquisitions, and spend much time considering future purchases. A favourite ritual is to scour the Trading Post for bargains, telephoning the sellers and trying to persuade them to drop their prices.

It is no surprise then that the Kerrigans love the fantasy of instant wealth offered by consumer game shows like *Sale of the Century* and *The Price is Right*. One of Darryl’s proudest moments, we are told, is when Tracey makes it onto the latter show as a contestant. ‘She almost won the lot,’ Dale says in voiceover. ‘If only she’d known the price of the luggage. But she still managed to come home with a tumble dryer and a drill set.’

In this family, however, the playing of the game is far more important than the winning. Even the Trading Post ritual – for bizarre and useless items like jousting sticks, overhead projectors, ergonomic chairs and a pulpit – is more about the repetitive exchange wherein the eldest son consults his father about reasonable prices, and Darryl invariably replies that the sellers are ‘dreamin’ to demand such a price. Rather than being about purchasing goods, or even about guessing the

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<sup>688</sup> D. Harvey, op.cit., p. 292.

<sup>689</sup> Ibid.



value of items or snagging a bargain, this is a game that allows Darryl to reveal his expertise. It is a comforting role-play that allows him to be a 'man of the world' in front of his sons, and thereby gently assert his patriarchal authority in a display that they enjoy and admire.

Ultimately then, the museum items of the home are not just material mementos like the matchstick photoframe and the Franklin Mint beermug; they are the non-material rituals and repetitive games that allow the family to maintain a collective identity that supports them and cushions them from a world which would generally judge them to be tasteless, unfashionable and not particularly bright.

### **Lilliputian Tactics: surreptitious creativity and re-coding against the grain**

De Certeau writes of the surreptitious creativity of re-using, re-coding against the grain of capitalism's disciplinary structures,<sup>690</sup> and there are a number of ways in which the Kerrigans do this, with varying degrees of success. One such re-coding might be seen in the family's relationship to its television set. Though they have a typical working class 'low-brow' love of game shows and *Hey Hey it's Saturday*, and though TV seems to be one of their primary forms of entertainment, there is nothing passive or depersonalising about their use of this form of entertainment.

As an affirmation of family values, the TV is always 'turned down' during mealtimes, and afterwards, it is watched as a group activity, a prompt for laughter and discussion, and loud 'talking back' to the screen. The banal and silly viewing material is re-used by the family to reinforce their togetherness in a number of ways. Dale tells us that when his dad laughs at shows like 'The Best of Hey Hey it's Saturday', he laughs with his whole body, and that this makes the rest of the family laugh. While watching *Sale of the Century*, Darryl finds an opportunity to complement his daughter Tracey, telling her that she is far more beautiful than the models on the show. He reveals a complete and naïve belief in her ability as a hairdresser, encouraging her to 'ring up the station and get a contract with them'.

This use of the TV can be contrasted with the lead-in to the television program *The Simpsons*, where that beloved but dysfunctional family madly scurry to plonk

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<sup>690</sup> Michel De Certeau, 'I:III – "Making Do": Uses and Tactics', *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven F. Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984, p. 40.



themselves in front of vacuously brainwashing programs that they seem to absorb with alarming and zombie-like eagerness, a fact which is underlined by the creative use of bizarre variations on this arrangement before every ad-break. (The ground swallows the couch; the family turns into a group of squatting toads, etc.) In contrast to *The Simpsons*' rather sinister relationship with their television, there is a remarkable innocence in the way the Kerrigans use the box. They love it dearly, and like some pagan shrine it is decorated by a border of artificial flowers. Its huge aerial reaches up from the roof of the house like a crude church steeple, yet the uncomplicated worship of this entertainment is always 'turned down' in subordination to the conversation of the dinner table.

The manner in which the backyard of the Kerrigan home has been put to use is also illustrative of a use of space that is jubilantly resistant to 'capitalism's disciplinary structures'. When the land valuer knocks on the door, Darryl treats him with suspicion, wondering if he is from the local council:

*Darryl: Is this about the dogs?*

*Valuer: No.*

*Darryl: The aerial?*

*Valuer: No.*

*Darryl: The extension?*

*Valuer: No.*

*Darryl: If it's about parking the trucks on the nature strip, I've had it up to here with the council!*

From this exchange it is obvious that this suburban home, with all its additions and idiosyncrasies, resists and rebels against the dictates of local planning



stipulations – reminding us of Lefebvre's declaration that 'State-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable'.<sup>691</sup>

As Susan Strange has noted, this is one of the paradoxes of the global transformation of state power, wherein the state interferes ever more in the private sphere of citizens, yet absconds from larger responsibilities of protecting the homes and the rights of people within the national and regional boundaries.<sup>692</sup>

'The impression is conveyed', Strange writes, 'that less and less of daily life is immune from the activities and decisions of government bureaucracies', yet the State withdraws its involvement from 'those matters that the market, left to itself, has never been able to provide...' like security, law, a stable trade environment, and public infrastructure.<sup>693</sup>

While not exactly breaking the law, the Kerrigans seem to burst out of their house, transforming every inch of their land into an untidy expression of their desire to truly inhabit the space. This legitimate desire calls for certain defiant transgressions, and for resourceful tactics of legal acquiescence. When their plans go awry, they simply improvise. The children's cubby-house, now no longer needed, is considered as a prospective granny flat. When the council refuses permission (the area is landfill and therefore unfit), the cubby becomes a grandiose kennel for the four greyhounds. Such optimistic resourcefulness proves essential to the winning of the legal battle to save the property from Airlink.

De Certeau distinguishes between the 'strategies' of the powerful, and the 'tactics' of the subordinate. These tactics are the:

*...clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong,' an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter's tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike discoveries.*<sup>694</sup>

That Darryl and his family are the 'weak' ones in this battle is established when he first protests the compulsory acquisition. The municipal official tells him that

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<sup>691</sup> H. Lefebvre, op.cit., p. 23.

<sup>692</sup> S. Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 4-5.

<sup>693</sup> Ibid.

<sup>694</sup> M. de Certeau, loc.cit.



‘There is an ironclad agreement between the Federal, State and Local governments and the Airport’s commission.’ He soon realises, with astonishment, that while he is obviously the wronged party, it is up to him to show why he should be allowed to stay, to refute the ‘rights’ of the federal authority. He is reminded time and time again that he must state his case ‘in law’ in arcane legal language, and that he must fight his battle in enemy territory. As the incompetent well-meaning solicitor, Denis Denuto (Tiriel Mora), tells Darryl, ‘they write the rules. They own the game.’ Darryl’s fighting spirit, his innate anti-authoritarianism and belief in ‘the law of bloody common sense,’ keeps him determined to ‘have the guts to stand up and shove it right up those people who think they can stand on top of you.’ A dwarfed uggh-booted warrior he maintains his stance of ‘they can get fucked.’ While a great deal of luck is involved in Darryl’s final triumph – the chance befriending of a sympathetic QC – it is nonetheless a victory made possible by Darryl’s conviction that the laws of common sense must in some essential way be instituted in the official codes of Australian justice.

In his analysis of *The Castle*, Stephen Crofts has emphatically criticised the film’s politics, its nostalgic representations of gender stereotypes, and its focus on the more-established ethnic groups of Mediterranean extraction, rather than on newer potentially controversial Asian ones. Crofts argues that the film, appearing in 1997, achieved its success due to ‘...its predominantly right-wing populist discourses’ which resonated with ‘...an anxious national formation’.<sup>695</sup> My own analysis of the film is obviously at odds with such a reading. Without explicitly taking on Crofts’ complex arguments, I do wish to identify one implicitly political facet of the story which had clanging resonations for a Victorian audience. After years of privatisation and government/industry alliance under the dictatorial Kennet State Government, Victorians could not ignore the implications of the film’s reference to ‘iron-clad’ agreements between all levels of government and a multinational corporations. This realisation, that ‘They write the rules’, and the sense of powerlessness and outrage depicted in the film, capture a truth that was very much of that particular political moment. That the narrative’s wishful thinking had Darryl stumbling across a guardian angel QC in order to fight the

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<sup>695</sup> S. Crofts, op.cit., p. 172.



system merely proved the system's omnipotence, its inability to be overcome by anything other than a small miracle. Yet it is Darryl's faith, and ultimately his own words and sentiments, which help to bring about this miracle.

Wilson and Dissanayake write:

*[I]f at times euphoric in its quirkiness, globalization discourse is marked as well by what have been called "Lilliput strategies" of tying down and impeding transnational flows and globally dispersed work chains by linking 'local struggles with global support' and connecting 'local problems to global solutions.'*<sup>696</sup>

The local struggle of '3 Highview Crescent' is finally tied to several global discourses. The first is the fight of displaced indigenous peoples, here represented by the Australian Aborigines. The overt polemic on the moral importance of the Mabo case for any of us, black or white Australians, to really feel at home in this country, may have been cringe-inducing to some, but at a purely narrative level it demonstrates a changing attitude to place, and the conflicting values that can be imposed upon it. Here we see a philosophical uniting of the rights of indigenous peoples, with the rights of white suburban Australians. It's an important and original connection, particularly in the context of a popular comedy, complicating as it does, a long-standing cultural divide between 'average' Australians and indigenous ones. While there is something shockingly simplistic about Darryl's comparison of his house to the Aboriginal dreaming, there is also a commonsense pragmatism that invites empathy between both groups; an appeal to the universal, though culturally differentiated, attachment to place and to homeland.

The other discourse to which Darryl ties his cause, and the one which ultimately allows him to succeed, is the very notion of justice itself, as instituted in the Australian Federal High Court's clause that land can only be compulsorily be acquired 'on just terms'. In his closing speech QC Lawrence Hammell (Bud Tingwell), takes some of Darryl's own words and attaches them to this idea of fairness:

*'You may think our appeal is based on emotion rather than law. Not true. It's about the highest law in this country, the constitution, and one phrase within it, 'On just terms'. That's what this is all about. Being just. They want to pay*

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<sup>696</sup> R. Wilson & W. Dissanayake, loc. cit.



*only for the house. But they're taking away much more than that. So much more. Sure the Kerrigans built a house, then they built a home, and then a family. You can acquire a house but you can't acquire a home, because a home is not built of bricks and mortar. It's built of love and memories. You can't pay for it and you're just short-changing people if you try. I can't speak for those who wrote this document, but I'll bet when they put in the phrase 'on just terms' they hoped it would stop anyone short-changing someone like Darryl Kerrigan.'*

Darryl's quest for recognition of his way of life is successful only because his QC lawyer understands the laws and is able to appeal to principles made possible by the existence of a national field. This national field exists as a crystallisation of the nation's aspirations to universally recognise the rights of its citizens. Denis Denuto's weak-sounding yet culturally authentic assertion that 'the vibe' of the constitution should protect the Kerrigans, is ultimately not 'up to scratch', an implicit criticism of the Australian apathy towards understanding the details and intellectual challenges of the rights and responsibilities upon which our most valued ways of life are based. While it is essential to know that what you have is precious, in its own terms, it is also essential to cut through the fuzzy logic of 'she'll be right' and do the work required to know your entitlements.

That this courtroom scene swiftly links the humorous and very prosaic words and beliefs of Darryl to the high-sounding abstract notions of justice and constitutional law is indicative of the film's whole populist yet subversively radical approach. Quickly veering away from the direct expression of any intellectualism or fanatical idealism, the closing scenes reveal the media's summary of the case – 'Darryl versus Goliath' accompanied by the Dale's voiceover: 'Mum reckons it's funny how one day you're not famous. Then you are. Then you aren't anymore.' The radical aspect of *The Castle*, in the context of Australian film, is that it manages to treat its 'little Aussie battlers' seriously, giving them an ultimate dignity, while simultaneously and self-consciously engaging in that great Australian tradition of 'taking the piss'. Some critics, who saw the film as patronising and despising of its characters, misinterpreted this approach.<sup>697</sup> Yet the filmmakers insistence on their affection for the characters is borne out by the

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<sup>697</sup> For example, Evan Williams' review in *The Australian* newspaper, reprinted in *Urban Cinefile*, <<http://www.urbancinefile.com.au> article ID=1205> ([06/05/02]).



fact that the Western suburbs audiences most closely resembling the Kerrigans loved the film and embraced it wholeheartedly.<sup>698</sup>

### **The Utopian Longing for Home**

*The Castle* is a departure from Australian cinema in general in that it explores unashamedly utopian longings for home, and attaches them to very real social and political issues. Lorraine Mortimer, a researcher into the sociology of everyday life, has written that:

*...the film's ethnographic hyperbole is a way of exploring the textures of the world these people have made in the shadow of high-voltage power-lines. It brings home to us the fact that we all make worlds for ourselves in the shadow of toxic realities over which we have little control.*<sup>699</sup>

She goes on to note the importance of mobilising people's 'perfectly valid hopes and desires' for home and happiness and the traces of something better than what is, in order to resist the 'Airlinks' of this world.<sup>700</sup>

The longing for something better mobilised by *The Castle* is closely connected with a nostalgia for the 'daggy' family holidays and simple pleasures of a particular Australian way of life that have been superseded by a preoccupation with stylish 'lifestyle options'. If, as Mortimer has noted, utopian longings have been saddled with purely pathological associations, so too have nostalgic ones. Yet, as Robin Trotter has asserted, '...nostalgia enables a dialogue between the past and present,' offering ways for people to connect their current personalised experiences to '...a broader past', which is allowed to tell its truths and access historical realities through the gentle, and necessarily unconscious, muting of its pains.<sup>701</sup> Thus through *The Castle* many sectors of the Australian audience are enabled to revalue the unglamorous, silly and gauche aspects of suburban family life, while accepting some of the truths upon which that life was based, namely the dispossession of Aboriginal people.

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<sup>698</sup> L. Mortimer, 'The Castle, the garbage bin and the high voltage tower: home truths in the suburban grotesque', *Meanjin*, Vol.57, no.1, 1998, p. 117.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid.

<sup>701</sup> Robin Trotter, 'Nostalgia and the Construction of an Australian Dreaming,' *Journal of Australian Studies*, No.61, 1999, p. 21.



*The Castle*'s importance within the tradition of Australian film belies its many faults – its technical shortfalls, narrative implausibilities, and a humour over-reliant on repetition and exaggeration. The significance of the film can be found in tightrope walk between attitudes of ridicule and the affection for the Australian suburban experience. These people are truly happy with what they've got, perceiving beauty, tranquillity and love where we are tempted to see just an outer suburbs eye-sore overflowing with kitsch. That we finish the film and love this family, without feeling pity, condescension or shame, allows us to love and accept, not uncritically, that huge part of national culture – life in the suburbs – which has been either ignored or deplored in our cinema.

### ***Floating Life*: Transnational Exile and Hybrid Home-making**

*...homelessness can mean destitution, and it can also mean freedom. – Ross Gibson*<sup>702</sup>

The recurrent theme of exile in Australian narratives takes on different accents in response to new challenges in *Floating Life*, a film depicting a globally dispersed Asian family who find a complicated refuge in contemporary Australian suburbia. Hong Kong/Australian director Clara Law grapples with the physical and psychological difficulties of homelessness, and the making of home in a foreign place. With its intensely subjective approach, the film can be read as an explication of Honneth's 'struggle for recognition' of the individuals within the family group, and of the family itself within different national cultures. Here the 'community of value' through which the characters define themselves and configure their identities is largely an internalised psychological one, working its way outwards among family members. Yet it is also a transnational one, a site of struggle that cannot be fully explained or contained by family ties or national limits and can never rely on a return to 'authentic' ethnicity. As the characters in *Floating Life* work towards being at home in their new world, so too audience members are given glimpses of ways the Australian national narrative might be opened up to new voices and new dialogues.

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<sup>702</sup> R. Gibson, op.cit. p. 45.



## Exiled from authenticity

On their last day in Hong Kong, Pa and Mum Chan (Edwin Pang and Cecilia Lee), and their two rambunctious teenage sons Chau and Yue (Toby Chan and Toby Wong), battle the bustle of a final shopping trip. Taking a lunch-break, they enter the steamy neighbourhood noodle café where they are on first-name terms with the proprietor. A familiar place, cinematographer Dion Beebe depicts it in golden brown tones and slightly soft focus.

Mum and the boys drop their parcels and run off for more, leaving retired tea-merchant Pa to taste some new green tea with the proud proprietor, who insists that the new brew is ‘priceless’, ‘very rare’, and ‘picked before the 5<sup>th</sup> of April’. Pa looks at the tea, notes that its colour is fine, and then tastes it, delivering his expert verdict:

*Pa: Too late. It was picked a bit late, certainly not before April 5<sup>th</sup> ...Not bad; it's still before the wet season. Those days are gone. Twenty years ago, I got one lot, real Dragon Well tea. It wasn't this yellow. It was as green as Jade...Even the million dollar Jade couldn't compare. (smiling, looking off into the distance) The fragrance was sweet. The taste made you feel the 'chi of tranquillity'. It's all gone. This fragrance doesn't linger, no subtleties.*

*Proprietor: Well, wontons are the same. Who really uses live shrimps today?*  
*(They laugh in agreement.)*

*Pa: So when are you going to Vancouver?*

*Proprietor: My son's working on it. I say we've just been warming our arses here. And now we're off to somewhere else.*

This exchange is full of yearning and nostalgia, invoking a past when things were ‘real’, fragrances lingered, and tranquillity could be achieved through the complexities of fine tea and live shrimp wontons. That these Hong Kong merchants speak of culinary authenticity is not just a signifier of their respective trades. It is also one of the few arenas in which they can defend themselves as possessing authentic Chinese knowledge.



Sinclair, Yue, Hawkins, Pookong and Fox argue that for the diasporic Chinese population, 'China' has assumed a mythical authenticity; it is a 'motherland', 'fatherland' or 'ancestral home', the centre of 'real Chineseness'.<sup>703</sup> Hong Kong, on the other hand, is 'a hybrid of East and West', a 'centre for cultural reformulation' where people must find ways of being 'Chinese enough' to be authentic, yet 'not too Chinese' to participate in the modern metropolis.<sup>704</sup> This is a central concern in Law's previous work *Wonton Soup* (1994),<sup>705</sup> a romantic comedy in which an Australian born Chinese man is rejected by his Hong-Kong girlfriend for not being 'a real Chinese'. Similarly, *Floating Life*'s characters each encounter an imagined 'authentic ethnicity' from which they are excluded.

Like many of their generation, Mum and Pa Chan fled communist China on foot in 1949, finding a safe place in Hong Kong, where they reared their five children. As the 1997 hand-back approaches, they feel the need to move again in search of another safe place – safety is an issue discussed almost obsessively by each of the film's female characters. Determined to make a new life in Sydney with 'second daughter' Bing (Annie Yip), the elderly parents still long for their 'real' home. Mum expresses this through her desire to burn incense and pray to 'the ancestors', and Pa in his wistful memories of his ancestral home.

Mum and Pa's belief in the existence of an authentic home, one to which they will never have access, is the source of much desolation and depression. Mum supposes that they are so far away that their prayers will not reach home anyway. Pa tries to console her with the idea that 'it's all in the heart', yet doesn't seem entirely convinced himself. Living in Australia he abandons his practice of making tea for the family, and when his visiting friend gives him a special bag of rare tea leaves, Pa tries to refuse, saying that his 'heart's not in it.'

Issues of authenticity are also paramount for the Chans' 'first daughter' Yen (Annette Shun Wah), who lives in Munich with her German husband and their small daughter. Where Pa's longing for authenticity is expressed through his

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<sup>703</sup> John Sinclair, Audrey Yue, Gay Hawkins, Kee Pookong & Josephine Fox, 'Ch.2: Chinese Cosmopolitanism and Media Use', *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas*, eds. Stuart Cunningham & John Sinclair, University of Queensland Press, 2000, p. 40.

<sup>704</sup> Ibid. pp. 40-41.

<sup>705</sup> *Wonton Soup* is Law's contribution to the omnibus *Erotique* (Lizzie Borden, Monica Treut and Clara Law, 1994).



discussion of tea, Yen's dilemma first becomes evident in the arena of language. Her opening scenes show her unpacking boxes of plates in the kitchen of her new Munich apartment. With the telephone cradled between chin and shoulder as she works, Yen speaks in Cantonese to her mother who is now living in Australia. Yen tries to comfort Ma, who is crying about the fact that daughter Bing is being so autocratically assimilationist as to insist that the new migrants speak only in English. Shocked, Yen later shares this with her husband, expressing her extreme concern that her younger brothers are not even allowed to speak to their mother in their native language.

Later, we see Yen's struggle to teach her little daughter Miu-Miu to write and speak Cantonese. Miu-Miu rebels, telling her stricken mother that 'Papa says the Cantonese that Hong Kong people speak isn't *real* Chinese.' Yen agrees that she can't teach Mandarin, but asserts that 'Cantonese is Chinese too.' The little girl walks off, rejecting her mother's culture as inauthentic and not worth the trouble. Added to Yen's sorrow at her child's disinterest, is her sense of betrayal, that her otherwise loving husband Michael (Julian Pulvermacher) could undermine something so important to her as her mother tongue.

In bed late at night, Yen tries to persuade Michael to move to Australia where she can be near her parents:

*Yen:*                    *Mui-Mui said she'd like to live with her grandpa and grandma. You believe in democracy right?*

*Michael:*           *Of course. I'm German, Mui-Mui is German. The majority wins.*

*Yen:*                    *(turning away from him) What am I?*

*Michael:*           *You're my wife.*

*Yen:*                    *And? ...I'm the eldest daughter, do you understand?*

*Michael:*           *And now you're Mui-Mui's mum. We've saved up enough to buy a home.*

*Yen:*                    *I don't know where my home is. I don't even know if I should think of myself as Chinese. I was born in Hong Kong. I don't speak Mandarin. And soon Hong Kong won't be Hong Kong. The colour of my skin is yellow, not white. I speak German with an accent. I live in*



*Germany, but I'm not really German.  
Where is my home? I only know my  
roots are connected to my parents. I  
finished college and came here ten  
years ago. They never asked me for  
anything. Now they've grown old. (she  
starts to cry) The happier I am in  
Germany, the more it hurts.*

Yen's sense of dislocation manifests itself in a constant rearrangement of her furniture. She reads a book about Feng-shui and becomes convinced that the house itself has an unlucky configuration. The often counter-intuitive furniture placement causes great disruption to the household, yet Yen asserts that it is an 'ancient Chinese tradition' and therefore must have some worth. In a voiceover she tells the audience that she's not sure she believes in it, 'but I dare not disbelieve. There are so many things beyond our control. You don't know when...which day...it'll all be gone.' This scene cuts to one in which she encounters the hateful glance of a neo-Nazi skinhead, a swastika tattooed on his skull. Though the malevolent young man strides off when she walks towards him, Yen's comment about feeling fearful and out of control is here linked the unspoken fears of racist violence. Though she may be safe in Germany now, Yen is watchful, aware of the fact that Hitler's racism was enacted quite suddenly. Her home in Germany could disappear almost without warning. Added to its racist past is the fact that contemporary Germany has ethnicity-based membership criteria for citizenship therefore excluding ethnic minorities from full participation in the workforce and in national life in general.<sup>706</sup> Though this is never overtly stated in Yen's story, it is suggested, justifying her fearfulness and her consciousness that she does not fully belong, exiled, yet unsure of where her longings for home should be directed.

### **'Houses here aren't very solid...'**

Where some members of the Chan family long for authentic ethnicity, the opposite approach is taken by 'second sister' Bing, whose 'search for secure moorings in a shifting world'<sup>707</sup> is expressed in paranoia and a rejection of all

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<sup>706</sup> Scott Lash & John Urry, 'Mobile Subjects: Migration in Comparative Perspective', *Economies of Signs and Spaces*, Sage Publications, London, 1994. p. 191.

<sup>707</sup> D. Harvey, op.cit., p. 302.



things representing the past. With her hard edges and sharp words, Bing is not a likeable character. She organises the rest of her family with fascist intolerance. Obsessive about cleanliness and security, she quickly apprises them of the many dangers of life in the new country. Having just arrived from the airport, Mum and Pa approvingly survey Bing's house, with its big rooms and spacious kitchen. 'Plenty of room to prepare a banquet' says Mum. 'So beautiful', says Pa, smiling as he looks around. The boys run up and down the stairs shouting at each other, until Bing yells at them to be quiet. 'I'm telling you, houses here aren't very solid.' She taps the wall. 'Thin as paper.'

As Mum unwraps the small family incense altar, trying to work out which way it should be placed in this hemisphere, Bing tells her she won't be able to use it:

*Bing:                    Forget it. It's a wooden house. You can't burn incense. A little fire would burn it down.*

*Ma:                     That flimsy?*

*Pa:                     The outside wall is brick. (He tries to open the back door, but finds it locked. He peers out into the sun.)*

*Bing:                   There's lots of burglars. We've got locks on the windows and doors. Plus an alarm and a smoke detector. Got a hat Pa? The sun here is dangerous. That hole in the ozone layer...three out of ten Australians have skin cancer. A terminal disease...and wasps kill here...try hanging out the clothes, you'll get Redbacks in the house.*

*Cheung:              Poisonous red spiders. Deadly.*

*Bing:                   Many people have dogs here.*

*Pa:                     They do in Hong Kong too.*

*Ma:                     We could carry sticks.*

*Bing:                   You've never seen a Pit Bull Terrier. They have a thick skin and jaws that lock. They've killed people. 30,000 Australians are bitten every year.*

*Pa:                     So many people killed in Australia!*



Bing's hysterical response to the difficulties of her new life is to close off all dialogue, either with her family, her culture or her past. She imagines her future without children, because after all, 'They won't take care of you when you're old, so why have them? Them might even kill you for your life insurance.'

With her refusal to eat fat or salt, or to encounter the sunshine without umbrella and sunglasses, Bing sees survival as paramount. A house is not a container for memories, but a fortress against a hostile and dangerous world. Life is not for pleasure or relationship, but is to be filled with hard work, allowing financial security and self-preservation. As she tells the boys, 'You're here as migrants, not here to enjoy life. It's the Chinese diaspora okay?' Shutting herself into a sterile self-reliant world where she relies on nobody, she tells the audience in voiceover that:

*'This is a 100% clean, tidy and secure house. I am saving up. I have two million Australian dollars so that even if the government goes bankrupt and has no pension for us Asian immigrants, I'll still have enough money. I won't have to beg for help. There isn't anyone to turn to for help.'*

This last sentence accompanies a scene of Bing's husband Cheung, newly arrived, marvelling at the beauty of the new home she has created. She silently makes him a cup of tea, refusing to enter into his joy. He has not been able to help her in the last three years, and she is determined never to need him again.

It becomes apparent, through the narration of her story, that Bing is the way she is because she has suffered so greatly in the process of establishing her new life. The first member of the family to move to Australia, she lived alone for three years, waiting for her husband to save up enough money to join her. Completely alone in the terrifying new country, she had to be bracingly self-sufficient and independent, as shown in her terrified encounters with mice, spiders and kangaroos. We see images of a sobbing Bing, crouched on the dining table, trying to elicit comfort from her helpless faraway husband over the telephone. Her voiceover describes her memory: 'A single woman in a suburb. Many vanished, their bodies never found.' This hyperbole reflects a subjective but nevertheless genuine terror.



Hamid Naficy has written of transnational exilic filmmakers that one common pathology in their experience of space is the contradictory oscillations between agoraphobia and claustrophobia.<sup>708</sup> Naficy builds upon Westphal's classic work on agoraphobia, wherein the condition is brought about by 'excessive adverse life events' including relationship disruptions, loss, bereavement and separation anxiety.<sup>709</sup> Naficy argues that the stresses of 'voluntary or forced separation from homeland' can bring about the typical symptoms of agoraphobia and claustrophobia, and the attempts to control them – through the withdrawal and confinement to safe places like a house, room or bed and preference for dark places manifesting itself in the wearing of sunglasses when venturing outside.<sup>710</sup> In *Floating Life*, Law allows herself to interrogate this pathology through the character of Bing. Bing's eventual complete nervous breakdown provokes a return to the bosom of the family, and to the reflexive use of the rituals of ancestor worship to counter the phobias brought on by post-migration exhaustion. When Bing is finally coaxed out of the house by Mum, it is significant that Mum grabs from her the sunglasses and the umbrella, throwing them back inside, and shutting the door firmly. Out in the quiet street, in the suburbs, agoraphobia and claustrophobia can finally be reconciled.

### **Home as an act of will**

*Floating Life* poses the idea that in this world of 'accelerating turnover time and the rapid write-off of traditional and historically acquired values' a home is a deliberate and labour-intensive creation. It is an act of will imposed upon a social landscape that moves too fast for homes to evolve in their natural incremental and organic ways. Making a home under such circumstances requires skilled and purposeful improvisation, a hybridising process in which a home is developed by the difficult blending of old customs together with adaptations to the new culture.

The task is an arduous and exhausting one, requiring the migrants to exist in the liminal 'floating' position of the title, neither here nor there, Australian nor Chinese, traditional nor modern. Yet to deny any one of the oppositions, to take a

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<sup>708</sup> Hamid Naficy, 'Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics' in *Global Local: cultural production and the transnational imaginary*, eds. R. Wilson, & W. Dissanayake, Duke University Press, Durham, 1996, pp. 129-131.

<sup>709</sup> Ibid.



firm position – through either clinging to the old, or completely embracing the new – is shown, particularly through Bing's experience, to be psychologically disastrous. More productive tactics are exhibited by Mum, Pa and the boys. Where Bing is heavy and rigid, a state that threatens to 'drown' her in paranoia and insanity, they are fluid and flexible – able to 'go with the flow', to float at least to some degree. They refuse to either give up their English lessons, or to stop speaking Cantonese; Mum furiously tackles food preparation, cooking everything 'from shark fin to kangaroo tail'; Pa listens to 'every piece of news, from The Voice of America in the morning, Radio Moscow at noon, the Voice of Free China in the arvo, and the BBC radio before dinner – and after.' The boys describe themselves as 'successfully merged into Oz' because they mow the lawns, try to play sport, lust after Australian girls, and watch local soap operas on TV. Yet they try to remember the old Chinese sayings, like 'A house with holes in its roof always meets the all-night rain.'

What these often humourous scenes of acculturation demonstrate is that while creating a new home in the flux-filled world requires a courageous act of will, it is a wilfulness aiming at a state of delicate balance, quite a different kind of exertion from the autocratic fear-driven control exhibited by Bing. Eventually it becomes obvious that the two approaches cannot be reconciled, and Mum, Pa and the boys leave her house, buying their own big house in a nearby suburb. (Bing's screams at them as they leave, threatening to disown them all.) It is significant that Bing's house is a monotone beige, contained within a tree-less quarter acre block, whereas the Chan's new home is an older style rambling red brick structure in a large semi-rural property of lawns and established trees.

Mark Roxburgh, in his analysis of *Floating Life*, argues that the Chans are able to make this beautiful new home precisely because Pa comes to realise, that there is no stable and fixed authentic home to which he can one day return.<sup>711</sup> After meeting with his old friend and realising that he will never return to the ancestral home in China, which is probably no longer standing, he is able to conceive of the creation of a new ancestral home.

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<sup>710</sup> Ibid.

<sup>711</sup> Mark Roxburgh, 'Clara Law's *Floating Life* and Australian Identity', *Metro*, No. 110, 1997, p. 5.



In his final scenes we see Pa sitting elegantly on his shady verandah, sipping tea and planning for the future. Then, while his three sons lie under a tree, he wanders the garden, referring to paper maps and plans he has made. He talks of making a lotus pond, and also of constructing a greenhouse. This last plan is a concession to the Australian climate, for as Pa notes, 'It's not wet enough here, it's too dry, and we need a greenhouse to grow quality tea leaves.' He then proudly proclaims that he's bought enough land so that his sons, when they marry, can also build their houses on the property. The boys look at each other, groaning 'oh shit' at the prospect of living their lives in a family compound. Yet they smile, seeming happy and content that the family is together, that Pa is once again looking towards the future with hope.

### **The life cycle as migration: three seconds of pleasure**

The segment of *Floating Life* accompanied by the intertitle 'A House in Hong Kong' focuses on the Chan's eldest son, a dissolute stockbroker Kar-Ming (Anthony Wong). Lingered in Hong Kong, he waits for his application for Australian residency to be processed, and tries to decide whether to take his girlfriend with him. A gambler who never got his degree, a smoker and a philanderer, he admits he doesn't know what he wants. Curiously, he is obsessed with counting his many ejaculations, a means by which he seems to measure out his life and his memories. He reminisces in voiceover: 'In the summer of 1980 I first ejaculated in this house. Everybody was here in 1980. We were all very happy.' And a little later says, 'My phonecalls with Mum reached a world record in 1994. My ejaculations too. Compared to 1980. The pleasure still only lasts three seconds. Will it be the same in 1997? Where will I be in 1997?'

Kar-Ming's seemingly nonchalant approach to life is challenged when he comes into direct contact with two deaths. In the first instance he is required by law to collect his grandfather's bones from the cemetery, where they have been lying since 1988. Kar Ming looks on with distaste as the grave attendant cheerfully cleans the bones, declaring them to have 'decayed beautifully'. Kar Ming is told not to be afraid, for this is his grandfather. He asks why the bones have to be dug up, and is told that 'Hong Kong is too small and lying down takes up too much room.'



This scene is particularly odd to the Australian audience for whom cemetery space has never really been at a premium. For Kar-Ming it is perhaps the first direct realisation of the reality that his own flesh and blood will one day be dried out bones. That there is not even enough room for these to be laid out in the ground signals the passing away of even the most basic dignities. His grandfather's identity rests only in the memories of his descendents, and Kar-Ming begins to feel the fragility of existence, and the heart-rending weight of filial love for ageing parents.

His second confrontation with death comes when he accompanies 'Apple', the girl he is having an affair with, to the abortion clinic. A Vancouver-based Chinese girl visiting Hong Kong, Apple is a flippant modern flapper, who speaks Cantonese with a Canadian accent. Her passionate holiday fling with Kar-Ming takes a serious turn when she finds that she is pregnant – a revelation that is accompanied by much raucous laughter as they lie drunk in bed.

As Apple is crying in the hospital bed, Kar-Ming asks to see the foetus. The tiny puddle of blood and tissue lying in the metal kidney dish appears to throb with life for a moment, and he feels a sudden urge to revive it. The nurse curtly dismisses this, saying that it's 'stone cold dead'.

Later, Kar-Ming takes the tiny corpse out to the garden below his apartment block. Placing it in a little box, he then digs furiously in the dirt, creating an open grave. In voiceover he says:

*'Three seconds of pleasure produces three inches of flesh. It throbs only once in its entire life. Its whole life is just one second. In one second it experiences birth, ageing, illness and death. Too short...or too long? (He begins to weep against the night sky backdrop of high-rise buildings.) It's not a piece of flesh. It's my child.'*

Kar-Ming's discovery of a sense of family also manifests itself when he arrives in Australia. He undertakes to rescue his little brother from Bing's control, hitting the younger boy and screaming at him, 'Why didn't you come home? Where is your home?' He drives the two younger boys to the beach, and talks about their ageing parents, saying, 'There must be *something* for me not to want them to die.' Like Yen, whose sadness manifests itself at the thought of her parents growing old and passing on, Kar-Ming finds his heart when he realises that he will mourn



the loss of his parents. He begins to accept that it is his connection to the people who have been before him and the people who will come after him, which gives his life meaning.

Clara Law has stated that while this film is a description of the immigrant's subjective experience, it is also about the universal and more generally existential need to live 'floatingly'. She asks:

*...aren't we all transient beings passing through this place called Earth? We are mortals that will pass away. We always try to hold hard on to a little space and call it our own. Are we not all immigrants to the world? Where are our roots?*<sup>712</sup>

The suggestion here is that the migrant's physical and psychological experience expresses most overtly what all humans live out, yet often deny. The privilege, and the burden, of the dislocated person, is that they must confront directly the temporal nature of existence and the essential place of history and heritage in the project of 'being'. As Law has said, 'I think heritage is important because it puts you in place. It reminds you that you are part of history. You are not the beginning or the end; you are just a process.'<sup>713</sup> Deploying the rhythm of the life cycle and the rhythm of migration as metaphors for each other, *Floating Life* elucidates a way of being in the world which is acutely sensitive to the particularities of time and place. While there is a yearning to find one's roots and set them down, there is also an embrace of movement, a resistance to the backward-looking root-bound ways of life that can only bring on stagnation and suffocation.

## **Diaspora in the Suburbs**

Unlike *The Castle*, which emphasises and celebrates ordinariness, *Floating Life* defamiliarises Australian suburbia, depicting it as an eerie and frighteningly expansive place; an agoraphobic's nightmare that might turn, at the blink of the eye, into an odd version of paradise. Through newcomers' eyes we see anew the brittle boxy-looking homes of sprawling suburbia; the stark white light of an

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<sup>712</sup> Clara Law, 'Director's Statement, Pardo: International Competition: Clara Law, *Floating Life*', <<http://www.pardo.ch/1996/festival96/floatingreg.html>> ([02/02/99]).

<sup>713</sup> Clara Law quoted by Chris Berry, 'Floating Life', *Cinema Papers*, No.110, June 1996, p. 11. p. 10.



Australian summer; the weirdness of the native fauna; the historical and cultural newness of our young cities. Chau (Toby Chan), one of the young sons, summarises the family's first impressions when he describes their first weeks in Australia as being 'like a movie', to which his brother Yue (Toby Wong) replies, 'A bloody horror movie!' Yet as they later admit, nothing terrible ever eventuates, their 'last great adventure' being an encounter with a neighbour's yelping Jack Russell Terrier.

The spacious possibilities of the suburbs are visually elicited by repeated shots of deep blue sky, open frontages and fences and walls of benign dimensions. Implicit in *Floating Life* is the notion that this country, because of its very emptiness and openness, provides a space for new beginnings, a place where scattered and displaced families, like the Chans, can begin constructing new lives and making new history. As Christos Tsolkias has written, the film '...manages to detail the colour, the geometry and the physicality of suburbia...', bringing into being '...a new cinematic iconography...' for the suburbs.<sup>714</sup> He notes the film's ability to convey the double nature of suburbia, its ugliness and beauty, '...an ugliness that sometimes necessitates escape...and a beauty which articulates longing.'<sup>715</sup>

Audiences of Australian film will be familiar with representations of our suburbs as a kind of monotonous monocultural hell, with multicultural vibrancy existing only in coveted yet conflict-ridden inner-city pockets. *Floating Life* challenges this picture, opening up '...the possibility for a reading of suburbia as not static and homogenous but as capable of reflecting the multiple and fractured communities and identities existent in urban Australia.'<sup>716</sup>

For the English-speaking white Australian viewer the film is surprisingly effective as a means of cultural self-understanding, not deriving merely from an 'explanation' of the 'other' or an empathy for the other's plight. As Roxburgh has convincingly argued in his analysis of the film, it creates a 'third space' in the externalised binary opposition of Self/Other.<sup>717</sup> It achieves this through the subjective and somewhat isolated representation of the Chan family, who

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<sup>714</sup> Christos Tsolkias, 'Aleka Doesn't Live Here Anymore...', op.cit., p. 45.

<sup>715</sup> Ibid.

<sup>716</sup> Ibid.

<sup>717</sup> Mark Roxburgh, op.cit., p. 4.



understand themselves, and speak of themselves as ‘othered’ yet are never constructed as such from the outside. Australian characters are almost entirely absent in the film, featuring only in minor roles as extras, and are never shown to be anything but friendly and accepting – but somewhat alien. The ‘othering’ of the Chans is a creation of their own dialogue with their ethnicity, and with the physical landscape that represents their exile. Yet they are also ‘Self’ because it is their story, presented with subjective techniques such as monologue and the use of symbolic colour palettes representing internal states of perception. They are simultaneously ‘Self’ and ‘Other’, constructing identity through a dialogical process which opens up ways to wholeness. Using Taylor's work on recognition, Roxburgh concludes that *Floating Life* has significant implications for popular notions of Australian identity. He writes that ‘...the third space opened up for the Chans, which enables them to come to terms with the inherent ambivalence of their sense of identities is also opened up to Australians as a whole and our conception of national identity.’<sup>718</sup> *Floating Life* thus exemplifies the possibilities for a national cinema to contribute to a polyphonic national narrative, a national narrative that has the potential to actively engage with the physical and spiritual problems of modern identity, without losing sight of the importance of the nation in creating and maintaining homes for its citizens.

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<sup>718</sup> Ibid., p. 6.



## Chapter 8B: *The Castle*, *Floating Life* and the Field of Australian Film

### *The Castle*

*The Castle*'s popularity with Australian audiences enabled it to reach \$10 million at the box office in less than 20 weeks.<sup>719</sup> Distributed wide-scale by Village Roadshow, rather than by an arthouse distributor, the film entered the realm of populist multiplex Saturday night entertainment. Its appearances on television have rated exceedingly well, and it has done brisk business as a video rental. Amidst the sample of films examined in this thesis, *The Castle*'s local box office performance is a [distant] second only to the blockbuster *Babe*.

The film's position in the national cinematic field is unique. Not only does it occupy a space with substantial financial clout and audience popularity, but it also has symbolic credibility as an 'Indie' film. Self-financed by the fiercely maverick Working Dog team, for an oft-reported low budget of \$700,000, the film was clearly free from any association with government funding bodies or major production companies.<sup>720</sup>

This unique position was reflected by the fact that the critics seemed somewhat unsure of how to place the film, or of what criteria to use in judging it. It was obviously not an arthouse text to be judged on its aesthetic refinement or complexity, (the low-budget aspect of the film was deemed worthy of mention in every review); Neither was it an indigenous interpretation of Hollywood genre, or a worthy social realist commentary.

One of the most common criticisms of the film was that it patronised its characters. An LA film critic wrote that: 'This sort of comedy is dependent on a genuinely generous attitude towards its characters. If the makers of *The Castle* have such an attitude it doesn't come through very clearly.'<sup>721</sup> Evan Williams, of *The Australian*, wrote that '*The Castle* defends what I suspect its makers secretly

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<sup>719</sup> *The Dish*, Press Kit, 2000.

<sup>720</sup> *The Castle*, according to Sitch and Cilauro, was part-financed by the pay-TV company Showtime, the Working Dog members, and the cast members who agreed to work on deferment.

<sup>721</sup> Andy Klein, quoted by Tearlach Hutcheson, 'Storming The Castle', *Cinema Papers*, no.134, Aug/Sept 2000, p. 14.



despise – the deeply conventional values of working-class Australia.’<sup>722</sup> While Evans was quick to qualify his criticisms – ‘perhaps this is unfair’ – his general verdict was that the film seemed unsure of whether we were to sneer at the Kerrigans, or to sympathise with them. Within Australia, some of this suspicion of the filmmakers’ attitude towards their subject can be traced, at least in part, to their history as a highly intelligent and university educated comedy team, whose work up to that point had relied heavily upon satire. With their symbolic capital built upon a foundation of ‘sending up’ and ‘pulling down’ Australian icons, advertisements and media practices, it was little wonder that there was some confusion in the interpretation of this film, which lampooned what it was also celebrating.

Not all reviews were negative. Louise Keller and Andrew Urban, from the popular online film weekly Urban Cinefile, found *The Castle* to be a genuinely funny ‘true blue comedy’, with ‘charm’ and ‘simplicity’, succeeding in spite of its low production values.<sup>723</sup> One of the US’s most widely read and watched critics, Roger Ebert, also viewed the film positively, declaring it ‘...one of those comic treasures...that shows its characters in the full bloom of glorious eccentricity’,<sup>724</sup> a tribute which was quoted liberally in the US publicity campaign.

In Australia there was heavy reporting of the film’s fortunes as it attempted to break into overseas markets. Newspapers like The Financial Review took an interest in the box office figures, and the film’s standing ovation reception at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998 was reported with glee, revealing an assumption that Australian readers felt ownership of the text, identifying its success or otherwise as a matter of national pride. When US arthouse distributor Miramax picked up the film for a reported \$6 million, there was further cause for celebration in local newspapers.

This celebration was somewhat muted by the outrageous discovery that certain words and phrases in the film were to be re-dubbed for overseas audiences.<sup>725</sup> The

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<sup>722</sup> Evan Williams, ‘Review of *The Castle*’, Urban Cinefile, <[http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/scripts/cinefile/videos\\_to\\_own.idc?Article\\_ID=1205](http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/scripts/cinefile/videos_to_own.idc?Article_ID=1205)> ([06/11/98]).

<sup>723</sup> Andrew L. Urban and Louise Keller, ‘Reviews of *The Castle*’, *Urban Cinefile*, Ibid.

<sup>724</sup> Roger Ebert, Chicago Sun-Times, quoted by Tearlach Hutcheson, ‘Storming The Castle’, op.cit. p. 14.

<sup>725</sup> Dale Paget, ‘Castle Culture Shock’, Arts and Entertainment Section. *The Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 02/0499, p. 29.



ethnographic integrity of the comedy was apparently betrayed when ‘petrol stations’ became ‘gas stations’, ‘rissoles’ became ‘meatloaf’, ‘pool tables’ became ‘billiard tables’ and ‘caravans’ became ‘mobile homes’.<sup>726</sup> In a similar way to the changing of accents in *Babe* in order to be intelligible to American audiences, this tinkering with the idiom of *The Castle* unpleasantly reinforced to Australians their peripheral audience position within the world cinematic field. Yet a national audience could only really care about such minor modifications if they had, indeed, truly engaged with the text’s detailed hyperbole. That there was such outrage at these modifications of small detail, suggests strongly that the text did occupy a powerful position within the national cultural imagination, and that the discomfort at the compromising of its ethnic minutiae was symbolic of a larger fear of being dominated or overpowered by another nation’s culture and cinema.

## Working Dog: Cottage Industry Collective

*Rough, Cheap and shot quickly by a team that is something of a cottage-industry collective working in the mass media, The Castle resembles the unexpected home-made present under the Christmas tree, distinguished by its lack of polish. – Lorraine Mortimer<sup>727</sup>*

*‘...we don't have autonomy individually, because we're answerable to each other...None of us have control, but I think as a group we do. And I think that's important.’ – Rob Sitch<sup>728</sup>*

The position of the Working Dog team within the Australian cinematic field is a unique one. Not only have they initiated ‘...some unprecedented and significant cross-fertilisation between film and television in terms of aesthetics and production processes’,<sup>729</sup> but Working Dog also illustrates a Lilliputian strategy that relies for its strength upon a collective approach to creativity and self-funding, rather than the heavily state-financed auteur approach adopted by most Australian filmmakers. This cooperative means of production may seem, at first, to be at odds with the idea of autonomy, yet as a group, Working Dog have been remarkably successful in jealously husbanding their independence, in such a way

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<sup>726</sup> Ibid.

<sup>727</sup> Lorraine Mortimer, op.cit., p. 17.

<sup>728</sup> R. Sitch, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>729</sup> S. Crofts, op.cit., p. 159.



as to ensure both financial and symbolic profits. This independence, presented as ‘professionalism’, co-exists with a populist appeal and an explicit rejection of the ‘aesthetic disposition’, thus complicating any simplistic understanding of Bourdieu’s model that equates autonomy only with high art and the ‘pure gaze’.

Working Dog encompasses team members Jane Kennedy, Tom Gleisner, Santo Cilauro, Rob Sitch, and their business manager Michael Hirsh, who have been working as a group for more than ten years. Gleisner, Cilauro and Sitch met at university in the 1980s where they performed in student revues, with other comics, under the title of *The D-Generation*. They were spotted by an ABC talent scout and went on to make a number of *D-Generation* series for television, and then hosted a top-rating breakfast shift on 3MMM radio. Dabbling in live comedy shows, and music-video parodies, the team gained something of a cult following with their television sketch comedy series, *The Late Show*, the videos of which became the ABC’s top-selling comedy titles of all time.<sup>730</sup>

The team, now including Jane Kennedy, wrote, produced, directed and acted in the satirical drama *Frontline*, set in the offices of a current affairs program. A popular and critical success, the program launched members of the team into other projects, including the acclaimed two-part political documentary, *The Campaign*, which followed the 1996 federal election, and the gentle, picturesque fly-fishing series *A River Somewhere* (1997).

The next step, embarking upon a feature film project, was a huge but natural progression for the team, who had over the years gathered enough symbolic and financial capital to raise an adequate, though limited, budget, and to persuade actors and crew to work for deferred payment. This self-funding was important to the team, who felt that it would enable them to have the creative control they treasured. As Cilauro has stated, ‘If we were going to do it on our own terms, then we had to do it with our own money.’<sup>731</sup> This necessitated a particular production strategy. Cilauro again:

‘...we worked backwards: How much money do we have?  
There are four of us, so we pooled as much money as we  
could. Basically, we were told by our fifth silent and non-

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<sup>730</sup> *The Castle*, Press Kit, 1997.

<sup>731</sup> S. Cilauro, quoted by P. Malone, ‘A House is a Castle’, *Cinema Papers*, April 1997, p. 11.



*creative partner... 'You can shoot for ten days, probably eleven, and that's when the catering runs out!'*<sup>732</sup>

The formal consequences of this philosophy are obvious within the finished product of *The Castle*. Its structural dependence upon voice-over plot explication was dictated by the need to condense storyline and thereby save on expensive film stock.<sup>733</sup> The deadpan-to-camera approach, along with the most basic of cinematography and mise-en-scene are technical illustrations of a 'return to basics', as described by Harvey, and are underpinned with a 'just get it done' briskness that cheerfully announces what Cilauro has explicitly stated: 'We didn't want to create the greatest film in the world with our first film.'<sup>734</sup>

Whenever they have discussed their film, the Working Dog team members have emphasised their philosophy of function over form, of 'just doing it'. When asked about his role shooting the film, Cilauro replied:

*'You can call it shooting. It was basically just holding the camera and getting the action...I don't know what style it was. It was a storytelling style. The only thing that was important was the story...When I think of Australianism I think of Ned Kelly, not because of his rebelling, but because of the words, "stand and deliver". I like the fact that the film is simple: here it is and there's nothing more complicated than that.'*<sup>735</sup>

Bourdieu argues that the populist ethos '...is the exact opposite of the Kantian aesthetic'.<sup>736</sup> Where the 'pure gaze' subordinates function to form, the 'common' or 'naïve' gaze '...performs a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life', always to an active proximity to necessity, and to 'making a virtue of necessity'.<sup>737</sup> Though they are possibly more financially secure than many other filmmakers included in this study, Working Dog's approach to their cultural production is the most pragmatic; they are the least likely to consider themselves 'artists' or to treat their work's formal aspects as seriously as its functional ones.

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<sup>732</sup> Ibid.

<sup>733</sup> R. Sitch, quoted in *Press Kit for The Castle*, 1997.

<sup>734</sup> S. Cilauro, in P. Malone, op.cit., p. 12.

<sup>735</sup> Ibid.

<sup>736</sup> P. Bourdieu, 'Introduction', *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, transl. Richard Nice, Routledge, London, 1986, p. 5.

<sup>737</sup> Ibid.



As Cilauro once said of *The Castle*, ‘This is just a plain painting, not cubism; it’s not anything.’<sup>738</sup>

The adoption of a blue-heeler cattle dog for their icon and their name suggests the way in which the Working Dog team wish to be perceived: as essentially ‘down to earth’ Australians, hard-working, unpretentious and good-humoured. Serious questions about their work are likely to be deflected with jokes or satire – ‘we get on pretty well as a group, and the ban on semi-automatic weapons has brought us together in a way we didn’t before.’<sup>739</sup> In their television work on *The Panel* the male members of Working Dog present ‘average bloke’ personas, while energetically discussing issues of popular interest, from politics to sport to entertainment, always with an eye on comic opportunity. Their choice of entertainer/writer Kate Langbroek as the female face of the panel, rather than team member Jane Kennedy, suggests more than an appreciation of Langbroek’s comic abilities. With her broad ‘strine’ accent and intelligent but girlishly silly manner, Langbroek is the larrikin lass, endearingly ‘ocker’ in a way that would be impossible for the decidedly middle-to-upper class Jane Kennedy, with her polished private-school demeanor.

The intended audience of Working Dog’s cultural production is therefore the opposite of the limited audience of rarefied peers as described by Bourdieu as existing at the most autonomous pole of cultural fields. The working methods of the makers of *The Castle* suggest then, that we need to refine Bourdieu’s model in order to understand how autonomy might be possible within a field like that of the mass media, with its particular relationship to large-scale audiences and heavy capital investment.

### **Professionalism: a model of autonomy**

*They are the most secretive people I’ve ever encountered;  
they are like a cult. – Magda Szubanski*<sup>740</sup>

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<sup>738</sup> S. Cilauro, in P. Malone, op.cit., p. 12.

<sup>739</sup> R. Sitch, in Press Kit for *The Castle*.

<sup>740</sup> Magda Szubanski, quoted in Lynden Barber, ‘Working Dog Days’, Review, *The Weekend Australian*, 18/11/00.



As Lynden Barber has observed, 'It has become virtually a media cliché to say that [Working Dog]...is tight-knit and secretive to the point of paranoia',<sup>741</sup> and that they retain an iron grip upon the production and exhibition of their image and their material.<sup>742</sup> In an interview with Rob Sitch I asked him about this perception of the team as control freaks, to which he answered with frustration:

*'Control freaks? I find it bemusing. It's almost like saying an author is a control freak. It's not an oxymoron but it's not far off. This is your job. You're not a control freak. This is your responsibility. It's a bit like saying because you're in charge you're a control freak...'*<sup>743</sup>

This fierce protectiveness of the work and its integrity has in fact changed the nature of the field of television comedy. As comedian Tony Martin has argued, before the Working Dog team came along, 'You were always made to feel arrogant and a control freak if you wanted any say in the editing,' whereas now, 'their way of working...has become the standard model for TV comedy [and] it's normal for comics to have creative control.'<sup>744</sup>

Though their success is built around humour, Working Dog take themselves and their ideas extremely seriously, always presenting themselves as professionals working within a creative domain. This atypical combination of creative independence and hard-nosed business mindedness clashes with the habitus of Australia's filmmaking community and has fostered some resentment. Refusing to conform to the ideals of 'suffering artists', Working Dog have become successful filmmakers without going to film school, and without relying on state funding. Sarah Watt, a talented animator and short filmmaker who describes herself as having 'failed completely in the fine art world' makes this comment about Working Dog:

*They didn't come via film school. I think there's a sort of snobbishness in the film industry that if you've had anything to do with television or haven't been to film school and hung around St Kilda and struggled for years, that you're somehow cheating. And I think Working Dog*

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<sup>741</sup> L. Barber, *ibid.*

<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>743</sup> R. Sitch, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>744</sup> Tony Martin quoted in L. Barber, 'Working Dog Days', *op.cit.*



*get that. Which is just absurd.*<sup>745</sup>

While she is undoubtedly an ‘artist’, and labels herself such, Watt's observation no doubt derives from her own position in the cultural field. An outsider who has done much of her best work for television, and with a young family to support, Watt sees the need for professional remuneration.

Where an ‘artist’ may cultivate the demeanor of an amateur, and should only be seen to derive financial wealth as an indirect result of their endeavours, a ‘professional’ has a more direct relationship with the financial world. The professional’s ethics and activities should always be governed by the ‘work’ itself and maintaining high standards, the payment for this labour as a means of livelihood need not be denied or subverted. While they are coy about their financial success – (budget details for *The Dish* are not forthcoming, while Rob Sitch and Jane Kennedy’s purchase of an expensive Toorak property was reported in gossip columns), Working Dog’s healthy relationship with money and with the details of business practice seems more explicit than that of many more ‘artistic’ filmmakers.

Sitch, who on top of his medical degree has partially completed a Harvard MBA, has expressed the belief that ‘business is the rhythm of life’.<sup>746</sup> He is unapologetic about the need for marketing films, and believes that Australian films need more marketing in order to sell themselves: ‘Marketing a film is almost as important as making a film’.<sup>747</sup> Yet he softens the impact of these statements by admitting that he has no passion for ‘the deal’, arguing that it’s a common trap to think that ‘the only scoreboard of life is money’.<sup>748</sup>

Working Dog are known for their stubborn bargaining, and yet this bargaining seems often to have less to do with financial aspects than with creative ones. Producer Nick Murray, chairman of the Screen Producers Association of Australia, tells the story of trying to negotiate with the team to license the rights of some of their ABC programs to a pay-TV Channel. According to Murray, they believed it was ethically wrong to sell a series made for the ABC to a commercial

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<sup>745</sup> Sarah Watt, private correspondence with the author, 1/5/01.

<sup>746</sup> R. Sitch, quoted by L. Barber, ‘Working Dog Days’, op.cit.

<sup>747</sup> R. Sitch, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>748</sup> R. Sitch, quoted by L. Barber, ‘Working Dog Days’, op.cit.



channel. 'They didn't want to do something they considered "selling out",' says Murray.<sup>749</sup> This anecdote reveals a sense of loyalty to that other (relatively) autonomous institution, the ABC, an institution in which Working Dog gained much of its formative experience and developed its ways of working. The 'schemes of perception' of professionalism, valuing independence and high standards over profit, need not preclude the pursuit of a 'mainstream' audience, or the desire to be financially rewarded for one's work.

The popularity of *The Castle*, and the financial capital gained from it, has allowed Working Dog to go on and make their next film, *The Dish* (2000), a glossy big-budget (comparatively) feature, which revisits a little known aspect of Australian history. With *The Dish* Working Dog increased both their economic and symbolic capital, for the film made \$16.8 million at the Australian box office, was voted most popular film at the Toronto International Film Festival, and gained several AFI awards.

The tactics used by Working Dog can be seen, in de Certeau's terms, as those of the 'weak' working within the order of the 'strong'. The careful planning and decisive 'naivety' of their first stepping-stone film project can be read, through de Certeau's words, as the 'hunter's tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike'.<sup>750</sup> This manoeuvrability, which transcends many of the dichotomies inherent in the national and global cinematic fields, suggests new ways in which cultural producers may be able to survive and thrive, telling their own stories to large local audiences, while they resist centralised power so prevalent in the globalised media.

### ***Floating Life***

Like the previously discussed *Vacant Possession*, *Floating Life* was a low budget film (\$2.7million) which struggled to make back its budget at the Australian box office (Australia and NZ \$144,191) or through its overseas sales

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<sup>749</sup> Nick Murray, quoted by L. Barber, *ibid.*

<sup>750</sup> M. de Certeau, *op.cit.*, p. 40.



(\$760,000),<sup>751</sup> screening for only two weeks to largely empty theaters in Australia.<sup>752</sup>

While few Australians may have seen *Floating Life*, the few who did see it were those agents capable of understanding the text as an important symbolic work, 'knowing and recognizing [it] as such',<sup>753</sup> and of recognising Law's status as an 'artist' rather than as a commercial director. The film was screened to acclaim at the 1996 Sydney and Melbourne festivals.<sup>754</sup> Adrian Martin comments that *Floating Life* '...reimagines the themes, moods and pictorial sensibility of Antonioni for the disconnected, postmodern world',<sup>755</sup> while Keith Connelly mentions Kurosawa and notes that the film shows the influence of Chinese auteur Hou Hsiao-Hsien.<sup>756</sup> These critics are thereby linking the film to a rich heritage of aesthetically important European and Asian cinema, marking it out to be read within the discourse of cinema art.

The film's symbolic richness comes not just from its status as art film, but also from its acknowledged contribution to the project of multicultural national identity. As the first Australian-produced feature to be made in a language other than English,<sup>757</sup> it occupied an important new position within the Australian cinematic field, thereby redefining what was possible within it, and indeed, redefining what an 'Australian' film might look like. At an international level, this strange Australian-but-non-English-speaking position was represented by the fact that *Floating Life*, in 1997, was the first Australian film to be nominated for an Academy award in the Best Foreign Language Film category.<sup>758</sup> This newness, its 'unprecedented' quality, constantly referred to in the literature about the film, constituted a large part of its symbolic value.

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<sup>751</sup> Bridget Ikin, private correspondence with the author, 2001.

<sup>752</sup> Tony Mitchell, 'Boxing the 'Roo: Clara Law's *Floating Life* and Transnational Hong-Kong-Australian Identities', *Cultural Studies & New Writing*, The UTS Review, Vol.6, No. 2, November 2000, p. 105.

<sup>753</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 37.

<sup>754</sup> T. Mitchell, op.cit., p. 104.

<sup>755</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Wanted: Art Cinema', *Cinema Papers*, December 2000/January 2001, p. 32

<sup>756</sup> Keith Connelly, 'Moving Experiences', *The Sunday Age*, Melbourne, 29/9/96.

<sup>757</sup> Fiona Harari, 'The risk takers', *The Australian Magazine*, *Weekend Australian* 18-9 November 1995, pp. 20-23.

<sup>758</sup> T. Mitchell, op.cit., p. 104.



Another aspect of the film's particular cultural power lay in its relevance to the issues of multiculturalism, a fact attested to by its funding through SBS Independent, a commissioning arm of Australia's multicultural broadcaster. The film was later screened three times on that TV station, once as part of a week of films dealing with racism. Critic David Stratton praised *Floating Life* as treating its 'New Australian' subjects with 'delicacy, humour and insight',<sup>759</sup> while Keith Connelly judges it '...the best feature film yet to be made on the subject of a migrant family'.<sup>760</sup> As noted previously, Roxburgh sees lofty potential in the film for the opening up of a 'third space' of identity to all Australians.<sup>761</sup> Tom O'Regan writes that the film is part of a 'diasporic multicultural cinema',<sup>762</sup> while other academic writers engaged with the film in scholarly journals such as the 'Journal of Australian Studies',<sup>763</sup> the 'UTS Review of Cultural Studies and New Writing',<sup>764</sup> and 'Senses of Cinema',<sup>765</sup> relating the text to highly topical issues of identity, nationalism and racism.

Contributing to the film's symbolic wealth, therefore, is its appearance at a moment in history where it can be situated within the 'independent transnational genre', to use Hamid Naficy's term. This genre, according to Naficy:

*...allows films to be read and reread not only as individual texts produced by authorial vision and generic conventions, but also as sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and translational struggles over meanings and identities.*<sup>766</sup>

With its themes and preoccupations, *Floating Life* provides such a site for various cultural agents (critics, academics, policy-makers) to display their credentials and advance their positions through their 'forward thinking' 'open-minded'

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<sup>759</sup> D. Stratton, 'Review of Floating Life', *The Australian*, 1988.  
<<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/film/>> ([02/02/02]).

<sup>760</sup> K. Connelly, op.cit.

<sup>761</sup> M. Roxburgh, op.cit., p. 6.

<sup>762</sup> T. O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, op.cit., p. 330.

<sup>763</sup> Audrey Yue, 'Asian-Australian Cinema, Asian-Australian Modernity', eds. Ffion Murphy & Miriano Weirlo, *Diaspora: Negotiating Asia Australia, JAS & ACH Joint Issue*, JAS No. 65/ACH No. 19, UQP, 2000, pp. 190-199.

<sup>764</sup> T. Mitchell, op.cit.

<sup>765</sup> Stephen Teo, 'Floating Life: The Heaviness of Moving', *Senses of Cinema*, January 2001,  
<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/12/floating.html>> ([06/05/02]).

<sup>766</sup> H. Naficy, op.cit., p. 121.



unconventionality, struggling against those agents favouring more traditional closed versions of Australian identity and Australian cinema.

That these agents, with their principles of advancing diversity and polyphony, are, to a certain extent, favoured, protected and promoted by official media policy, suggests that the field itself is structured to advance autonomy. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation the idea of a polyphonic Great Narrative was canvassed as a way for nations to protect diversity while maintaining the integrity necessary to pursue collective projects. It is through state funded bodies such as the SBS that these principles are crystallised. The SBS has a charter of providing ‘...multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians, and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society,<sup>767</sup> and a vision statement that promotes ‘Uniting and enriching our society by creatively communicating the values, the voices and the visions of multicultural Australia and the contemporary world.’<sup>768</sup> It is no surprise then, that the SBS as well as being instrumental in producing *Floating Life*, has also been essential in assisting Indigenous film production, as for example with the *From Sand to Celluloid* series and the 2001 feature *Yolngu Boy*. The specific policies of ‘cultural exchange’, together with funding from sympathetic national government are essential to the existence of these voices within the media and therefore within the national cinematic field.

## Clara Law: Transnational Exilic

*‘I'm a restless person, I always have been. And I've always been moving: born in Macau, studying in London, working in Hong Kong, now living in Melbourne. So the concept of "home", for me, doesn't really exist. I'm probably more like a bridge between different places, different cultures and philosophies.’ – Clara Law<sup>769</sup>*

*Speaking to more than one audience. Translating between audiences. Making a kind of bridge or facilitator between different positions. This seems to me to be almost a kind of*

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<sup>767</sup> SBS Charter, *SBS Annual Report*, 1998-1999.

<sup>768</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>769</sup> Clara Law, Press Kit Interview for *The Goddess of 1967*, 2001.



*definition of creativity in late modernity.* –**Stuart Hall**<sup>770</sup>

To speak of an Australian national cinematic field, and then to try to place Clara Law within it, is to see that the boundaries of that field are blurred and stretched, and that many of its agents are capable of remarkable mobility; an inter-national position-taking to maximise specific forms of capital. That Law has been embraced by this national cinematic field suggests the field's orientation towards heteronomous (independent) principles of non-commercial filmmaking; a commitment to polyphony and an increasingly sophisticated conception of the role and potentials of a national cinema.

As a child Law moved from Macau to Hong Kong, where she later received a Bachelor's degree in English literature. After working in Hong Kong television for several years, in 1982 she enrolled in London's National Film and Television School. Here, as her graduation project, she completed her first feature, *They Say the Moon is Fuller Here*, which won the Silver Plaque at the 1985 Chicago Film Festival. Returning to Hong Kong, Law directed a number of films dealing particularly with themes of migration, loss and the search for identity, including the acclaimed *Autumn Moon* (1992) and *Temptation of a Monk* (1993).

A collection of circumstances led Law, and her scriptwriter husband Eddie Fong, to move permanently to Melbourne in 1995. Law's retired parents had previously migrated here, and visiting them she found the filmmaking environment to be attractive. Finding the post-production facilities in Australia superior to those in Hong Kong, Law decided to post-produce *Temptation of a Monk* here.<sup>771</sup> Then, when her film *Autumn Moon* was so warmly received by Australian critics and festival audiences in 1993, winning a theatrical release, the location became even more appealing. While visiting, she was approached by local producers interested in working with her and her husband. Bridget Ikin, associated with SBS Independent, became producer on *Floating Life*. The script had already been written, with a view to obtaining finance from Japan, but it became a totally Australian-backed project.<sup>772</sup> Law describes the move:

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<sup>770</sup> Stuart Hall in dialogue with Naoki Sakai, 'A Tokyo Dialogue on Marxism, Identity Formation and Cultural Studies', *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Chen Kuan-Hsing et.al., Routledge, London, 1998, p. 364.

<sup>771</sup> J. Schembri, 'Director Stops Here to Hear Her Own Voice', EG, *The Age*, Melbourne, 12/06/96, p. 6.

<sup>772</sup> L. Barber, 'No Foreigner to Spiritual Dislocation', *The Australian*, 6/9/96, p. 15.



*'...living in Australia was never a planned thing for us. Eddie and I came here in 1993, looking for somewhere we could do better post-production because in Hong Kong that's always the lowest priority...I think, basically [the appeal of living in Australia is] the quality of life. There's more space, and the pace is much more human. Even though we didn't work to the same pace as other Hong Kong filmmakers, we still felt that pressure. And because we were outside the mainstream there, because of the kind of films we make, we grew tired of having to defend our position. Whereas in Australia we thought we'd have the space and the time to work in the way we wanted.'*<sup>773</sup>

This reference by Law to her 'outsider' position in Hong Kong, and of constantly needing to defend that position, is further explained in other interviews where she speaks of the overly commercial nature of filmmaking there. She describes Hong Kong as a place where '...we had to shut ourselves in our own room in order to fight the kind of values that were surrounding us',<sup>774</sup> an environment where '...you will be wiped out very quickly if you don't make a film that makes money',<sup>775</sup> and a place where film '...is not looked at as art, [but] purely as entertainment and...often not quality entertainment'.<sup>776</sup> Law contrasts this with Australia:

*'There is an art scene here which we don't have in Hong Kong. There the climate is more commercial and monetary than anything spiritual. There is more of an attempt into spiritual life here than anywhere else I have been in the world...Even with the newspapers and with the media here, with SBS and the ABC, there is an attempt to try to give more information about the diversity of cultures and about the spiritual part of Australia. I don't find that anywhere else in the world.'*<sup>777</sup>

Law speaks with bitterness about finding herself completely unsupported and unrecognised within her home territory. Her first awards, from prestigious festivals such as Torino and Locarno, were almost totally ignored by the Hong Kong press, and investors were ignorant of the importance of the festival circuit in

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<sup>773</sup> C. Law, Press Kit Interview for *The Goddess of 1967*, 2001.

<sup>774</sup> C. Law, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>775</sup> C. Law quoted by Chris Berry, 'Floating Life', op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>776</sup> L. Barber, 'No Foreigner to Spiritual Dislocation', loc.cit.

<sup>777</sup> C. Law, quoted by Jim Schembri, 'Director Stops Here to Hear Her Own Voice', loc.cit.



promoting and selling art films.<sup>778</sup> ‘Awards are not something I chase’, says Law, ‘but I think when [they come] to you, it is an acknowledgement of something that you’ve done, and I would hope that the place that I am from, the place I was living in, the people around me, would also feel the same.’<sup>779</sup> Law speaks of the ‘silliness’ of having to explain why these awards are significant, what it is that they ‘mean’.<sup>780</sup>

This dissonance can be understood as a product of Law’s status as ‘restricted producer’ of symbolic good intended for other producers of cultural goods. In opposition to this, the Hong Kong field with its mass production of genre films, can be characterised as a ‘field of large-scale production’ aimed at producing cultural goods for audiences of non-producers, or as Bourdieu terms it, ‘the public at large’.<sup>781</sup> What Law finds in Australia is a field of restricted production in which she is recognised as an artist, an environment where ‘...at least there are some people who understand us.’<sup>782</sup> Bourdieu writes that artists and intellectuals depend for their very existence and self-definition upon ‘the circular relations of reciprocal recognition among peers.’<sup>783</sup> When Law speaks of the ‘nurturing’ she experiences within the Australian filmmaking environment, and that ‘you can’t just sit in a room and grow on your own’,<sup>784</sup> she is describing these relations of recognition which affirm her claims to cultural and artistic legitimacy.

Law refers to herself repeatedly as someone who wants ‘...to make films as an art form rather than a commercial product.’<sup>785</sup> She distances herself from market values, bemoaning the fact that most film festivals are now more concerned with ‘showcasing’ product rather than really engaging with the films and talking about them.<sup>786</sup> Proudly telling the story of her student days in London, when she

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<sup>778</sup> C. Law, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid.

<sup>780</sup> Ibid.

<sup>781</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 115.

<sup>782</sup> C. Law, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>783</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p. 116.

<sup>784</sup> C. Law, Interview, Appendix I.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid.



informed her skeptical teachers of her plans to make ‘poetry’ with her films,<sup>787</sup> Law aligns herself with poets, those most autonomous and specialised of creators. In various interviews she makes reference to her heroes, cinema masters Ozu and Tarkovsky,<sup>788</sup> and speaks with intensity about the conditions for fostering her own creativity. Within the field of Australian filmmaking, Law is surely one of the directors who takes herself and her work most seriously, unashamed of high-minded idealism or of aspirations to greatness. That she has chosen to work from an Australian base signifies that in relative terms, the Australian cinematic field favours autonomous producers and the autonomous principles of hierarchisation.

## Chapter 8: Summary

### Narrative Elements

The fears of homelessness, exile and dispossession continue to be evident in Australian cinema, with particular contemporary emphasis on the threats posed by the globalisation of capital and labour. Departing from Australian cinema’s negative and discouraging depictions of family and home *The Castle* and *Floating Life* each offer models of freedom which are centred around the hearth. They offer vastly different, yet equally valid, assertions about the importance of home and the work that must be done to construct and preserve homes that neither deny global realities nor succumb completely to their impersonal and fragmenting logic. Creating, maintaining and protecting home values, without becoming isolationist or xenophobic, is perhaps the greatest and most important struggle facing Australians as we live through the new millennium. These narratives open up ways of re-thinking the nation as the home site of both old and new Australian identities.

### Industry Elements

Working Dog and Clara Law each represent unique positions within the Australian cinematic field, suggesting ways in which the field itself is growing and evolving. The independent team of media workers have found a way of working within the mainstream while maintaining their independence. Clara Law,

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<sup>787</sup> Ibid.

<sup>788</sup> C. Law, Interview, Appendix I. Similar sentiments are expressed by Law in L. Barber, ‘No Foreigner to Spiritual Dislocation’, *The Australian*, 6/9/96, p. 15.



a transnational auteur, has chosen to work within the confines of the state-funded Australian cinema precisely because she has found it to be conducive to her fiercely autonomous ethic. That the Australian cinematic field has embraced her, supporting her with both financial and symbolic capital, suggests an openness and flexibility.



## **Chapter 9: Threats to the Autonomy of the Australian Cinematic Field**

The autonomy of cultural fields is always under threat. By their very nature, existing at the negative pole of the ‘field of power’, cultural fields must continually negotiate their relative levels of freedom. National cinematic fields are particularly vulnerable to the ‘contaminations’ of high finance on the one hand, and to the possible interference of political and ideological imperatives on the other. As I have suggested throughout this thesis, the Australian cinematic field, since its 1970s renaissance has managed, through constant efforts, to maintain a kind of autonomy that is owed almost purely to the protections and support provided by the nation itself. This form of autonomy resulted in the 1990s, in a broad and flexible network of possibilities through which feature filmmakers could interpret the brief of ‘telling our own stories’.

The vibrancy and diversity of the Australian cinematic field during the 1990s undoubtedly owes much to an opening-up of the concept of ‘nation’, and to the creative opportunities provided by a pattern of increasing co-operation and integration with international cultural and financing networks – Globalisation. It must be remembered, however, that much of this positive activity has, directly or indirectly, relied on national forms of support, endorsement, and regulation. The post-1989 official policy of multiculturalism, for instance, was a national one, re-directing cultural policy towards renovated ideas of what the national cinema could and should be able to achieve. The celebrated diversity resulting from this period of ‘globalisation’ was enabled not through the withdrawal of the state, but through its active participation in creating enabling frameworks in which creators and storytellers could work. A superficial analysis might identify signs of a divorce between nationalism and Australian cinema, yet closer inspection reveals that many aspects of this relationship have merely evolved into a more sophisticated, yet no less dependent one.

Many authors have adopted a celebratory approach to the changes occurring within the cinematic field during the 1990s. Many of the films analysed within this thesis are illustrative of the grand possibilities of globalised finance and the



borderless world of inspiration and ideas. Without seeking to undermine these positives, in this chapter I wish to outline how during the 1990s autonomy of the Australian cinematic field was undermined both from within the nation and from without. There were, and continue to be, numerous threats to the field's ability to operate as '...a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force *independent of those of politics and economy*'.<sup>789</sup> Here I will outline some of these structural factors, external and internal (with regards to the nation), which were undermining the ability of the national cinematic field to operate with the levels of autonomy it had struggled to negotiate.

The major *external* threats, mainly associated with economic globalisation included: trade liberalisation; increasing co-production treaties and changes to local content regulations; the establishment of Hollywood studios on Australian shores; aggressive and monopolistic exhibition and distribution practices; and the colonisation of arthouse cinema by major Hollywood interests.

The most significant *internal* threats to the autonomous workings of Australian cinema included the dismantling and de-funding of education, research and screen culture facilities.

Many of these threats have previously been identified or suggested in this thesis, relating to the individual films and the production problems encountered by filmmakers. My purpose here is to re-present them as a disturbing complex of factors affecting the field. Each of these factors has deservedly spawned numerous detailed policy documents. The issues are ongoing, and the information dates quickly. Yet a messy sketch of the whole canvas allows us to see the clear and ongoing role of the nation in underpinning autonomy.

## **Threats to Autonomy from Trade Liberalisation**

In Chapters Two and Three I argued that the Australian cinematic field relies implicitly upon the proper operation of the national field for its autonomy, and suggested that the undermining of the nation's autonomy would therefore be detrimental to the cinematic field. The 1990s environment of global trade liberalisation posed major threats to the autonomy of cultural fields, or indeed any

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<sup>789</sup> P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, op.cit., p.162, (my emphasis added).



kind of field apart from that of commerce, pushing, as it did, for fairly narrow principles of market logic to be applied to all sectors of human endeavour, from agriculture and manufacturing, to broadcasting and intellectual property.

The Uruguay round of world trade negotiations, ending in 1993/94, leading to the establishment of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), proved that national support of cultural industries was going to be one of the more hotly contested areas of debate, ‘...threatening to derail the entire GATT round.’<sup>790</sup> A 1999 submission by the AFC to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, sums up the Uruguay debate thus:

*The tension between the push for reduction of national audio-visual support mechanisms and those countries who were anxious to retain support mechanisms for national cultural policy purposes was in effect unresolved at the end of the Uruguay round. Last minute negotiations resulted in the maintenance of the status quo and a commitment to talk further with a view, at least in the eyes of the United States, to liberalisation in the future.*<sup>791</sup>

It is important to note that the US, so clearly dominant and until now relatively unthreatened by local audiovisual industries, is still the most ardent advocate of liberalisation in this domain, primarily because entertainment is America's second largest export, only exceeded by the aircraft manufacturing sector.<sup>792</sup> David Puttnam, industry critic and former chairman of Columbia Pictures, states that despite the fierce competition among US Studios, when it comes to the issue of trade liberalisation, the industry ‘speaks with one voice’,<sup>793</sup> a voice which seeks to maintain and extend its monopoly, and presents itself in the language of a victim under attack. As Hollywood’s chief lobbyist, Jack Valenti, has said, ‘...the American audio-visual industry is everywhere under siege’, its very success, according to him, ‘inciting a counter-attack by foreign governments.’<sup>794</sup>

As Toby Miller notes, a historical perspective casts Hollywood’s current advocacy of ‘liberalisation’ as more than a little ironic:

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<sup>790</sup> David Puttnam, *The Undeclared War*, Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1997, p. 342.

<sup>791</sup> ‘Australia's Approach to Further Multilateral Trade Negotiations’, *Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, Australian Film Commission & Film Australia Ltd., May 1999, p. 8.

<sup>792</sup> D. Puttnam, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>793</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.



*...U.S. government diplomacy, information-gathering, quotas, and tariffs were critical to the establishment of Hollywood's success in setting internationally attractive cost structures in place and expanding monopolistically through the 1920s; moreover, the deflection of significant Italian, German, and French film exports from the United States was occasioned by government action...But then history is not the motor of neoclassical discourse. One might, however, have expected some reflection on two decades of generous tax credits for U.S. investors in American film and television, in addition to numerous tax shelter schemes and evidence that U.S. businesses operate a selling cartel each year at Cannes.*<sup>795</sup>

Without reducing our interpretation of trade liberalisation to one of U.S. cultural imperialism versus all other national industries (culture industries included), this reading is quite sensible, identifying the dominant player and its heavy-handed tactics. The stalemate concluding the round of 93/94 trade talks assumed that there would be a return to the subject of culture industries, and that future talks, under way as of December 1999, will involve forceful pressures being applied by the US for further liberalisation in the audio-visual sector.

While the Australian government has, up until this time, maintained (if at static or declining levels) its commitment to cultural objectives in the funding of the Australian film industry, the current rounds of WTO discussions will involve pressures for a withdrawal. It remains to be seen whether the current Liberal government, with its gradual, though possibly impotent retreat from the rhetorics of 'freeing up' trade, will enter into the fray to fight for direct cultural exemptions in trade talks.

It is possible that the federal government's September 2001 pre-election commitment to the local film industry was deliberately twinned with a tax initiative for large-budget projects (\$15 million or more) in order to specifically counteract such attacks on the national cinema. Such tax breaks go some way towards proving the openness of Australia to international film projects, particularly those intended for production at the Fox and Warner Bros Studios, and may, if cleverly argued, be used as a bargaining tool for support of the

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<sup>794</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>795</sup> Toby Miller, *The Well-Tempered Self: citizenship, culture and the postmodern subject*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993, p. 100.



Australian film industry. The results of such negotiations will impact heavily upon the degree to which Australia can maintain any autonomy in its cinematic field.

## **Threats to Autonomy: Co-productions and Changes to Local Content Regulations**

In the context of the aforementioned trade liberalisation, issues of local content and international co-production dominate debates about film and television, as outside pressures constantly seek an opening up of the market. The US sees our content quotas and subsidy of our film industry as ‘market barriers’ and ‘...regularly place[s] Australia on its trade watch list as a result.’<sup>796</sup> This is currently being argued in the present round of GATS talks, and will also include the related argument that trade barriers are represented by our co-production treaties with the UK, Canada, Ireland, Israel, Italy, France and New Zealand.<sup>797</sup>

The Australian Content Standard, set out in the Broadcasting Services Act, requires commercial free-to-air television to screen minimum levels of Australian programs and first release Australian drama, children’s programs and documentaries.<sup>798</sup> The intention of this is to encourage the making and showing of identifiably Australian films and TV programs which would otherwise be swamped by cheap US product, subsidised by its huge home market. The importance of this to the film industry lies in the dual aspect of television providing a learning environment for film technicians and creative personnel, and in the fact that Australian films qualify as local content.

There is a current commitment by the Federal government to review all legislation for its anti-competitive effects, under the international Competition Principles Agreement.<sup>799</sup> Stemming from this, in March 1999, there was a review of the Broadcasting Services Act by the Productivity Commission, which insisted that the only basis for legislation restricting competition was if it could be demonstrated that ‘...the benefits of the restriction to the community as a whole

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<sup>796</sup> ‘Home Movies in a Global Marketplace’, Background Briefing, Radio National, produced by Gerald Tooth, 08/08/99. <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s43425.htm>> ([24/07/00]).

<sup>797</sup> Ibid.

<sup>798</sup> *Australian Film Commission Annual Report*, 1998-99, p. 21

<sup>799</sup> Ibid.



outweigh the costs; and ...the objectives can only be achieved by restricting competition.’<sup>800</sup> The pressure is on for Australian content quotas to be reduced, primarily in order to please international trade partners, but also to please broadcasters who see local content as relatively expensive. This can only be seen as a threat to the autonomy of the field.

Opening up the options for fulfilling these content quotas are the official co-production treaties, which allow audio-visual content to be certified as Australian if it is made by a treaty partner, or qualifies as having significant local input. This certification, as Australian, in the case of film, entitles such films to ‘...benefits like investment by the Australian Film Finance Corporation or the AFC, income tax concessions to investors and recognition for Australian content quota on commercial television.’<sup>801</sup> These co-productions allow for necessary injections of funds from outside the local industry, and also enable creative cross-pollination and audience expansion. Films such as *Bad Boy Bubby* (Italian co-production), *The Piano* (French co-production) and *Shine* (French co-production) are nurtured by such arrangements. The facility for such cooperation suggests that the Australian audio-visual sector is actually, contrary to US propaganda, ‘...extremely open to international product and involvement’, and that it ‘...maintains a very open market to foreign product and participation.’<sup>802</sup>

For all its benefits, however, this international co-production facility is open to abuse and manipulation, and is also a way for US stories to find their way onto screens in the guise of local content. For example, the mini-series *Moby Dick*, an Australian-UK co-production, screened as local content in 1998, a fact which angered many industry insiders, like television producer and writer Tony Cavanaugh:

*‘It’s just bullshit, Moby Dick. It’s written by an American, it’s directed by an American, it’s originally an American story, it stars an American, it’s got an Australian cast, great, that makes it local content...I mean a lot of those shows have been counted as Australian, they’re not, that’s*

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<sup>800</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>801</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>802</sup> ‘Australia’s Approach to Further Multilateral Trade Negotiations’, op.cit., pp. 5-7.



*just crap.*<sup>803</sup>

Television, a vital training ground for film professionals, and an important avenue for local film product to find its ways to viewers, has also recently suffered a major funding withdrawal. Against the advice of their subcommittee, the Federal Government chose to scrap the Commercial Television Production Fund, which since the mid 1990s had been funded to the extent of about \$20 million a year to develop high quality local TV programs.<sup>804</sup> Also of significance in the 1990s were the crippling cutbacks to the ABC, leading to less spending on local drama production. The trickledown effect of this defunding is only now becoming visible in TV, and will later be felt in the film industry, another instance of the undermining of the foundations of a healthy and autonomous local audiovisual sector.

### **Threats to Autonomy: Hollywood Studios Down Under**

*'We can't become complacent and stop funding those [Australian stories] because we have this vision that everything's fine because Tom Cruise is in Sydney.'* – **Fiona Egger**, Producer of *Mallboy*<sup>805</sup>

*'American capital comes at a price: usually a diminishing of the level of creative autonomy the director and other key creative personnel have over a feature film.'* – **Mary Anne Reid**<sup>806</sup>

In the 1998/99 period, the value of Australian production in film and television fell by almost 30%, while the value of foreign production more than doubled, and the value of co-productions between Australia and other countries tripled.<sup>807</sup> Thus, while the total value of audiovisual production in this country appears to be rising, there has been '...a fall of almost 30 per cent in the value of production activity under Australian creative control',<sup>808</sup> a situation mirroring the general trend of the decade.

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<sup>803</sup> Tony Cavanaugh, quoted on 'Home Movies in a Global Marketplace, op.cit.

<sup>804</sup> Ibid.

<sup>805</sup> Fiona Egger quoted on Ibid.

<sup>806</sup> M.A. Reid, *More Long Shots, Australian Cinema Successes in the 90s*, op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>807</sup> 'Key Findings: 98/99', Australian Film Commission, November 1999.  
<[http://www.afc.gov.au/resources/online/nps/nps98\\_99/keyfindings.html](http://www.afc.gov.au/resources/online/nps/nps98_99/keyfindings.html)> ([30/11/00]).

<sup>808</sup> Ibid.



Significant in the increasing participation of foreign interests in Australia's audiovisual industry during the 1990s were the Hollywood studios that set up operations here. For example, Warner Brothers or 'Hollywood on the Gold Coast' consists of both a theme park and studios for hire. In these studios, more than 90% of the production activity is shot for US television.<sup>809</sup> Highly trained local crews are utilised, the low Australian dollar is taken advantage of, a certain amount of money flows into the country from overseas, but the contribution to the government's stated cultural objectives is negligible. Likewise Fox Studios in Sydney, which also hires out production facilities and, until late 2001, ran an adjoining theme park. 'International' Hollywood films such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Babe*, *Pig in the City* (1998), and *Mission Impossible II* (2000) have been made in these studios. More distinctly local product such as Christina Andreef's *Soft Fruit* (1999) and Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001) have taken advantage of the high quality sound stages offered by Fox. Despite the fact that Fox has, as yet, contributed little to the government's cultural objectives, it has reputedly received more than \$100 million in indirect subsidy from the NSW state government, showing, in Barrett Hodsdon's words, 'a superficial sense of cultural priorities'.<sup>810</sup> Hodsdon goes on to comment that the Fox Studios are '...simultaneously a literal and figurative example of the current tenor of economic rationalism in the movie world...an emblem of the glitzy Darwinism that infuses Sydney's cultural dynamics.'<sup>811</sup> As Mary Anne Reid has argued, 'With some important qualifications...the inbuilt drive of the Hollywood studio system is towards the homogenous: the story that can be most successfully mass marketed to please most of the people, most of the time; a simple matter of profit.'<sup>812</sup>

As numerous people involved in the local industry have stated, there is a distinct danger that the increasing economic activity, which has little to do with Australian culture, will become conflated in the mind of the public and in the rhetoric of the federal government,<sup>813</sup> which seems keen to roll back its underwriting of local

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<sup>809</sup> 'Home Movies in a Global Marketplace', op.cit.

<sup>810</sup> Barrett Hodsdon, 'After the Fox Whither Film Culture', *Metro*, No.121/122, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>811</sup> Ibid.

<sup>812</sup> M.A. Reid, op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>813</sup> 'Growth in Foreign Production and Co-Production', Executive Summary, AFC, 1999.



product and to focus on jobs and prosperity. Witness this statement from Queensland's Premier, Peter Beatty:

*...there are thousands of jobs literally employed in the Queensland film industry, and that will increase. I reckon we have a great film industry, but I also reckon it's a launch-pad, I reckon it could take off, and offer the world something new and different.*<sup>814</sup>

As the broadcaster Gerald Tooth noted, following this interview, the Premier was not about to make a distinction between local and foreign production.<sup>815</sup> This conflation of economic and cultural objectives is by no means new in the Australian cinematic field of the last 40 years, yet there seem to be far fewer voices speaking out in favour of cultural objectives, objectives that might require public spending or serious thought about that unfashionable concept, the nation. The opportunities brought onshore by US Studios should not be completely discounted, but they should be distinguished from the quite separate cultural objectives that have fostered the autonomy of the field up to this point. Also essential for consideration are the impacts these studios have in terms of raising costs for smaller independent filmmakers, to the extent that Sydney is now considered too expensive a place to film for most Australian filmmaking budgets of \$1-4 million.

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<sup>814</sup> QLD Premier Peter Beatty, speaking on 'Home Movies in a Global Marketplace', op.cit.

<sup>815</sup> Gerald Tooth speaking on 'Home Movies in a Global Marketplace', op.cit.



## Distribution & Exhibition

*'When we started out [in 1994] hardly any of the studios had special product divisions, now every studio has an independent arm. When acquiring titles we're competing directly with them which makes it much more difficult to secure commercial titles. With the studios adding a greater volume of acquired product to their production slates it means there are a lot of titles coming through their infrastructure that compete directly with us. At the speciality end of the market it means a film's theatrical life is much shorter, and the viability of a small film building its audience through word of mouth is much less. As with the mainstream major studio films, if the speciality product doesn't open strongly, it must come off to make way for other product.'*

**Andrew Mackie**<sup>816</sup>

It remains difficult for Australian films to find exhibition windows both domestically and internationally. High-budget films, mainly from the US, demand wide releases and the large number of films competing for exhibition windows puts a great deal of pressure on smaller films that cannot afford the support of multi-million dollar release campaigns. With an average budget under \$5 million, most Australian films can be considered 'small' alongside US films routinely budgeted at more than \$60 million. In this environment, closer attention than ever is being paid by distributors and sales agents here and overseas to the quality – dramatic as well as technical – of Australian films.<sup>817</sup>

The dominant suppliers of films to Australian exhibitors are Hollywood studios, and these are generally distributed by the studio's Australian representatives or affiliates. It is the distributor who chooses when to release a film, where and how often it will screen, and whether a specific or generic marketing campaign will be used. The five major distributors, responsible for around 90% of the films shown in Australia in 1997 were Buena Vista International, Columbia TriStar films, Twentieth Century Fox Film Distributors, Roadshow Film Distributors and United International Pictures.<sup>818</sup> The remaining 10% (approximately) of films are dealt with by smaller distributors who generally trade in specialist or arthouse

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<sup>816</sup> Andrew Mackie of Globe Distributors, quoted by M.A Reid, 'Independent distribution', *Distributing Australian Films: A Survey of Current Market Conditions and Distributor's Perceptions*, Marketing Branch of the AFC, 31 August 1999.

<sup>817</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>818</sup> Sandy George, 'The Cinema Industry: The distribution sector', *Get the Picture*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn., op.cit., p. 139.



films. They include Dendy Films, Sharmill, REP, Globe, Palace Films and NewVision Film Distributors,<sup>819</sup> and until recently, Ronin Films, who have found the going too difficult despite having released such local hits as *Strictly Ballroom* and *Shine*.

The site of fierce competition, the distribution sector underwent a transformation during the 1990s, as the majors expanded into the 'arthouse' and specialist sectors, making it more difficult than ever for the smaller distributors to break even.<sup>820</sup> This situation has led to the formation of alliances among the minor distributors and exhibitors, the Australian Independent Distributors Association and the Cinema Owners Association of Australia,<sup>821</sup> who see that the current environment is tougher and more unpredictable, with declining profit margins.<sup>822</sup> In addition, the encroachment of the major distributors into previous specialist territory forces up prices at International festivals, and usually results in the Independents losing out on the more commercially viable titles, titles that would previously have helped to finance the riskier choices.

Independent distributors also found that their income from the sale of product to the free to air television networks was eroded during the 1990s.<sup>823</sup> TV networks signed three-year deals with major distributors and thus had little income left to spend on independent product.<sup>824</sup> The public broadcaster, ABC, faced with crippling budget cuts, has reduced its acquisition of films, while the SBS, remaining a good potential buyer, could not afford the rates previously paid by commercial networks.<sup>825</sup>

The difficulties experienced by independent distributors are particularly pertinent to the autonomy of the Australian cinematic field, as it is with these distributors that the fate of local films generally lies. If the financial risks resting upon independent distribution become too great, then these players will be forced out,

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<sup>819</sup> Ibid.

<sup>820</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>821</sup> Ibid.

<sup>822</sup> M.A. Reid, 'Independent Distribution', *Distributing Australian Films...*, op.cit.

<sup>823</sup> Ibid.

<sup>824</sup> Ibid.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid.



shutting down a major avenue of sale for local filmmakers, and weakening the already weak position of Australian product.

The increasingly expensive and competitive conditions for the distribution of international 'art' films could, however, provide a comparative advantage for Australian films, which are cheaper and easier to acquire. There is also now, more than ever, the possibility that an Australian film may be snapped up by a major distributor, who, with its independent acquisition arm, will be searching for off-beat product with market potential. This is a possibility, but not a likelihood for most local films, and it is the Australian Independent distributors who must generally be relied upon.

### **The Exhibitors**

A crucial connection between filmmakers and viewers, the exhibitors are the ticket-sellers. They split profits with the distributor on the basis of deals negotiated individually for each film.<sup>826</sup> Income is derived from box-office sales, screen advertising, and from the sale of food and beverages. (A staggering 17% of exhibitors' revenue comes from the 'Candy Bars'.<sup>827</sup>) Dominating this exhibition environment are three main exhibitors, Greater Union, Hoyts and Village, who own nearly half of all Australian screens and generate around 70% of total revenue.<sup>828</sup> Two of these companies, Greater Union and Village, are involved in a joint venture with Warner Bros, to expand their cinema holdings both in Australia and abroad,<sup>829</sup> meaning that there are effectively two major groups exhibiting the majority of films within this country. These large exhibitors hold multiplexes and megaplexes, with as many as 30 screens in one complex.<sup>830</sup>

The smaller exhibitors, constituting the remainder of screens, range from the small family run cinemas with only a couple of screens, (Melbourne's Lumiere, for example) to the larger arthouse chain, Palace, with its 44 screens Australia-wide.<sup>831</sup> Significantly, Palace is half-owned by Village Roadshow, and a number

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<sup>826</sup> S. George, op.cit., p. 140.

<sup>827</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>828</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

<sup>829</sup> Ibid.

<sup>830</sup> M.A. Reid, 'The exhibition landscape', *Distributing Australian Films...*, op.cit.

<sup>831</sup> Ibid.



of the Nova screens are jointly owned by Hoyts. This participation by the majors in the 'arthouse' sector suggests that they recognise the potential for capturing the more specialised audience segments. The fear, expressed by many, is that this involvement will mean an imposition of 'mainstream' logic, representing an actual decline in the diversity of films available within the national exhibition sector. As a recent report states, in the last decade 'The number of foreign-language titles screened has declined significantly and specialist cinemas, which have also moved into multi-screen exhibition, now screen a number of cross-over commercial films...'.<sup>832</sup> By screening in these 'boutique' environments, such cross-over commercial films like *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998) and *Antz* (Eric Darnell & Tim Johnson, 1998) gain a symbolic cache they would not have by exhibiting solely in the multiplex chain environment – where they also compete.

According to distributors, who have an interdependent relationship with exhibitors, there have been dramatic structural changes in the industry over the last decade, whereby there is a mainstream exhibition environment '...which is necessarily less focused on the films that move through the cinema chain, than on the cinema chain itself.'<sup>833</sup> Having invested large sums in the development of multiplex cinema chains, the emphasis is on a cinema-going experience that brings high returns, high repeat attendance, and an emphasis on big event films.<sup>834</sup> These multiplex environments rely upon a uniformity of programming, with a limited number of titles screening for short times in uniform timeslots across venues, coordinated closely to capitalise upon events like school holidays, Valentine's day, or the Saturday night 'date'. The result of these structural changes is a situation where '...the box office taken by a film in its opening weekend determines its fate. If a film doesn't work on that crucial weekend it won't last in the cinemas long enough to make money...'<sup>835</sup> A film that is slow to gain momentum, or depends upon a specialist audience and word-of-mouth recommendations, as do many Australian films, has little chance of lasting in such

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<sup>832</sup> Ibid.

<sup>833</sup> Ibid.

<sup>834</sup> Ibid.

<sup>835</sup> Ibid.



a rapid turnover exhibition environment. As we have seen in the example of *Thank God He Met Lizzie*, this situation can lead to the failure of a small, but commercially viable local film.

The move to the multiplex environment has significant impact upon the fate of Australian films as it reduces the possibility for a 'platform release' – a means by which many local films have traditionally found success.<sup>836</sup> The platform release involves a small number of prints opening on a limited number of screens, building up to a larger number on the basis of word-of-mouth publicity or positive media attention. Supported by an increased publicity campaign, such small films can move on to becoming hits, as happened with *Strictly Ballroom*, a film that grossed over \$20 million, starting on about 30 screens and building up to over 100.<sup>837</sup> With the current emphasis on films making or breaking in the first two weeks of release, the platform release is much rarer, and confined to the very small release of about 10-25 prints.<sup>838</sup> Thus it is much harder for an Australian film to occupy screen space, head-space and thereby symbolic space, than it once was.

## **Dismantling of Education, Research and Screen Culture Facilities**

The Australian film industry has long been a national cultural flagship, and as such there is great reticence among political bodies to be seen to be attacking this '...haven of national self-expression.'<sup>839</sup> Thus the rhetoric is always supportive, promising to ensure that cultural objectives, as well as economic ones, are taken into account in future policies and trade negotiations.<sup>840</sup> At the same time there are pervasive attempts to reduce the financial burden of this weighty cultural flagship, to offload the burden onto private investment.

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<sup>836</sup> M.A. Reid, 'polarised release patterns', *Distributing Australian Films...*, op.cit.

<sup>837</sup> Ibid.

<sup>838</sup> Ibid.

<sup>839</sup> Barrett Hodsdon, 'Flagship culture and commercial chimera', *A Century of Australian Cinema*, ed. James Sabine, Australian Film Institute, Reed Books, Port Melbourne, 1995, p. 161.

<sup>840</sup> For example, the Federal government's assurances to maintain support and take into account cultural objectives in trade negotiations. See 'Australian Content Standard for Television and Paragraph 16(d) of the *Broadcasting Services Act*', Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Report by the Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Legislation Committee, February 1999.



The way this was accomplished during the 1990s was through the dismantling of the less visible infrastructure underpinning national filmmaking. For example, in 1998 the government funded AFC has had its annual budget cut by half from \$10 million to 5 million.<sup>841</sup> A draft report from the Federal Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, suggested a number of ways in which the AFC could adjust its operations to fit in with its newly impoverished state. These included the recommendation to cease funding the screen resource organisations which exist in nearly all states. Operating on small budgets, these screen resource organisations offer assistance to local filmmakers by way of information, editing facilities, and hire of camera equipment. They are crucial points of contact for small and medium-sized filmmakers, yet have a low profile in the industry as a whole. De-funding this sector weakens the position of some of the most autonomous practitioners within the field, and thus weakens the field as a whole.

Another manifestation of the AFC's reduced budget was its plan to cut its funding, as of December 2000, of the Australian Film Institute's Distribution service and its Research and Information Centre, located in Melbourne. Institutionalising the aesthetic values of the Australian cinematic field, the AFI is a non-profit cultural organisation '...devoted to the promotion of the moving image as an art form, with a particular focus on the Australian screen industries.'<sup>842</sup> Incorporated in 1958, the AFI's flagship enterprise continues to be the organisation of the annual AFI awards ceremony which in 1999 garnered a television audience of 430 000 when it was broadcast live on SBS.<sup>843</sup> Its primary services, however, are as Australia's largest distributor of short films and independent documentaries (to schools, universities and the public library network); and as operator of the research and information facility, which is the premier national and international source of information about the Australian film industry. Reasons given by the AFC for this withdrawal of support is its desire to '...focus on the AFC's core function of development – project development, practitioner development and

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<sup>841</sup> AFC Annual Report 1998/1999.

<sup>842</sup> Chris Brophy, 'Australian Film Institute', *Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, op.cit., p. 22.

<sup>843</sup> AFI Annual Report, 1999/2000.



industry development.’<sup>844</sup> The AFC is also reported to have stated that ‘it is not the role of the AFC to fund the provision of services to the education sector’.<sup>845</sup> This, despite the fact that many of these functions assist industry as well as education, and provide a focus for international viewers and investors interested in the local industry. As AFI chief executive Ruth Jones has said, ‘Distribution and research and information services are two building blocks of the film industry...50% of the...clientele comes from the production industry, media and regional film societies.’<sup>846</sup> These ‘building blocks’ of the industry, autonomous keystones in the field, are threatened by the Federal de-funding of the AFC, and its focus on the more visible industry ‘production’.

## 2002: An Update

After years of disappointing levels of government funding (static or declining), there was an announcement in September 2001 that the Federal Government was renewing its commitment to the local film industry with increased funding of \$92.7 million over 4 years to be given to bodies such as the AFC, FFC, Film Australia and SBS Independent.<sup>847</sup> Some groups complain that this is merely restoring what has been lost in previous cuts.<sup>848</sup> It is significant to note that twinned with this renewed funding for local bodies, came a funding initiative aimed specifically at attracting international film projects to our shores: a refundable tax offset for large film productions (minimum A\$15 million).<sup>849</sup> Begun in the 1990s, this integration of the national cinema and its transnational counterparts has become a dominant feature of the Australian cinematic field. It must be treated with caution.

Meanwhile, such an integral and relatively inexpensive service as the AFI’s distribution arm has disappeared for want of a mere \$217,000 a year.<sup>850</sup>

Representing more than 1300 titles, the distribution service has played an integral

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<sup>844</sup> *Filmnet Daily* 3.095, 18/07/00.

<sup>845</sup> Ibid.

<sup>846</sup> Ruth Jones, AFI CEO quoted in Ibid.

<sup>847</sup> Tina Kaufman, ‘\$92.7m: the morning after’, *RealTime/OnScreen*, No.45, October/November 2001, p. 19.

<sup>848</sup> Ibid.

<sup>849</sup> Ibid.

<sup>850</sup> Gabriella Coslovich, ‘AFI’s Distribution Arm Suffers Final Cut’, *The Age*, 21/3/02.



role in distributing and marketing indigenous and short films, features (such as *Vacant Possession*), documentaries (e.g. *After Mabo*, 1997, John Hughes), and for the past 22 years has been the exclusive distributor of graduate films from the Victorian College of the Arts and the Australian Film Television and Radio School. Filmmakers now established in the international arena, such as Phil Noyce and Gillian Armstrong, gained significantly from this service during their early career years. Funding of the service was terminated as of January 2001, as part of the AFC's continuing restructure. AFC chief executive is reported to be adamant that '...there are more effective ways of delivering the AFI's collection to clients',<sup>851</sup> yet despite a year of desperately trying to make the service pay for itself, its closure was announced in early 2002. This funding decision shouts out as an ideological one, a re-positioning of priorities in line with short-sighted financial goals.

At the time of writing (March 2002), Hollywood is all agog with the 'Aussie invasion' of the Academy Awards, with Australians nominated for a total of 13 Oscars in various categories. None of the films represented by these nominations, however, are Australian in any real sense of attempting to represent our land, our culture or our people. High profile actors such as Russell Crowe and Nicole Kidman are nominated for their roles as, respectively, an American mathematician and a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Parisian courtesan. This may not represent, as Philip Adams so elegiacally puts it, 'a funeral of sorts' for local film industries such as our own, with the statuettes being so many 'golden nails in our coffin'.<sup>852</sup> What it may signify, however, is the threat of confusing Australian technical and creative success in Hollywood, with a rich and vital national cinema that has its own unique ways of valuing output and measuring success.

When interviewed for this thesis, director Cherie Nowlan made the weary declaration that 'It's been Groundhog Day for the Australian industry since 1926'.<sup>853</sup> This may be true in the broad sense. The industry *is* always in a state of semi-crisis, fighting for its survival, constantly threatened by the power and pull of Hollywood. This struggle for continued existence is constitutive of the field

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<sup>851</sup> Ibid.

<sup>852</sup> Philip Adams, 'Stuck in our Back Lot', Review, *The Weekend Australian*, 23-24/3/02.

<sup>853</sup> C. Nowlan, Interview, Appendix I.



itself. What this thesis has argued is that the significant gains made in the last three decades of a state-supported cultural industry have indeed allowed for the development of a semi-autonomous field that has, particularly in the 1990s, contributed creatively to the development of a polyphonous national narrative. Threats have always existed. These particular threats must be met with particular kinds of resistance, and with a renewed sense of why the local industry exists, and why it must continue to be actively supported and protected through a predominantly culturalist rather than economic agenda.



## Chapter 10: Conclusion

*There is an omni-present danger that our mental maps will not match current realities. The serious diminution of the power of individual nation states over fiscal and monetary policies, for example, has not been matched by any parallel shift towards an internationalization of politics. – David Harvey<sup>854</sup>*

*Lacking both [the Americans'] history and their myths as well as any satisfactory 'sacred text', we could do the sensible thing – we could make the guiding principles of Australia its diversity and pluralism, its inorganicness, the absence of oppressive and constraining symbols (the flag and the monarchy, for example, are meaningless), and seize the chance to create a post-modern republic...and a very civilised society. Australia is as much a lifestyle as it is a nation – we should make the nation in that image. – Don Watson<sup>855</sup>*

The films and filmmakers represented in this thesis were not initially chosen for their particular contributions to polyphony in Australian cinema. If I had wished to demonstrate that the national cinema of the 1990s did indeed foster a new diversity of representations, then a quite different sample of films would have been assembled and discussed. Instead, my choices arose organically through attempts to understand globalisation, national identity and freedom through the feature films and industry production patterns of the period.

Using Turner's work on the traditional narrative preferences and patterns of Australian cinema and literature, this thesis searched for evidence of their recurrence and/or their transmutation in response to new political and social realities. What kinds of freedom or imprisonment were depicted in these contemporary films? How much individuation and agency were the protagonists allowed? What roads to emancipation were mapped or blocked? How much emphasis was placed upon survival and acceptance rather than on transcendence or 'becoming'? How did the category of 'nation' continue to function through its presence or absence?

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<sup>854</sup> D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, op.cit., pp.305-306.

<sup>855</sup> Don Watson, 'Rabbit Syndrome: Australia and America', *Quarterly Essay*, No.4, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2001, pp.51-52.



A new and vibrant multi-voiced complexity was evident without actively searching for it, yet traces of the past persisted. Films like *Head On* and *Praise* revived and reworked a kind of slave morality that was reminiscent of convict heritage. *Love and Other Catastrophes*, a film that ostensibly broke with Australian tradition by happily depicting romance, subtly folded itself back into Australian tradition with an emphasis on community rather than on the individual. *Thank God He Met Lizzie* gave fresh embodiment of the philosophical position that the noblest surrender of all is made through an acceptance of ‘reality’. *Bad Boy Bubby* allowed its twisted hero a happy ending that depended precisely upon him remaining warped and disabled, while *Babe* permitted its hero a downplayed and understated triumph.

National history, such a central preoccupation in the films of the 1970s renaissance, re-appeared in new guise in *Dead Heart* and *Vacant Possession*. These films, self-conscious of their own (white) narrative construction, attempted to create contemporary stories that resonated with the submerged histories of white/Aboriginal relations, opening up spaces for new dialogue. National identity, and what it means to ‘be Australian’ was revisited in radically new ways in *Floating Life*, while it was dealt with nostalgically, yet subversively, in *The Castle*.

Bourdieu’s pronouncement that ‘...the whole history of the game, the whole past of the game, is present in each act of the game’ is borne out here.<sup>856</sup> Clearly, the ruptures with the past are incomplete, even as the Australian cinema expands and diversifies, becoming simultaneously more preoccupied with the ‘transnational’ and the ‘local’ in addition to, and some would argue, to the exclusion of the ‘national’. Yet as this thesis has demonstrated, it is the national which underpins the entire field, both in the ways films are interpreted, and in the ways they are funded, supported, justified and exported.

Writing in 1994, Turner argued that:

*Australian cinema in the 1990s...is notable for a gradual dissociation of the industry, its legitimating discourses, and its products from any explicit participation in nation*

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<sup>856</sup> P. Bourdieu, ‘Chapter 9: Some Properties of Fields’, *Sociology in Question*, translated by Richard Nice, Sage Publications, London, 1993, p.74.



*formation...it is increasingly the case that any defence of the industry which privileges its participation within the construction of nationhood over its contribution to a free market economy looks like an anachronism.*<sup>857</sup>

This is putting the case strongly. Perhaps the emphasis should be upon the *gradual* dissociation, a separation between film industry and nation building that, in 2002 is, as yet, uncompleted. What seems to have happened during the 1990s is that the field split into two quite distinct industries: one which remains highly dependent upon the official funding of small-scale productions that are primarily concerned with cultural imperatives, with ‘telling our stories’ in ways the market would not necessarily support. This part of the field actively seeks to provide opportunities for those voices previously absent from the screen. The other industry, also highly subsidised by the state, through tax concessions and other sweeteners, is concerned primarily with attracting big budget offshore productions, some of which utilise linkages with significant local creative talent (*Moulin Rouge* and *Babe*), others of which provide minor roles and technical work for Australian personnel (*The Matrix*, *Dark City*, *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*). Whether these two unequal industries will continue to work separately yet cooperatively remains to be seen. Some serious indications suggest that the smaller specifically ‘national’ filmmaking sector will become blurred with its counterpart, then losing its justification for existence and public funding.

If a national cinema is to be retained, it is therefore of utmost importance that filmmakers, critics, policy-makers and cultural theorists continually do the extra-textual work that connects the films to national goals and objectives. These national aspirations are presently (and idealistically) best configured as the polyphonous representation of Australian life, its land, its people, its problems, and necessarily, its connections with the rest of the world. The struggle that constitutes this particular field of national cinema, is the struggle to have the products of the field, its films and its practices, evaluated in terms other than economic or financial ones.

The filmmakers interviewed in this thesis demonstrated, to varying degrees, an awareness of their work’s connection with the nation, and with its cultural

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<sup>857</sup> G. Turner, ‘The End of the National Project? Australian Cinema in the 1990s’, *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, pp.202-



objectives rather than its economic ones. The development of the common phrase ‘telling our own stories’ (a phrase harking back to Philip Adams and the 1970s renaissance) was used repeatedly to describe what the contemporary industry is and does. This indicates that a *habitus* has evolved that allows for the field to rationalise itself in a loosely nation-bound way, dependent upon and supportive of an open and ongoing civic nationalism rather than an exclusive and backward-looking one. When threats to the local industry escalate, the culturalist rationales are clearly the only real defence – a fact evident in policy documents protesting changed local content regulations, or arguing against GATT pressures to remove the ability of nations to protect their own audio-visual industries.

Bourdieu has written that ‘The partial revolutions which constantly occur in fields do not call into question the very foundations of the game, its fundamental axioms, the bedrock of ultimate beliefs on which the whole game is based.’<sup>858</sup>

Though the field transformed itself away from explicit nationalism in the 1990s, the essential foundation of the nation, and of hopes and ideals for what the nation might become, were still the ‘bedrock’ of the field. Most of the directors interviewed here were highly conscious of this, and of the dangers (to themselves, and to the field) inherent in disarticulating the film industry from the nation proper.

All the while these filmmakers maintained their rights, and their aesthetic responsibilities, to make films that were their own, and not the product of official policy directives *or* commercial interference. While politics and commerce clearly play important constitutive roles in the Australian cinematic field, it is the issues of autonomy which *define* the field, a fact which suggests that the field is indeed a cultural one. The collaborative nature of filmmaking means that a director is an ‘artist’ in a completely different sense than is an author, painter or composer. Yet the outrage expressed when a distributor tries to influence an ending (*Thank God He Met Lizzie*) or when the characters’ accents are modified to appeal to a North American audience (*Babe*), suggests that there remains in the field an essential and aimed-for aesthetic integrity. The film directors featured in this thesis share

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<sup>858</sup> P. Bourdieu, ‘Chapter 9: Some Properties of Fields’, *Sociology in Question*, translated by Richard Nice, Sage Publications, London, 1993, p.74.



an intense investment in their status as ‘artists’ (albeit commercial ones), rather than as ‘directors for hire’. Their ongoing choices, as they attempt to position themselves from film to film, reveal strategies that are intended to maximise both autonomy and symbolic capital.

The directors featured here suggest that within the Australian cinematic field economic success is pursued obliquely, only as a means to keep working with maximum agency within the aesthetic domain. For many of these filmmakers (Clara Law, Margot Nash, Ana Kokkinos, for example), their work is economically ‘viable’ only through deals cobbled together from AFC funding, small private investments, the FFC and bodies like SBSI. Low budgets are often seen as the best insurance of a director’s autonomy, as demonstrated by Rolf de Heer’s proclamation that anything is commercial if you make it cheap enough. Working Dog illustrates yet another strategy, based upon collective resources, and making connections with the relatively strong and highly developed national TV audience.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that the autonomy of national fields, and of cultural fields, should always be a qualified autonomy, one that is open to challenge and argument. Such fields are actively constituted by the clash of conflict, unlike ones that withdraw from engagement, protecting their own narrow spheres of value. It is useful here to refer back to the discussion in Chapter 1, where concepts of narrative, identity-construction and the dialectic of recognition were outlined. People and groups were understood as existing and developing only in relationship and dialogue with others. Autonomy was defined as a relative concept in which fields are able, to varying degrees, to act as critical mediating forces between their own agents and external social, economic and political conditions. National fields, while constituted by international relationship, are defined by their separate attempts to appeal to their own particular versions of the universal values of freedom, citizenship and cultural self-determination. In Honneth’s terms, national societies are ‘communities of value’, the values of which are determined by that society’s cultural self-understanding.<sup>859</sup> It is through their cultural fields that nations develop an understanding of themselves and

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<sup>859</sup> A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, op.cit., p.122.



interpret their place and their potentials within the changing world. These cultural fields, existing as sub-fields of the national field, are in turn highly dependent upon national fields for their own autonomy. They must be free enough to operate in ways that critique, challenge and expose the status quo, always implicitly asking and answering the questions, ‘who am I?’ ‘who are we?’

As this thesis has shown, the Australian national and cinematic fields are deeply entwined in relations that are passionate, antagonistic, idealistic and undeniably pragmatic. The connection exists even as these fields exhibit their own often-contradictory ‘laws of operation’ and ‘structures of belief’. The autonomy of the Australian cinematic field (and this may not hold for certain other cinematic fields) depends explicitly upon the protection of the national field within which it is nested. This national field must itself have a certain level of autonomy in order to offer this support – as is obvious in current international trade negotiations.

The cinematic field exhibits its own autonomy when it is able to critique the nation and the nation’s leaders, who also, in a sense, pay its way. When we hear that there are, in 2002, several AFC-funded documentaries and feature films in production which critique the present government’s refugee policy, then we know that some significant autonomy is being assumed and exercised. When we hear that the AFC is cutting off funding and thereby closing down the AFI’s distribution arm for want of a mere \$217,000 a year, then we have to wonder if the ideological principles of current rationalist management practices are radically undermining the field’s own logic.

Making the nation in the image of a postmodern republic, as suggested by Don Watson, requires an act of will, an act that encompasses the actions and intentions of individuals, groups, and the many fields that make up the nation, including, and especially the cultural fields which ‘story’ that nation. Yet if these fields are to be able to act in ways that foster the emergence of a nation built on narratives of diversity and plurality, then they will need the protection of the nation at large, upon whose autonomy they depend for their own particular and essential forms of freedom.

THE END



## **Appendix I: Interviews with Film Directors**

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## Interview with Ana Kokkinos

(This interview took place by telephone on Wednesday 8 November 2000.)

Ana Kokkinos: Are you there? Sorry I'm late. I just realised what the time was. My agent had given me the wrong number, so, anyway. I'm sorry about that. She just got one digit wrong. Anyway we sorted it out.

R. Siemienowicz: Oh, good. I'm so glad I'm getting to speak to you. It's been quite a rigmarole. Apparently you're very very busy at the moment.

Ana Kokkinos: I am. Yeah.

RS: Is that to do with your next film?

AK: It is.

RS: Is this *The Parakeets* one?

AK: That's right.

RS: So how close to getting there are you with that?

AK: Look we've only just finished the script about three or four weeks ago. We're just now gearing up for financing and you know, getting it all on the road.

RS: Good. The fun begins.

AK: So I'm really frantic. The fun begins, exactly. Well some say the easy bit finishes and the fun begins, but you know writing's pretty gruelling too.

RS: Yes. Is this another collaborative writing thingy?

AK: Yes it is. This is an original script co-written with Mira Robertson.

RS: Okay. Okay. Well, yes, okay thank you for agreeing to speak to me.

AK: That's okay.

RS: *Head On* is a very important and provocative film. So much so that I think a lot of people are studying it for their theses!

AK: Of course. Yeah. That's what I've heard actually.

RS: Yeah, I seem to run into people at parties all the time 'oh yeah I studied that!' So why do you think it has struck such a chord with students and the general broad audience?

AK: Well, I think it's a unique film. I think it's a film that particularly young people have taken to heart because it's very much about a young man trying to find himself and trying to make his way in the world. I think that the film obviously speaks to a lot of different people on different



levels, but um, you know I think, I feel as if it's a very bold film that tells it how it is, so there's a level on which a lot of people can connect into the story and the journey of the main character.

RS: Mm.

AK: I mean obviously there are all sorts of things in the film, you know there's the clash of cultures. A young man growing up with two cultures, not quite knowing how he fits in. Um, he doesn't sit comfortably within the Greek community. He doesn't sit comfortably within the Anglo mainstream community. He is out of work. Work is not something that he sees as an easy solution for him. I guess he's a young person who's really questioning a lot of things. Particularly for younger audiences, the intensity of that experience, the way in which young people are intensely questioning everything around them, is one of the key reasons why it's a film that people are going back to and wanting to look at again and study because it remains relevant.

RS: Mm. Mm. To what extent do you think Ari rejects these goals and ideals because they're not actually achievable? Or he doesn't see them as being achievable.

AK: Well, the relevant thing is that he doesn't see them as being achievable. He doesn't see them as being something that is within his grasp. I think that's a very interesting notion, particularly for young people at the moment who find entering the workplace very difficult, in some circumstances unattainable. And um, so I guess what the film's, one of the things the film is dealing with is this sense of disempowerment that young people feel at a certain age, where they don't feel that society is accepting of them, or ah, they're trying to find some way of being heard, of their concerns being voiced in some way.

RS: Mm. Do you think he actually comes through at the end being heard, or just sort of reconciling himself to pretty much...

AK: The way things are,

RS: Yeah.

AK: He's an interesting character because...he was a very tricky character firstly to write, and dramatise from Christos' book, because he apparently doesn't want anything. He's in a way a very difficult protagonist to follow because he says 'I don't want...I reject family, I reject my community, I reject all these various things' but on the other hand I think it's because he's deeply connected to these things. I think it's because he's deeply connected to family, deeply connected to his cultural roots, deeply connected to the



world. In fact if anything I think Ari cares too much about these issues, that it throws up a kind of dilemma if you like, or a contradiction in him. Because on the one hand he wants to be connected, and yet he doesn't know how to actually achieve that. And I think that by the end of the film we get a really strong sense that Ari is a survivor, and that he will find his way. But at that particular moment he's looking to the future, and it's open-ended.

RS: Mm.

AK: I mean often a lot of films like to close off the way in which you know, there's a closure in the way in which the character's resolved that now and he's going to move on. And of course there is a level on which that will happen to Ari. But what was interesting about the film and what a lot of people really appreciated was the fact that we weren't trying to, we weren't trying to give a false closure to his life. We were trying to open it up and say, 'well he's now on the verge of something new. He's not going to take the easy way out. He's always going to question things on a certain level, but he will find his own path. His own way.'

RS: That's a very Australian way of finishing a film isn't it? To sort of end with the main character surviving but not necessarily triumphing or overcoming or falling in love or any of those more sort of heroic things we find in Hollywood cinema?

AK: Mm. Mm. Yeah, I think that's true. I think that um, I guess it's got a lot to do with the fact that because we have a thriving independent scene here, narratives are able to be a bit more open-ended. There's a level of realism in the films that obviously you don't find in Hollywood films. And um, it's probably a truer representation of where that character is at at that moment, rather than actually trying to say, well, you know, trying to say for example that he's going to redeem himself through love. There's a crucial moment where he's having that very intense interaction with the Sean character. Um, he is held up clearly as the love interest in the film, and he's someone that Ari pursues, but for all sorts of complex reasons at that particular moment he chooses to reject the idea of love, or trash the notion of love. And um, that has consequences for him, but certainly it's where he's at at this particular point. But we get a really strong sense that he regrets that as well.

RS: Yeah, he's in a sense presented as an anti-hero in comparison to the, what's his name, the Tula character?

AK: Absolutely. And the contrast between the two characters is very stark. On the one hand the Johnny/Tula character is a person who believes in standing up, of declaring who you



are. Being completely open about who he is. Whereas Ari takes a totally different attitude, totally different route, which is one of saying 'I'm going to keep my secrets, and move within the shadows of my city. I will keep my secrets to myself because in that way, if I do that, no one can actually hurt me. No one can actually destroy what I believe to be my sense of freedom.' And so the cop scene is a very pivotal scene where you see the way in which that's played out. The way in which Johnny absolutely pushes everything to the limits. Ari is unable to really be heroic in a classic sense, but in the end I think he stays true to himself, which is the most important thing. To that extent he is the anti-hero. And that was what we found so fascinating about him, that we wanted to posit something positive in the film about the choice that Johnny made. Um, and in some respects his message is a very important message in the film I think. Whereas I think Ari is a more prickly character. A more tricky character. But he's a classic anti-hero.

RS: Yeah, I sort of saw him as a bit of a coward in that scene.

AK: Mm. Mm.

RS: And yet I couldn't see what would be the point of him standing up and getting his own head bashed in, or whatever.

AK: That's right. But that's the dilemma. That's the contradiction. On the one hand he says 'but what could I do?' and I think on some level we all identify with that because what would you do in a situation like that? And yet, and yet, at the same time the fact that Johnny is able to do what he does is also extraordinary. Um, one often thinks of how you would react. I mean it challenges the audience to think, 'well how would you react if you were in a situation like that? Would you stand up? Would you have the guts to say this is what I am, and have your head kicked in?' So this is what I mean about a film trying to deal with these dilemmas quite honestly, and not trying to...I mean for us, for me as a filmmaker I don't judge either characters, but it's important to explore that and tease it out.

RS: Yeah. The issue of honesty is quite interesting. Just thinking of a lot of my friends who come from fairly strict immigrant families. They have to lie, almost, to get by. It's like truth isn't really an option.

AK: Exactly. And that's a really powerful thing for Ari. Honesty is not on his agenda. The minute you're honest then you're actually crushed. And I think that's how a lot of immigrant kids experience it, that the only way they can survive is to



lie. The only way they can survive is to be secretive, because that's the only way they feel they can keep a small part of themselves which is true to themselves. It was interesting. I mean one of the big things that Greek Australian kids talked to me about was one of the strong reasons they identified so powerfully with Ari was because whether they were straight or gay, the issues are the same. The issues are exactly the same. So anyone who chooses to live a lifestyle which doesn't necessarily include marriage and kids, is pretty much ostracised. Like, kids are really given a hard time. They are given certain options about how they've got to live their lives, and the way they can live their lives is in this very conventional heterosexual marriage trip, you know. And it's a very strong thing. So Ari on the other hand represents that vein within immigrant kids which is about how does one live one's life according to one's own feelings and views, without then being totally ostracised from the community that they actually live in, from their family and their community. And you know a lot of that goes on. Kids have to make a choice. They're told 'If you don't marry, well we'll boot you out of the house' it's as simple as that. I think that's a really high price, a terrible price for young people to pay where they're making a lifestyle choice, and yet they're actually wanting to make a lifestyle choice, but actually just being unable to.

- RS: Yes, well honesty's a luxury that you have when you have parents who are fairly...well, maybe not happy with what you do, but they'll accept it. They'll still let you live there.
- AK: Yeah. Yeah.
- RS: But there's also that thing of a lot of parents not wanting their kids to leave the family home unless they get married.
- AK: Exactly.
- RS: And that's really weird to my way of thinking.
- AK: Oh, it's big. It's huge. I remember having a huge battle with my parents about wanting to move out of home. Their first reaction was, 'but you only move out of home when you get married.' And you know, we talked it through. I think I was lucky in that I had a relatively liberal you know, set of Greek parents. But still, it was an issue. It was something that we really had to discuss and they weren't happy about it. But a lot of kids don't even have that ability to talk to their parents in that way. There's just no discussion. It's just like, this is the way that it is.
- RS: Mm. It's a film that very much presents multiculturalism as no sort of happy picnic!
- AK: (laughter)



RS: Which is probably a really good thing.

AK: The darker side. Yeah it's... I think, on the one hand I think it presents one aspect of the Greek community, but I also think that what we do in the film is we represent the fairly joyous aspects of it too. I mean, there's a real great sense in the film that as I said Ari is connected to the family, and his community. I think that there is a celebratory quality in some of the dance sequences that gives one a sense of a closeness of the community.

RS: Mm.

AK: You know a lovely sort of cross-generational aspect that the community has. Um, we did try to actually, and it was important to me too, to try to really talk about the closeness of these bonds and how close-knit these communities really are, which has its good aspects and then the sort of down side to it as well. Which is, if you want to be part of it, which is all fantastic, that's wonderful and that's what's so beautiful about it, and yet, but on the other hand if you want to express yourself, well then you really are having to play quite a different game.

RS: Yeah, I don't think I got that on first viewing. I didn't realise that Ari actually enjoyed those parts of it as much as I think I've come to see with repeat...

AK: Repeat viewings.

RS: Yes. He really loves that dancing, the aunts and the cousins and...

AK: Well I think there's a lovely quality to all that and I still, when he dances with his father for example, you get a really strong sense of what that relationship's about, which is that he absolutely wants his father's attention, wants his love, and yet of course, but his father wants it absolutely on his terms, and that's what Ari rejects. You know hopefully through the film you get a really strong sense of how really committed he is to that family and to his community, but he just has to actually express himself on all kinds of different levels, which takes him, which puts him into kind of a conflict situation with them.

RS: Um, maybe I should just try to tell you a little bit about what my thesis is trying to achieve.

AK: Mm.

RS: And then I can ask you some of the questions about you as a filmmaker rather than about the film.

AK: Mm.

RS: I'm looking at themes of exile, imprisonment and alienation in ten contemporary Australian films, and um, and then as a



kind of framing study I'm looking at the film industry in Australia, and how there might be pressure to open that up to competition and how there might be – well, there is – a fight to remain autonomous and free. So there's that idea of imprisonment that's coming through in both the narratives, and in a lot of the filmmakers that I've been talking to.

AK: Mm.

RS: So I'm just wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your background, coming into making films, and how you might be perceiving that to be changing with globalisation and the free trade issues, and government support of the industry, those kinds of things.

AK: Mm. Well it's interesting. I have a sort of...well my background is Greek Australian. You know, a child of immigrants. When I was a teenager the idea of making films or the possibility of having a career in films was about as um, as remote as flying to the moon in a way. And so what I did through my teenage years was just knuckled down and pursued things academically, and in fact became a lawyer for a period of time. And then, really kept going back to this idea of being a filmmaker. But as I said, in my teens, the possibility of being a filmmaker just seemed incredibly remote. It wasn't until I was in my twenties that I started to think this thing is still really kind of, um, it feels important to me and it's something that I should try. And then I was able to be in a position where I had my own resources to go back to film school and do the one year film course at VCA school of film and TV, which was the last year of Swinburne when I did it. I think that's an interesting narrative in itself, because what it's saying is that you know, there are a lot of young people out there who would perhaps be greatly talented filmmakers but may never get an opportunity to really pursue it as a possibility, think about the idea of becoming a filmmaker because it's just not something within their scope or within their range of knowledge. Um, obviously that's a really big question, or a big issue, because someone like me has been able to, despite that background, enter the filmmaking area and actually, most importantly I think, or I hope, anyway, intervene and tell stories that are coming from a different place. I clearly have a different voice. And so that voice clearly speaks to an audience that finds my work relevant, which is incredibly important to me, but if I hadn't had my own resources to go back and do film school, you know, that voice wouldn't be heard. And so I think that filmmaking is still largely the domain of you know, um, people who feel like they have access to that from the beginning. And so what we're not, what I think is the most important thing for the lifeblood of the industry is to see



young people coming from diverse backgrounds who come in and actually start telling their own stories in their own way. And that's a really important thing. Um, I think that since I began, since I've begun making films, what I felt is that there is definitely a tightening up. There's been radical changes in the business since I began. I mean so radical, things have changed at such a rapid rate in terms of the kinds of support mechanisms available for younger and emerging filmmakers, um, the whole climate of what kinds of stories can be told. The ability to get things funded has changed. All these things have changed rapidly. And in essence, the globalisation, Hollywood let's say, has had a significant impact not only in Australia but around the world, on all kinds of levels. Not only in term of the types of films that are being funded or being financed, but also the way in which those films are distributed. On the one hand, we now have a greater number of films being made around the world, and yet on the other hand we are seeing less and less of that diverse filmmaking because we don't get the opportunity to see it on the screen, because if a distributor, say for example a local distributor doesn't pick up a film for domestic release we don't see it. And the kinds of choices that are made about what's going to be distributed in this country are in essence, and primarily, based on whether or not there's going to be a commercial return. So the kinds of films we're seeing now are being limited.

RS: Would you say less risks are being taken than there once were?

AK: Yes. Yes, less risks are being taken, there's less invention, less experimentation. Um, people are far too worried about box offices receipts and results. It's a more thoroughly commercially driven process now. Even when I, when I think back to when we made *Only the Brave*, the changes that have happened in the last four or five years, even within the domestic and international distribution, is just so significant in terms of what they want to see and how they want to fund things, and what kinds of demands are placed on filmmakers now. You know, it's radically different. It's very hard, for example, in this country now, to get um, financing for your film unless you really have name actors. It's very hard – above a certain budget level, you know. It's very difficult to continue to actually experiment in the narrative form because essentially what we've had is because we've had a less colourful diet, what automatically happens is that because audiences are not being exposed to a variety of different kinds of films, they start to only want to see one kind of film because that's the only film they can digest or 'get'. Because their mind is not being expanded.



They're not being offered a really diverse range of narrative styles of storytelling. Um, and what that then does is it impacts on what distributors say will play to audiences. They say, 'we put out this radical film and no one wants to see it.' You know. So it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, that less varied diet, sort of like the McDonalds approach to filmmaking.

RS: It's quite condescending to the audience really isn't it?

AK: Very much so. I call it the McDonalds sort of, like any aspect of our lives it's being constantly whittled down. On the one hand we feel as though we have a lot of choice, more choices now than we've ever had as consumers. And yet on the other hand we're actually being fed a lower class diet of whatever we're consuming constantly all the way through. And it's a really big problem. A big problem for filmmakers and a big problem for audiences. And what we've got to be doing I think, from wherever we are, if we care about filmmaking or we care about storytelling in that medium, we have to be pushing those boundaries all the time. We have to be encouraging distributors to take risks. We have to be encouraging audiences to go and see our films. We have find interesting ways of getting people to see our films as well.

RS: Mm. It's pretty amazing that *Head On* received such good exhibition and distribution I suppose.

AK: Yeah.

RS: You were quite fortunate to have those people willing to take the risks, which is probably not typical.

AK: That's right. And of course, you know, they took a risk and it paid off for them. So it was a good example of a distributor saying, 'sure it's risky, but we faith in the filmmaker, we have faith in the material, and faith in the people who have made it,' and as a result, as I said, they actually won out in the end because they got excellent box office returns, you know. So, but this is where I think risk-taking has got to be a constant thing. I mean there's often a dumbing down in film, or a lull where you think 'my god there's not a decent film that I want to go and see that's saying anything new or presenting ideas in a different way'. But, then all of a sudden something comes along that's new or different, and it blows that idea out of the water, you know. And this is the interesting thing, you know. And distributors also know that all of a sudden something can happen and the landscape changes.

RS: Yeah. The relationship with the producer would also be very important in maintaining your independence and autonomy, getting the story you want onto the screen. I've



heard some terrible stories about really compromising endings being put on to films that just you know, destroyed the director's vision of what they were trying to say.

AK: Yeah. Yeah. Well the relationship between the director and the producer is really *the* most important relationship. And I think what you've got to do – and it's an important collaboration, it's one where you have to be very careful that the person you're working with is someone who actually shares the vision that you have for the film. They're not trying to make you change the ending, or do things that in some way belittle the work that you're actually trying to put up on the screen for an audience. I think you've really got to be very rigorous in your own work, know exactly why you want to do it and what you want to say. And then hopefully the producer that you're working with, and you've chosen them for that reason, actually shares that vision and wants that to be realised, not something else. Not what they think. But certainly I think they're there to support the filmmaker in what they're trying to do. I mean I must say I've been very lucky in these respects, because the producers that I've worked with are collaborators and work with me to realise the vision that I have for the film. And I've never been in a position where a producer has said, 'gee I think you've gotta tone this down, or change the ending' or whatever. So in that sense I've been very lucky.

RS: What about working with the AFC? Have you had much involvement with them, or with Film Victoria?

AK: Well the Australian Film Commission have been very supportive to our projects over the years, and they continue to be supportive. I can't speak high...I find them a very um, user-friendly organisation. I think that they...

(tape changes sides)

...Into *Only The Brave*. Um, and with *Head On*, Cinemedia contributed, was a financing partner in that film. And um, as I said the AFC continues to be an ongoing support mechanism for filmmakers.

RS: It's becoming um...it's just got to constantly defend itself hasn't it?

AK: Mm, and I think that the real tragedy is that you know, there are always examples of where these funding bodies and agencies can do better, and they're constantly looking at ways I think of servicing the industry better, but overall, we have to applaud what they do, and we have to be constantly supporting what they do. Because in the end it's government money that's being used to support and assist a vibrant film community, and without them we wouldn't see the kinds of quality films that are being made here.

RS: They actually do quite a lot on very little money.



- AK: They do. I think they do an enormous amount, and that's why I think we as a filmmaking community and certainly the community at large has got to recognise that they really do a huge job in maintaining and supporting the industry in all sorts of ways and on different kinds of levels. And that amount of government assistance, while we always wish it was more, is still significant enough to allow a film industry to even maintain itself here. It's crucial.
- RS: And you think it's important that Australia as a nation has a film industry, just to maintain that diversity or...?
- AK: Absolutely. Absolutely. We, the Americans and the Australians may all speak the same, all speak English. But I don't think we speak the same language. I think that it's crucial that if we want to have any films being made in this country with an independence and a vibrancy, we have to have government support. You just cannot survive any other way. There's no country in any part of the world who has a film industry and doesn't rely on government assistance. It's just the way it is. You know, if any country is going to have an indigenous filmmaking community, well then there's got to be government support.
- RS: And yet, you know, people who are trying to cut back on the government support say 'well, isn't that hampering the independence of the industry, you know', as though the market will somehow ensure this great independent scene.
- AK: No. Nup. The market will only respond to the high-end commercial product. That's all the market is interested in. They're not interested in supporting filmmakers. They're not interested in developing filmmakers. They're not interested in assisting emerging filmmakers. They do nothing except play a market role, which is fine. And that's what they're there to do, but at the same time, if there's not a government backed industry, you're not going to get all those things I just mentioned. You just won't get them. They just won't happen.
- RS: Mm.
- AK: So it's as stark as that. So I think that when people talk about knocking government support, you know, I just don't know where it comes from.
- RS: So do you see your role as a storyteller then?
- AK: Yeah. Basically I'm a storyteller who chooses to tell stories in the film medium. And I think that as a storyteller you have, for me at this particular point in my career, I feel very connected to the place that I live in, and I feel as if I'm trying to tell stories that come from a particular place in time, that are stories that come out of not necessarily my own personal experiences, but they have personal



obsessions in them. Stories that reflect something about me and my life on the screen. Stories that actually reflect something about the community that I live in. Now, if I didn't make films you wouldn't get that sort of filmmaking happening. You wouldn't get those sorts of stories being told.

RS: Yes.

AK: It's just as simple as that. You would then just... We'd all have films representing us in a Hollywood style form of storytelling. Which has got nothing to do with my life, and nothing to do with your life.

RS: Do you see yourself as being part of any filmmaking tradition? Any sort of inspirations or influences that you'd note as being really significant?

AK: Mm, look my influences are pretty diverse. But I think that my...it's an interesting question – I think that my influences are diverse but predominantly I think I really grew up on a diet of European films. And the great 70s, 80s period and even going back to the sort of French New Wave, I think there was an incredible explosion of kind of filmmaking, extraordinary filmmaking that happened in the last century, you know in the last 30 or 40 years, which inevitably influence you in terms of what you do. But what you try to do out of that is find your own voice and your own concerns and your own issues. And also as a craft what you try and do is express that, that sort of storytelling in a way that hopefully just gets better and better, and therefore communicates better to an audience as well in terms of what it is you're trying to say.

RS: Yeah. What do you see as the greatest threat to you doing what you do?

AK: (laughter) Well, that they'll stop giving me money to make films! You know that's every filmmakers biggest concern. It's...it's interesting, people think we have you know, glamorous lives. And I always laugh when people think that because you've got your name in the newspaper or your photo, that somehow, I don't know, that that's...

RS: This is Australia we're talking about!

AK: Yeah!

RS: A lot of filmmakers spend a lot of time on the dole!

AK: Yes. Exactly. What filmmakers, what we sacrifice financially to actually to do what we do is just ridiculous. It's enormous. You literally live off the smell of an oily rag. You are constantly worried about money and making ends meet, and you're constantly chasing um, the possibility of realising the work. And um, no one, there's a lot of time



where we don't get paid. I don't get paid to do any of what I do. I might get paid for a six month period but that has to last me for two years, or something like that. It's a pretty, you know, look, you know, you don't...I certainly didn't start filmmaking in order to make money. I got into filmmaking because I had a passion to make films and that's what drives you, and that's what keeps you going. And if you get sick of it and tired of it, well then you go and do something else.

RS: Mm.

AK: If you just can't do it anymore for whatever reason, or the passion's gone, or you can't survive, realistically, and continue to work, well, I mean, you should just go and do something else.

RS: Yeah. And um, it's a question that I suppose I've been asking a lot of the directors I've spoken to, do you see the move here of the Fox studios and Warner Brothers, as having anything at all to do with your life, and the Australian film industry?

AK: Well, it does impact on the local industry. There's no doubt about that. It impacts wherever the studios in Sydney have had an impact on costs related to film production, or in real terms it means, for example, that if you're trying to shoot a film in Sydney, it's become more expensive because the studios and the American, or Hollywood based productions have come in and been able to throw around a lot more money. When someone in a small independent film comes along and says 'gee we want to pay for that location too,' you know all of sudden you find, just as a small example, you find the studios have used those locations and they've paid X price, and you come along, a small filmmaker, and want to use the same location, well all of a sudden the price has gone up.

RS: Mm.

AK: And so just all of a sudden crews are able, may be more attracted to working on Hollywood productions, or American sort of productions, because they can be paid more, and that means that you know there's less crew available for independent films. Um,

RS: Have you experienced any of that yet?

AK: Yeah, it does. It happens. There's no doubt about it. So it has all kinds of subtle and not-so-subtle effects. That's just in the way it impacts on us very directly. As a result of that a lot of Sydney films now, independent films, are finding it too expensive to shoot in Sydney, and there are all of a sudden a whole lot of productions coming down to Melbourne. The reason they're heading down to Melbourne



is because the costs are lower. The reason they're lower is because we're not competing with any studio in this city at this particular point in time.

RS: Which could be quite good for Melbourne.

AK: And so my whole argument is, what Melbourne should be doing, what Cinemedia should be doing, for example, is cultivating and promoting Victoria as an independent filmmaking um, place, city. A place where you can come and...and generate independent filmmaking in an exciting way. In a different way. So on the one hand ironically, I think it's put the squeeze on Sydney, but it opens up good possibilities for us here in Melbourne.

RS: Yes. Melbourne's always been known as more 'arty'. It's probably something to capitalise on.

AK: Well I think we should. And I think that's a really important thing that we've got to foster and kind of like promote, and be aware of.

RS: Well I think I've covered most of the questions that I had. Is there anything that we've touched on that you'd like to add on that I haven't given you the chance to?

AK: What because you were talking over me?!

RS: Yeah, that's right.

AK: Right, when you said "...excuse me"! No, darl, look if that's cool for you that's fine by me.

RS: Thanks so much for your time, and all the best with the project that you're working on at the moment.

AK: Thanks a lot Rochelle. Good luck with your thesis.

RS: Thanks. Bye.

Tape concludes.



## Interview with John Curran

(This interview took place in person on Thursday 15 April 1999.)

R. Siemienowicz: Okay, well first of all congratulations on the film. I really enjoyed it and thought it was very true to the spirit of the book and captured that strange....well, it's ironically energetic and humourous isn't it, even though it was kind of about apathy and tragedy I suppose.

John Curran: Oh good, I'm glad you got that. That's always a difficult thing, not just in adapting books. I don't think you can bank upon the fact that people liked the book, it has to work on its own. That was what I liked about the book was that there was apathy, and he was a static character but there was warmth and a gentleness to him, balanced by a unique sense of humour.

RS: I actually thought – I mean it's been a long time since I read the book, I read it back in 94 I think. I thought the film was actually warmer than the book. Um, I suspect that maybe that was the conclusion as well. The conclusion was a bit more upbeat than the book.

JC: You know I think that naturally when you adapt a book you lose elements of the book. You know what I liked about the book was that in its time it was a really fresh voice, and it was a-rhythmic and kind of plotless, but that's why it stood out, because it was like a new form, a distinct form, and we knew that when we did the film we had to capture an unconventional form. Potentially it could be deemed inaccessible. That was always the challenge, trying to make that. But I think that once we truncated the book, what we really just hung onto was the love story. I mean that's what it is, a love story. When you read the book it is about a love story, but it is, but you have much more of a sense because of the opportunity of prose, to kind of explore the world of where he hung out, the milieu, and the subplots become bigger. So I think just by virtue of focusing on the love story and focusing on the character of Gordon, it was warmer, and we did want it to be warmer I think.

RS: Yeah, I was just re-reading certain bits on the tram, you know the bit where she leaves at the airport, and it was gut-wrenching, and I thought, 'oh, I didn't remember it being quite this...'

JC: You know it's weird because I purposely didn't, you know, when I got the screenplay given to me, I'd been working with the producer that developed it, Martha Coleman, for years and I hadn't read the book for like four years like you. I made the decision that I wasn't going to read the book again, you know, I was just going to...if it's not in the script



then it didn't matter to me. And I didn't draw from the book for ideas, yet a couple of times where we were doing voice-over I went back to the book and I thought, 'wow, it's not really the book'. It's quite a... it's a you know it was written by Andrew McGahan, the screenplay, and it's a distillation of the book, it's removed from it quite a bit, and there's things from the book that I barely remembered, and other stuff I went, 'wow, this is interesting'.

RS: There were a number of books that came out that year and they were lumped together under the title of grunge novels...

JC: Dirty realist I think they called it.

RS: Yeah, that's right. Did you read any of the others?

JC: Um, *Falafel* I read. Um, I'm assuming that these are all part of...I guess there was *Loaded*...

RS: Yeah, which they've made into *Head On*. Have you seen that?

JC: Yeah, I think they were books and ideas of their time and then the films that have come out in the last year, cause you know film takes so much longer. I think the danger of taking something of the moment is that you don't want it to date, you know, and I think my fear when I was doing this film, was that you didn't want it to be a kind of youth grunge rock and roll film cause you know we've moved past that so much now that it would certainly seem dated and passe. So it really kind of determined a lot of our directions, whether it was cinematography or music was 'let's not go back there.' Let's kind of take the essence of what was refreshing about this story and these characters, but let's make sure that it's more timeless, that it's not about 1989 or 1990. That's not what the film's about. It's kind of removed from that. You know I don't know a lot of the other books, but you can kind of gather the impression just by the few that I had read, that...

RS: There was *The River Ophelia* and a few others, and I was actually writing a paper on them when they came out, the grunge novels and stuff, and so I immersed myself in them and so I got really really depressed. And so I wonder if maybe you got depressed immersing yourself in a story that is about self-destructiveness, really.

JC: Well, yes and no. Well I think probably what I related to in Gordon, was... I think everybody has their addictions and that defines the person, even if you're addicted to health. Some people are overly zealous about it and it determines a pattern of behaviour that I think even in a person like that you'd have to be self aware and say, 'you're repeating this behaviour over and over again overcompensating. And that interested me. I loved the way Andrew adapted that for the screenplay. You could really feel that these vices that define Cynthia and Gordon and the patterns of behaviour but also, not just in the way they drink and smoke and eat, but also in the way they love. And looking at love as a vice,



and sex as an addiction, and you know, the idea that we're attracted to things that aren't necessarily healthy for us, you know. And I guess what depressed me about making it was that, um, you know whenever you make a subjective story or film, you do have to sort of buy into the character's inner logic and understand it and find elements of yourself that are like that. Even though you're not that person you do have to sort of become that person a little bit to get under their skin. And you know, my frustration with Gordon's inertness, was probably recognising that there are a lot of similar things that I have in terms of you know, I make the same mistakes over and over again. I find myself, you know messing up a relationship or a situation, and thinking 'God, when will you learn?' you know. I guess what I held onto was that everybody can hopefully when they see the film they recognise just the humanness of that, you know, and that if you're at all cynical about films, they have a habit of neatening up people and situations and giving nice happy endings and a sense of closure. But really I guess the point of this film, and the point of the story is, he doesn't know anything about love, he goes through this incredibly thing and comes out the other end of it and he knows a little bit more about something, but it's not, it's a realistic move forward. It's like life, you kind of, you don't kinda change, you don't get a job and get a haircut and you know put all your vices behind you. You do it just a little step at a time I think. That's what I hung onto, even though I agree with you that there's times when like...but I also thought that this is why I was attracted to the thing in the first place. It's reality, I suppose.

RS: And yet if the character of Gordon is based on Andrew McGahan, and it certainly is, I mean he certainly escapes that in terms of doing something with his life.

JC: Oh God yeah. Well, look Andrew's written a couple of books. He's had success, and it's created a life for him that he likes. But, you know, he's still got elements within himself, I'm sure that, things that...and you know I've known him for years now, and you know, he's evolved, like we all have as we all have as we've got older. But he's still essentially the same person. I guess that's the point. He did evolve, but not everything at once, he didn't kind of give up smoking and take up clean living. He's still Andrew you know, and there's a lot of Gordon still in him, so it's weird working with a writer who's written a character that's based on him, you're talking about the character and ultimately you're kind of psychoanalysing the guy himself.

RS: Yes. Is he as frank in person as he is in prose?



- JC: He's um...yeah, he's really straight forward. He's pretty ego-less, you know, protective of his characters, but ego-less about working with you, which is great, and he is very upfront about his weaknesses, and whatever, in the way that Gordon is. He's...unlike Gordon he's an incredibly fast talker. He's like just a motor-mouth, stumbles over his words, talks faster than I do. That was a surprise. I expected him to be very laconic and laid-back and simply spoken, but he's a real fire-ball.
- RS: There aren't that many men who could write that frankly about having a small penis or being bad in bed.
- JC: Yeah, I think that's why the book kind of resonated a bit. It's true. You don't. It's odd really. That's what I wrote in my director's notes when we were trying to get finance for the film. I'm 38 years old and I don't think I've ever heard a man admit they've got a small penis and that they're bad in bed. And I'm sure a lot of them do and a lot of them are. And I guess that was a revelation – I wonder why that is. That's partly why the book resonates
- RS: Do you think...it's quite unusual to see such a sexually ambivalent man on screen, and such a voracious woman – she's quite masculine. Do you think that's perhaps more common in real life than we can see?
- JC: Oh, I'm sure that it is. And I think that, you know, I've had sexual ambivalence in relationships and a lot of it's just that you're kind of distracted, or that you're at some kind of a low ebb where you're just not there, so you know, within every relationship there's been those periods, so you can certainly relate to that, whether that defines you sexually or not. I'm sure that there's a lot. What I think that what it played with is the flip side of a dynamic that we expect in cinema. You know, we assume that most men want to have sex all the time, and a lot of women are sexually ambivalent. So I think that playing with the flip side of that dynamic, it revealed a lot about how common the opposite probably is, and probably how, yeah, I think it just played with that perception a lot.
- RS: It's really not fair on men. I was just reading how Gordon was saying, 'why can't I let go of my mind and get lost in the body, why can't everything be subservient to the Lord Penis, or something like that . And I thought why do we expect that of men? I suppose it's that cliché.
- JC: You know I think that women are – and this is really generalising – but I think generally women are a lot, men probably do become distracted by the surface of a person and you know that feeds into their performance and everything, whereas the woman generally responds to the



essence of the man. I think women are a lot more open about how their partner looks than men are. It's probably a biological thing or something. And I think that...what's that saying? Women need to feel good about themselves to have sex, but men need to have sex to feel good about themselves. Some sort of adage like that, that was really kind of poignant, that really...I'm not sure that that's what it is, but it's something like that. They're same species, two different genders, you're really talking two different worlds, and you expect them to all come together and all mix properly, and that's what's interesting about any love story, like I guess the corny Hollywood version is opposites come together, and somehow it's a beautiful thing and there's a happy ending. But a lot of times there's this sort of collision and then you know, turmoil, then separation, and you think, wow what was that? You've taken something out of it.

RS: Yeah the way you shot the sex scenes between Gordon and Cynthia was really emphasising that collision, quite violent almost.

JC: It always annoys me, sex in films. And I think that this is the first script that I read where I didn't find the sex gratuitous or that it was supposed to be erotic, you know. Sex really was the narrative. I mean if you've seen the trailer, the essence of it is that. It's marked by the sex scenes. The whole progression of the relationship is marked by the sex scenes and so they, you knew from the beginning that that was the through-line was that evolution, those two together in bed, and you know, when you don't want the sex to be erotic and you don't want it to be disgusting and voyeuristic it leaves you with this kind of challenge. How do you shoot sex for the cinema? It's one of those things. We stayed quite static on it and quite wide, didn't go in on it and try to force the eye anywhere, just kind of... I think when you get wide enough on two people fucking it's a kind of bizarre-looking thing. And I wanted it to be so far away it looked ridiculous. It's like, when you see animals doing it it always looks ridiculous, that's essentially what...we don't look any different really, so it was really fun to do that, and also kind of play with real orgasm faces. They're quite kind of funny and ugly at the same time. You know in cinema it's always reduced down to some kind of sigh and controlled thing.

RS: They're a grimace aren't they?

JC: It looks...you know out of context it looks like agony.

RS: Yeah, I have a friend whose ex-wife used to say that he looked like he'd been hit by a bus when he came. And he was just really offended by that and that made him feel



really self-conscious, and I thought to say something like that, how are you ever going to expect to have good sex with them if you tell them they look stupid?!

JC: I mean, I probably...I don't think you're ever really attracted to, with film you're with it for so long and there's so many elements you consider before you take something on, and this is like falling in love with somebody. You can't really define it as one thing, it's a lot of things. But one of the things I was really attracted to was um, that, you know, showing sex realistically, and it would be funny, that's what I thought. I get to show sex really honestly, and when I do I think it's going to be funny. Cause it is, if you look at it from a certain perspective, it is quite ridiculous, but without reducing the kind of importance of it, that we were dealing with a character who was inept at it.

RS: The woman, Sacha Horler. Very brave actress. A really good performance.

JC: Yeah, we...I mean you know the hardest thing about adapting it is, who are you going to get to play these people. You know, are you going to sell out, and have an attractive spunky girl with minor skin problems, or you get rid of exzema all together. Those were discussions and those were considerations, but I think that again, the idea of the book is that it's a frank honest warts and all love story, and you had to believe that this person had a bad self image, and that she... that exzema was really part of the character, the way that she was very up-front about it, but didn't' really do much to change to change the fact that she had it. I mean, she still kept doing all the things that probably aggravated it. And the main thing was to see from Gordon's point of view how he didn't care about that, you know, the main thing of the love story was establishing the non-judgemental nature of the book. That's what you love about seeing a couple together is when they totally accept each other no matter how strange they are or how unappealing they are, you can love their love because they just accept each other totally and that's what I've always loved about Praise, because I think there's a period in time when they really work, you know. Um, you know ultimately he has to make a decision based on self-preservation, but he's really very non-judgemental about her and really very accepting of how she is.

RS: Yeah, I was talking to another reviewer just before I went to the film and she said "I bet they make her pretty" and when I saw the stills before the film she did look very perfect and I thought... but you know the bad skin really was there.



- JC: Yeah, a total credit to the make-up guy cause he did a brilliant job. You believe it. You know we take creative license with it. It's there when Gordon sees it, and we see it and we see how he reacts to it and it's not a big deal, it's just more a matter of curiousness, and but you know, it definitely could have been overkill with it, and the audience could have said, 'oh god, here comes that flaking bitch again' and we didn't want that either. We wanted to see her as he did.
- RS: They were both highly allergic people weren't they? He had his own allergies and so did she. They kept doing what they did to aggravate them.
- JC: I think it's that kind of idea of, that cycle of behaviour where you don't know if you're smoking and drinking because you're depressed about your asthma or you don't know if your asthma is playing up because you're smoking and drinking. And the same with her, the fact that she's got eczema contributes to her desire to get out of herself, whether it's drugs or sex. Which comes first, the eczema or the feelings? And I guess I saw that as very similar in both of them, that kind of pattern of behaviour where you don't know where began and you don't know where it's going to end, ultimately they are in control of it but it's part of the choices that they make in that point of life.
- RS: Do you think that Gordon was a character who just had no love of life?
- JC: You know I think he's at that age where there's that kind of gap between school and ultimate reality where you're just trying to find out what it is, what your sense is and what your purpose is in life. I think he's the kind of considered person where he's not going to commit to anything too quickly, you know out of fear, or out of insecurity or ambitions a lot of those strong characteristics, so he's just slowly kind of watching and absorbing which essentially makes him static and appear to be not a strong participant in life, but you know hopefully he's you know, my intention with the ending was to project a sense of hope, that you know what's going to propel him forward is experience and knowledge and hopefully he's come through his relationship with Cynthia and kind of um, a sense of closure with Rachel that he'd been carrying around for a number of years, and so he can take a step forward in some direction, you know,
- RS: Whereas in the book he just goes into the shop and buys cigarettes and says, 'fifteen years! God I've got fifteen years to fill in.'



JC: The book is a lot more nihilist. I mean I wasn't interested in that kind of nihilist film it was hard to kind of come to terms with precisely following that ending and not having it be nihilistic and you know again, it comes back to me, I look at the smoking as a metaphor for love that you know, it's attractive and he's compelled to do it, but ultimately it can be bad for you, you know it's always going to come with a warning. I don't think you ever enter into a relationship thinking it's going to be perfect, or that it's going to be a disaster. you go into it with the best intentions and your eyes open, but you know you don't know where it's going to go. I think that that was it, the way cigarettes come with a warning, surprisingly so many people still smoke, that was the kind of love story that love comes with a warning.

RS: Yeah, I hadn't thought of that, the smoking as a metaphor for love.

JC: Well it was the only way I could rationalise it – you know you have that inner logic system that works for you. I didn't want it to be nihilistic. I wanted it to be a bit more fable-esque, I suppose, that it wasn't just a gratuitous aspect to him it's part and parcel of him. He's such a stripped back character that okay he doesn't have Cynthia, doesn't have Rachel, who is he? what is he? What's the first thing that he is? He's a smoker. Kind of defines himself like that. Hopefully kind of says something about the kind of relationship he's going to move to next probably not be the perfect one, he'll probably screw it up again, but maybe he'll be a bit more careful with the next person he chooses.

RS: A lot of people get stuck in that phase. It's not just a stage that they pass through, that nihilistic thing, but I don't know if you've read any Nietzsche, but I've been looking at the concept of *ressentiment*, the sort of slave mentality where you perceive that you can never achieve the goals of success that society puts forward, so you decide to reject those, and at the beginning of the film he says something about keeping your expectations under control. I know Andrew McGahan has said that he didn't want this to be representative of youth angst, do you think that's something we do see in Australian society at the moment?

JC: I think if I'd made this film when I was 25 I would have romanticised a lot of the superfluous stuff in the story, romanticised the drinking, the clubs, made it seem like this is a great way to spend your life, while you're waiting for life to come, for reality to come. And I think I'm older now, and having been through my own kind of phase like that, and I can look at it for what it is, I think essentially what you're talking about, a little bit of cynicism a bit cynical about your own worth and also the worth of those kinds of goals, so you know, why bother. It's a pretty unattractive way to live and be. And I don't think you can say all youth looks at the world that way. It's a little bit hard not to be a little



bit cynical or you're just inundated now a lot more with information than you were when I was even 25, 15 years ago! Is it that long? I'm 39 this year. I don't think that – I didn't want to paint a picture of youth, you know this is, it's one guy and it's a very particular guy and I think he's a frustrating guy. I knew that the potential problem with the film was that a lot of people could feel frustrated with this guy. Okay he kind of presents himself as gentle and doesn't want to hurt anybody but he's certainly prepared to hurt himself. He's doing nobody any harm. He's not doing anybody any good, but he's kind of beyond reproachable a bit except for your opinion of this guy by putting him in that environment and toning the film very uniquely to him I really wanted to steer away from it being, 'this is the youth of Australia' or the youth of the world, and this is their view. It's certainly there, but...

RS: I think you definitely achieved that individual character portrait rather than him being a cipher for Australian youth, but on another level it really taps into the way young people think of work, and what you do get if you get a job, probably a shit job, and there's nothing really to commit to, and I think it taps into that whether it means to or not.

JC: Well, it's really, and this is, you know, if there is an element of Australian youth in it for me, it's bizarre, I've been here for 15 years, and it's easier as an outsider to see a culture. You're removed from it, you're foreign, and you sort of see the difference immediately from your own culture. You know in America it's pre-written – you go to high school and you've got to go to college. If you don't go to college you're not going to get any kind of job, so your youth's pretty much taken up with school. And you get out of school at about 22 and by that time after all you've been through you're pretty close to knowing what you're going to do and because school's very expensive and most people take out loans, unless you're paid for by your parents, you know you've got to start working to pay off those. So it's a self-perpetuating kind of ambitious thing. And coming here I said wow, there's a lot of people that don't need to go to college, number 1, to get a really good job. A lot of Australians travel. I think that's a geographical thing where you know, you're so far removed from the rest of the world that there's this desire to get out and see it, and so instead of jumping right into college cause they don't really have to, they have that choice, a lot of them work, save up money and go and they become more worldly, and gather a lot of experience and then that defines what they do. A lot of times they come back a lot further ahead than someone who's progressed through school and chased that didn't really mean anything to them, and there's a lot of people who get out very disillusioned, in America, for different reason. Here you can arrive at that point of Gordon and I will say, and I think it taps into it the book. I don't think it's quite the same now, but it's very easy to go on the dole here, and very accepted. You know in America



there's a real stigma attached to being on welfare. It's like...ugh. First of all you wouldn't apply for it and if you're on it you wouldn't admit it, whereas here it's like, I know film-makers who are still on the dole.

RS: I'm on the dole!

JC: I don't have any...it's an accepted thing. It's a part of, you know you can be quite up front about it, and there's no judgement at all about that, and I think that therein lies an opportunity for kind of hanging out, if you're so inclined to do that. You know, I see people that are on the dole, and they're living by the beach, and they just want to surf, and to be honest with you I find that kind of attractive. I think if I was 23, 24 and didn't know what I wanted to do, I'd do that for a couple of years if I could swing it. So I think it's a lot more in the book, but it's touched on in the film, is that idea, 'well just go on the dole, what's the big deal?' It exists, you can get it. Three forms of ID, there you go. So you're kind of allowed. I don't know whether it's a nihilistic or cynical view of the world, but I would say that it's something unique to this story that's an Australian aspect, that is all those elements combined kind of allows you to be like that. Some people do get stuck in it simply because it's easy.

RS: Whereas in your culture I suppose you're so goal-directed through your youth till you get your low-level administrative job and then you maybe you start feeling trapped. I don't know.

JC: Yeah, I don't know why I came down here, but it seems clear to me that I wasn't happy doing what I was doing, and I wanted to make a big change, a dramatic change. I wanted to get out, and it's easy...and the idea of going back there, I consider Australia my home, and I love living in Sydney, and my friends are here. It's hard being this far away from my family, but when I go back there I find myself kind of wound up, you know, New York city, LA cause it's kind of the epicentre of what I do, that's where my family's based on East coast and stuff, and I just find that it's so kind of...you are what you do, to a degree, and that's what defines you and you know things are, because it's literally the same size country but with 250 million people, and 18.19 million people here, it's the old rats in a box theory. You put a lot more rats in the box, they're going to be scurrying a lot faster and clambering over each other a lot more aggressively for food and stuff, and that's what I feel when I go back there, it's just this kind of, 'we've got to get someplace, we're going someplace,' and here it's just a little bit more relaxed and...

RS: I feel like that when I go to Sydney!



JC: Do you? Yeah, well I've heard that a lot. I do get a strong sense here in Melbourne that people, you know, have dinner parties and sit around and talk more, it's much more relaxed a pace, and the people I've met here are a lot more...it's a bit more of a circus in Sydney I think.

RS: Well you need a lot more money to live well in Sydney, and people are really quite comfortable asking you how much money you have and where do you live. I mean Melbourne is still like that – what suburb are you in – in Sydney I just felt that real overt materialism. I don't like to generalise, but...

JC: Well, I think that you kind of can, about New York and LA. Any city really, Brisbane. The thing that you're talking about is really a state of mind of a city, and I think that, well, we didn't shoot the film in Brisbane – you know it wasn't necessary really. I didn't want to do a documentary on Brisbane, I wanted to capture that Brisbane state of mind, which is exactly what we're talking about, you know. What is it? You know, it's a place that has a geographical location and it's hot and I wanted it to feel hot and to determine the pace of the film and the pace of the characters there, you know, um, certain sounds and insects and birds I wanted to hear of that place, and I wanted it to have a location, but it was always going to be an interior film, so you know what's the point of really being out on the street and seeing the Storey Bridge and knowing you're in Brisbane. More important to kind of capture the essence of what that was. And I guess that dole aspect was born out of the story of the book, where in that milieu in that place, at that time this is this is the way that a lot of people function now. And I guess the main reason that we didn't shoot up there was money, we just couldn't afford it. I would have loved to have shot there base all the interiors on... I'd been on reccies, location scouting and taken lots of videos and taken lots of photographs and stuff, and we based a lot of everything on Queensland, Brisbane stuff, but...

RS: Have you spent much time there?

JC: Um, oh probably three weeks, but enough to get what I needed out of it. And I don't present the film as my view on Brisbane or um, or a recreation of Brisbane. Again, it's an abstraction of that discussion we just had, every city has its own personality and a cliché attached to it and it's kind of just taking that and playing with it a little bit, and you know, I guess it was inevitable, unless we were going to change the emphasis of the story and make it more about the character of the place, I didn't think that the place had



such a strong character once we'd adapted the book into a screenplay.

RS: I take it from what you said before about how you feel when you go home that you don't want to go back to the states to make films?

JC: I guess it's inevitable, given that um, well you know, for two reasons. One that a lot of stories within me are American stories, that you know, I'm compelled to write and to direct. But I'm also developing Australian stories as well, and the stuff you're interested in is always borne out of – for me anyway, um, something from life experience. I've been here long enough that there's a lot that I have to say in, even as an outsider living in this country. I suppose I'm ...I'll never make quintessentially Australian film, it will always be a kind of observational, from an observational perspective. But there's a lot that interests me from coming at it from that angle. You know, It's hard as a filmmaker, once you make a film here, it's a great place to make a first film, but it's hard to have a career here. It's a small market, it's an expensive medium, and you know, it's a long time between takes, and you need to make money in development, and there's not a really strong development culture. You're kind of swayed by opportunities abroad, so a little of it is just a natural kind of progression into reaching a place where you have a bit more control, so you come back here and define your career, like Baz Luhrmann, Jane Campion, Peter Weir, they're all at stages of their career with successes behind them, where they can say, oh I'm going to live in Australia, I'm going to make my films where I want. Whether it's an American story or an Australian film, I'm still an Australian but inevitably you find that most film-makers have to go and learn that environment somehow, because you can't avoid it really. So, I don't have a desire to go back there, but I'm sure I'll do stints there.

RS: This is your first feature?

JC: Yeah, I made a short film, it's completely different from *Praise*. It's a different tone altogether. Dogs played by men. It's called *Down Rusty Down*. Noah Taylor plays the lead dog and it's about a gang of neutered men and the leader still has balls and it's about the lead up to him being castrated.

RS: This is fairly late for a person to be making a first feature – not that you're old, but you've obviously had a career making other – what was it, music videos, and graphic art?

JC: I kind of came at directing late, you know. I didn't start directing till I was thirty, so I guess. It's a much more – by contemporary standards, yeah, I mean it's not that old to be



making a first film, but there are so many people making a first film that are under 25 and 28, it's becoming a youth industry really.

RS: But it's like you've had another career before you came...

JC: Yeah, I made music videos and advertisements. That's how I kind of cut my teeth as a director.

RS: Do you continue to sort of do that to pay the bills or...?

JC: Yeah, I guess the emphasis has just shifted, that I'm a filmmaker and I'll do that stuff in gaps, whereas before I was you know, making ads and music videos, and filling in the gaps with developing films. I mean, ultimately I'm making films and when I have enough time and opportunities I'll do the commercial work, but again, it's hard here, because it's a small market, you can't just sort of dabble in that the way you can in the States. You really have to focus, and make ads here it's competitive and there's a lot of people doing it, and you can't just kind of waltz in and waltz out. You kind of have to make a choice and...

RS: Did you know that's what you were going to be doing when you moved over here?

JC: No. I was a graphic designer, but I knew that I wanted to get into something more film-oriented and I guess I knew that my way in would be through advertising, so that was my earliest exposure to the film-making process. And I knew I wasn't going to go back to film school and do something like that. So I sort of evolved into it. A natural progression from design, through advertising and music videos into doing my own stories.

RS: What are you doing at the moment?

JC: I'm writing a film at the moment. I'm working on a screenplay separate from that with Andrew McGahan, and you know in development, back to square one.

RS: How did you find the process of applying for film funding with *Praise*?

JC: You know, to the producer's credit, Martha Coleman, she developed the project for years and when I came on board, it was...I read the script and loved it and got involved, and then it was ... all happened very quickly. It happened within six months. She'd been nurturing it for years. For Martha it's been like a six year project, you know so I found it very painless because a lot of the hard work had been done.

(Tape Concludes.)



## Interview with Margot Nash

(Interview took place by telephone, 18/2/00.)

- R. Siemienowicz: Hi, it's Rochelle here,
- Margot Nash: Hi,
- RS: Is it still convenient to talk now?
- MN: Well, yes and no. Let's have a bit of a talk now, to clarify what you want, and tell you what's up with me, because I am just – I've been trying to make a cup of tea before you rang – clear the – I've just been overseas, I've gone around the world and back in a week, so I'm a bit, I'm a bit...
- RS: Flabbergasted?
- MN: Yes, thank you. I need some Bach Flower remedies to balance me.
- RS: Are you still jetlagged?
- MN: I think I'm through – I got back on Friday. And so I think the jetlag is in the main over, but I'm a bit wired because I've got a lot on my plate.
- RS: Okay.
- MN: I had to go away, took a couple of weeks out, with prep and travelling and being there. Anyway, and *Vacant Possession* seems a long way away, when you're in the middle of something else.
- RS: I'd be very interested to hear what's happened since *Vacant Possession*, because it's been a bit difficult to find out much about you?
- MN: Really?
- RS: Yes, I hope that's not too much of an insult. The AFI research centre, your file just had a photograph of you. That's all it had!
- MN: How hopeless! They've got heaps of my films in the AFI.
- RS: Yeah, well they had *Vacant Possession* on video and there's also some Cinema Papers interviews that I have had a look at
- MN: So you haven't seen the press kit from *Vacant Possession*, or the blurb blah and everything?
- RS: No, I'd love to get hold of it.
- MN: There's a lot of stuff been written about *Vacant Possession*. We did quite an extensive press kit which is a little bit - what's the word – self-conscious – in retrospect.



RS: Oh really? Would it be possible for me to get a copy of that?

MN: Yeah, let me find a piece of paper in the mess...Um I'll tell you who else has written extensively about *Vacant Possession*. Adrian Martin. And he's a big fan of the film, and he wrote a couple of very good reviews of it.

RS: Okay.

MN: But they're in the press kit. Or one of them is.

RS: Okay. I think there might be something on the database too, that he's done on the film, so yeah, okay. Can I give you my address?

MN: Yeah.

RS: It's....

MN: Okay,

RS: That would be great. I'll just give you a brief outline of...

MN: How urgent is all this? I know what PhDs are like. They can take years.

RS: Well mine's been going for quite a few years. I would like to get my interviews sorted out in the next month or so, so I mean, if next week's better for you or...?

MN: Well, I'll tell you what's happened with me. I'm completely overloaded; I've taken on a .5 fractional academic position at UTS teaching screenwriting.

RS: Congratulations. That's a bit of a plum position, I imagine.

MN: It certainly is. It means I can do my own work. It's flexible. So I can still be a filmmaker. But I start teaching, Monday week. And I've just had to go to Dublin for a few weeks with my film, so,

RS: Was this the Dublin film festival?

MN: No, this was something else, I'll tell you in a minute, so um, so the next week is a nightmare, because I really have to lessen my load and pull my shit together for the Uni. Um, so next week is not a good week. Once I start teaching and settle down it will, you know, I'll be better. After that first week I'll be better.

RS: Okay.

MN: I've got another feature happening, which the plan is to shoot next year. And I went to Dublin because I went to meet Marianne Faithful, who is going to play the lead!

RS: Really?



MN: Yes!

RS: A bit of a coup.

MN: Yes! That's why I'm a little bit...I've adapted a book of Dorothy Hewitt's called *The Toucher*.

RS: Oh yes. Haven't read it, but have heard of it.

MN: So I've been on that ever since I made *Vacant Possession*, and it's suddenly I got the job and the film's going ahead. Everything's going at once. So, I'm a little bit spun out.

RS: In a good way.

MN: In a good way, that's right. That's right. I just have to clear a few things off my plate, that I said yes to. Um, so that's where I'm at. Um, you need to tell me what you're doing and what you want from me.

RS: Okay, I'm sort of in about the fifth year of my PhD.

MN: Oh, right.

RS: So it's dragged on. Life got in the way,

MN: Yes, as it does.

RS: And I'm looking at Australian cinema, globalisation, and national identity,

MN: Oh yes!

RS: Yeah, like everyone else. I'm combining an analysis of the films – I've chosen about ten, and you're in good company I reckon,

MN: Good,

RS: And I'm looking at the films and the themes in them, like in the chapter on your film I'm looking at indigenous issues and globalisation, the way indigenous groups have sort of mobilised through globalisation, and looking at Aboriginal representations in Australia and the dialogue between white and black filmmakers, and looking at your film as, um, a film that doesn't try and take the Aboriginal perspective. You know, very, I think you said that in one of your interviews, it's very much written from a white perspective, and not trying to give them the voice.

MN: That's right.

RS: And I'm also looking at the field of cultural production, filmmaking in Australia, and interviewing the directors of these films just to get a feel for the way these stories emerge and get made, and whether they get seen. For example *Dead*



*Heart*, which is the other one I'm looking at in this chapter, didn't get much of a distribution at all, and so it's sort of industry factors as well as narrative factors. So from you I guess I'd like to talk a little bit about the film, but I'd also be just interested in some of your experiences of working within the area.

MN: Okay. Two things. I did a postgraduate, I did an MA, MFA, Master of Fine Arts, and my subject was the research writing and visual preparation for a feature film, i.e. *Vacant Possession*, so I wrote at length about my whole process of putting the film together. My research, my connections with the Aboriginal community in La Perouse, and I did the script and painted the storyboard for the film, so there is a sort of, there is my paper that I wrote.

RS: That would be great to have,

MN: It might be quite interesting for you to look at.

RS: Yep.

MN: Um, I'm a bit embarrassed by it now. It's terribly chatty. It's not very academic.

RS: (laughter)

MN: I'm so emotional! Um, there's that. The other thing – I think you should read some of this stuff, and then we should talk.

RS: Yes.

MN: I probably should send you my CV too, because I have done a lot of work with Aboriginal people in creating a creative space for them to have their voice.

RS: Okay.

MN: I have worked at CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) as a mentor, in the documentary area. I worked as a mentor for the young Aboriginal director, on documentary, and I worked with a group of Aboriginal writers, putting up projects for the AFC indigenous drama initiative. So I did a drama intensive writing workshop at Karma. Then I worked as a consultant for SBS on an indigenous documentary series, where I ran a workshop with first time Aboriginal filmmakers from remote areas and then held their hands for a year while they made their films. That series went to air on SBS last year. Um, so apart from the films I've worked on with Aboriginal people in the past, I've been doing a lot of training work which has all been geared towards them telling their own stories, and having their own voice. Because as you know I'm



sure, there has been a huge number of initiatives to create those kinds of spaces for indigenous filmmakers.

RS: Mm.

MN: Probably *Vacant Possession* comes out of a whole range of experiences, um, ah, probably not the least that I worked back in the 80s on a film called *For Love or Money*,

RS: Okay. I haven't actually seen that. Is that a documentary?

MN: It's a feature length documentary. The history of women and work in Australia, and was made, there was a group of us, it wasn't just me. Did a book with Penguin, and we made it, it was finished in 1982, and so we looked at women's work in the home, unpaid work as well as the struggle for equal pay, and we looked at Aborigine's work and um, we began there. I think it was really going back there to the initial research and the work that we did, back in the sort of late 70s early 80s, and the Aboriginal filmmakers who I was in contact with through the filmmakers co-op, really raised a whole lot of the questions that I was trying to explore in *Vacant Possession*.

RS: Mm.

MN: But my journey, um, also was a personal journey on some level as well, because there's bits of my own story mixed up in there, and um, it was through the whole process of having an Aboriginal advisor on the film that really I came to that conclusion that I needed to tell it from the white point of view, and that that was the correct way of doing it, the better way of doing it. And I put a lot of other kind of energy into creating the spaces for Aboriginal people to tell their own stories.

RS: Mm. And how aware were you that you were creating a story that dealt with the metaphor of the nation?

MN: I was very aware. I think I had big ideas. You know I think I would approach things differently now. But I certainly, I wanted to tell a big story. I wanted it to be a metaphor. Um, and that's a big task to give yourself, really. You know, certainly it was not unconscious. You know I was quite conscious about that. It was therefore my journey was how do I do that, how do I do that and make a good film, tell a good story, and without being too self-conscious and laboured and you know, didactic and all of those things.

RS: Mm.

MN: That's a tough call.

RS: Yeah.



MN: It's like that saying from little things big things grow, little stories sometimes tell the big story, and when you try and tell the big stories, it can be really tough, because you are, you fall into being didactic. So that was really a lot of my journey through the process of making the film, to find a way of telling it so it wasn't didactic. But to actually tell a story that was a metaphor.

RS: And did you feel that perhaps – it was your first feature wasn't it?

MN: Yeah.

RS: That it being your first feature that was something you had to deal with before you went on to do something smaller stories, was to do something big, set the stage for where you come from, why...

MN: I'd already made a lot of films. I'd made a lot of short films, before I made *Vacant Possession*. I mean I'd made experimental shorts, I'd made documentaries, um, you know I didn't jump in without having made any films. And I'd worked as a cinematographer, an editor, and done a whole range of things. So the feature really came out of having paid my dues, as an independent filmmaker working in short films and documentaries. And a lot of my short films that weren't documentaries were experimental films. So it was a journey to try and tell a narrative film, and I'm sure you've seen *Vacant Possession*, there's experimental aspects to it.

RS: Yes, very...atmospheric – for an Australian feature. I mean a lot of them don't want to deal with anything so obviously 'arty'.

MN: I'm a bit arty! (laughter.)

RS: I liked it. It's probably why Adrian liked it because you know, he thinks there's a lack of stylistic consciousness in Australian film doesn't he?

MN: Yes. It's true. I'm a bit arty.

RS: How did you want to make the representations of Aborigines in this film different from the ones you'd seen in films before you made it? I mean was it kind of a dialogue with any of the other Aboriginal representations you'd seen in film before?

MN: I think one of the things happens is that – one of the things that happens in representations of Aboriginal people, has been very cliched representation of Aboriginal people. And I think when you first start, when I first started working on the script, which was original, um, I had had quite a lot to do with Aboriginal



people and I'd seen a lot of things, and I wanted to initially I wanted to include some of those things. And one of the first drafts that I did which I took down to the land council, to the La Peruse like a babe in the woods, and um, you know I had the Tommy Lewis character had just got out of jail, and they went, 'why are our people always represented as having come out of jail?' And they were really hostile to some aspects of the script as I wrote it in the early parts. And also I'd done quite a lot of work in La Peruse and research, and they took what I had written extraordinarily literally. 'Who's Auntie Beryl?' you know. 'She's made up.' 'No she's not.' You know, I think one of the things that happens when people are oppressed and people have not been able to tell their own stories is that they are unable to embrace metaphor, and they take things very literally. And so I realised that I had a really tricky thing on my hands if I wanted to represent Aboriginal people. I was dealing with an Aboriginal response that was very paranoid, very literal, very political, and I knew I had to have an Aboriginal advisor to work with. And I did find someone who worked with me over a very long period of time. Wasn't a filmmaker but a storyteller, and somebody who worked at a community level. She'd been working for streetwise comics writing around comics on legal issues for Aboriginal people, AIDS, medical issues. And she'd grown up in that area and through a lot of discussion with her, things changed. There were things she said, 'you can't put that in. That would be offensive to Aboriginal people.' So I took it out. Um, and in the end we decided not to set the film in La Peruse, but to create another place that didn't actually exist, and shoot it on the other side of the bay, which we did. We shot it directly opposite La Peruse, right around near Cronulla, at Silver Beach. And you can see La Peruse from the location, but it's a long way away. And I created, I shot a couple of scenes in La Peruse, I created a community that didn't exist. I tried to create a magical other place that was, so that it wasn't – that literalness I suppose, that if you make something in La Peruse it's about La Peruse.

RS: Yeah.

MN: And so, you know, I had to create another space, um which I did, and um, in terms of the representation of Aboriginal people I think Cathy Cum Sing who I worked with, she was very good in terms of you know, helping me and supporting me through a difficult process. And I think it was that thing – I've got to try and get my head back into all of this stuff – it was a wanting to represent Aboriginal people not as poverty-stricken, not as you know, the shit flying around the kitchen every 5 seconds, um, you know not as dying all the time, but to



actually create an Aboriginal family who yes, had all that history, but were more real, even though the reality is that most Aboriginal people's lives aren't like that.

RS: Yes.

MN: That's the reality. You know, the reality of working with someone like Kathy was of working with someone who worked in constant crisis.

RS: That's something about *Vacant Possession* that I really liked, that it foregrounds its fictional status, at every moment really. Even when Tessa's telling Millie 'that's why I like stories because everyone gets a different set of pictures in their mind,'

MN: Yes.

RS: And so that was part of the desire to make it not as literal, not as offensive maybe to those people?

MN: Yes. Because I think it was really interesting to create the white dysfunctional family rather than the black one, because I come from one! As many people do!

RS: Oh yes. We all do in some way or other.

MN: You know why do they have to carry the bloody load? And so that was kind of an interesting thing to do, an interesting thing to play with, to not go into what was happening behind closed doors in that Aboriginal family, even though I had first hand experience of what was going on, which was a nightmare a lot of the time. I told the story behind the white closed door.

RS: Mm. Yeah, and dealing with that subject matter, Indigenous people and their relationship with the white family and the metaphor of the nation, was that, do you think in any way helpful in terms of getting funding from Australian funding bodies? It's very much the sense that...

MN: At the time? When we looked for the money at the time?

RS: Yeah.

MN: Um, yes. And no. You know I think there's, while the Australian Film Commission fully funded the film, there was no money from anywhere else. It was fully funded by the AFC, you know, who's brief it is to create cultural diversity, and to put money into projects that aren't necessarily commercial, but are dealing with issues of cultural identity, national identity, that are important to Australia, so it fitted into that kind of brief. Um, but um, I think when it was more in the earlier stages when it was more didactic and trying to look at issues for Aboriginal people, the screenplay was much less successful



and it was not successful in getting the money, but when I actually changed it, did a huge re-write that it went ahead. Dealing with the white family it became more interesting to them too.

RS: That's interesting isn't? Because if they weren't very sophisticated they would have probably preferred the first one because it would have more fully fitted their brief.

MN: It wasn't as good. And I think there is a sort of fallacy that everybody's desperate for Aboriginal stories whereas in fact it's very tough to get projects going that have Aboriginal characters, very tough to get these stories told.

RS: Aren't they commonly known as box office poison? Haven't there been unofficial policies not to fund anything that has Aborigines in it?

MN: It's poison. That's right. And *Vacant Possession* was not a huge box office hit. It was a critical success and it did quite well, but it certainly didn't get the distribution that it could have got. You know, it's interesting because I have to go into UTS and meet an Aboriginal student at 2 o'clock who has been knocked back, and he's appealing, and it's come onto my desk and I have to make a decision. His research topic wasn't up to scratch at all. His research project was that there is this voracious desire to gobble up Aboriginal stories. And it's not true. It's actually a tough call to tell stories that have Aboriginal people in them.

RS: Also the Aboriginal stories themselves, like the myths and things like that, you go to any second-hand bookstore, and even the charity bookstores, and there's all these kid's books that have tried to take up Aboriginal myths and make them colourful and interesting, but people have given them away, I don't know why, they mustn't have liked them or read them or used them. There's lots of them there, but nobody seems to want them.

MN: A big shame. We've got to deal with silly old Howard, and all of the stuff that's going on. There's a really long way to go, and I think the other thing that's happened, there's been a real push, there's been a lot of hostility from Aboriginal people towards a number of white filmmakers making films, documentaries, and taking on Aboriginal topics and subjects, and Aboriginal people wanting to tell their own stories. And there's been a lot of money poured into initiatives, some of which, as I've told you before, I've been a part of some of them, to try and fast track Aboriginal people into telling their own stories, which is what they said they wanted to do. And



there's been a huge amount of stuff that's happened, and a lot of opportunities created for Aboriginal people, and really not enough people out there who can do it.

RS: Mm.

MN: So there's a handful of Aboriginal filmmakers, and a lot of wannabes. And just like there is in the white community. And it's actually a huge amount of pressure on the few who are really good. Because it's like, 'okay, do it.' And then that's a huge amount of pressure.

RS: They don't have all that sort of cultural capital to be able to deal with and use and trade with.

MN: That's right. And then you have people like SBS who I worked for on that indigenous doco series, who have a fabulous general manager of SBS independent, Bridget Ikin. And Bridget is just heaven to work with and a really lateral thinker, and a human being, and fantastic. And she has been not only facilitated that documentary series that she brought me on to be a consultant on, but she's also been involved with an indigenous feature initiative that's on the go at the moment. There are Aboriginal scholarships at the film school, um, but you know, the problem is that it's really – I know because I work with people from remote areas, you bring people from remote areas in, they've got a very different agenda. English is not their first language. It's not what they want to do. And then you have the more urban Aboriginal mob, or some of the mob who went through CAMA, who've got skills through documentary and then gone on to the film school, and they just want to go to Hollywood! (laughter)

RS: 'No! You've got to stay here!'

MN: And 'do the right thing.' 'Well, sorry we want to party, and we want to have fun and we want to be cool.' You know, and fair enough. We're at a really interesting point with all that sort of development. And I think I just made *Vacant Possession* in time. I think I just got away with it really. It was before its time, but it couldn't have been made much later than I made it, because I would have got too much shit from the Aboriginal community. I wouldn't have got the money, because now it's really tough to get money for a film like that. Unless you're black.

RS: Do you think those initiatives to get them telling their own stories are...

MN: They all think I'm black anyway because I'm dark! (laughter)

RS: Oh, are you?



MN: Yes, I'm quite dark. I think they all think I'm really a blackfella. They think I'm Maori. I was born in New Zealand. I probably am. I do have very odd ancestry. I probably do have Maori blood. And you know, I think one of the things that helped me to, and I understand why I had such an interest in all of this I was so terribly drawn to it all, is part of that, and one of the things that helped me to understand that, a very wise person said to me when people were saying 'you should go and trace your ancestors' she said 'look, when you have a situation of colonisation, the colonisers begin to look like the colonised, and the colonised begin to look like the colonisers.' And I think that's very true.

RS: Mm, yeah.

MN: It's very tricky, because a lot of the Aboriginal people who are doing very well are ones who have been brought up white way, or who are very light skinned, or you know, and the ones from remote areas are often working with white people from behind the scenes, doing the work. I want to write about all this one day! One day I will.

RS: You can do it in your spare time!

MN: Yes, in my spare time. Sorry I cut you off,

RS: I was going to ask you about Tracey

MN: Moffat?

RS: Yes,

MN: Little Miss Moffat.

RS: Where does she fit?

MN: Oh, she's amazing.

RS: 'Little Miss Moffatt'.

MN: Don't you dare quote me on that. That's what we call her, Little Miss Moffatt, who has done exactly what she wants to do, which is go and be a big star in New York.

RS: Yes.

MN: She has never taught an indigenous workshop in her life and wouldn't be interested in a second.

RS: Was she sort of involved in some AIDS education video?

MN: She did one video years ago!

RS: She likes to talk about it,

MN: And it was terrible. I remember I went to the launch of it in Redfern, and it was, you know, it was that weird thing where she was caught. Tracey is caught between two cultures. She's not really – a lot of the blackfellas hate her.

RS: Really?



MN: Well, the tall poppy syndrome. They hate her because she's so clever and so successful. She's also shockingly arrogant, and gets people's backs up. I love Tracey you know, but she's pretty tricky. So she's -

RS: She's an 'Artist',

MN: Yes, she's an 'Artist', she's brilliant, but she has never really been, she doesn't have street cred on the ground in Redfern, let me tell you,

RS: But she does in New York,

MN: Oh God. But she did do that video. That's when she was first starting out. She was early in her career, it was a job, and she's a good girl. She did it really well, because she's smart, and she did it in a way that was interesting for her. Um, she copped shit.

RS: Did it work for them?

MN: I think it worked for them. Tracey copped shit from Aboriginal community and she copped shit from white community too. She's sort of caught in between, and she's always been very individual, and quite vulnerable behind that big tough exterior that she's got. Um, for me her most successful work is *Night Cries*.

RS: Yeah. That's great.

MN: Absolutely most successful work. A brilliant piece of work, and it's very personal, because Tracey was brought up by a white mother, and not by her Aboriginal mother. And it was very traumatic when she did find her Aboriginal mother. Her Aboriginal mother died while she was making *Bedevelled*, and her Aboriginal mother was I think alcoholic, and it's very tricky, you've got someone like Tracey brought up in a white home, gone to art school, beautiful, you know, smart, creative, clever. And she's never quite been able to reconcile. And she's gone to New York. So I place Tracey as a great artist, I suppose, and a really important filmmaker, but she's not part of the community. Not really. She never has been, and she's always been very individual. And I think *Night Cries* works very well because it's her story, you know, she's done something very interesting and clever with her 'what if Jedda hadn't gone over the cliff?',

RS: Yeah,

MN: And there's the white mother, which was her huge fear, and her love. She adores her white mother.



- RS: What do you think of *Jedda*? Some Aboriginal people find it really offensive, and others find it quite, one of the only positive images of masculine Aboriginality, and all that kind of thing.
- MN: I went to a very interesting screening of *Jedda* at the Bowral reconciliation festival about two years ago. They screened *Vacant Possession*, and *Jedda* screened I think in an earlier session on the same night, I can't remember. And there was a lot of hoo-ha, and again, very divided, because what happens when you talk to Aboriginal people, particularly older Aboriginal people, it's a landmark film for them.
- RS: They're on the screen.
- MN: They're on the screen!
- RS: Major roles. Not just as anthropological curiosities,
- MN: That's right, they were on the screen, and um, so I think it had – you know you can talk to one Aboriginal mob and they'll say how they'll never forget when they saw it, and how important it was. And then it was this other weirdo Aboriginal woman who got up and went ballistic about how Chauvel had tied Tudawali up in a cage, and let him out for shooting, and put him back in the cage. The most spurious kind of...I was there with James Mills from the film school, our mouths were dropping open. What do we do here? What is this all about? You know, is this true, isn't it true, why is she doing this, and um, but you know I think it wasn't true. But it was a classic response from that other camp which was that this was exploitation of Aboriginal people, this is stealing our stories, this is you know, this is outrageous, cliched, all of those things. And it is. I mean it was made in the 50s for God's sake.
- RS: What can you expect?
- MN: What can you expect? And for the time I think it's very radical, and you know it's a really landmark film. I don't know what to say, because you do get those two extreme camps on *Jedda*. I think if you talk to – who was it? I know, I talked to Bob Mather about it.
- RS: What does he think?
- MN: I'm just trying to remember. I sat down with him at the AFI awards, and I said this woman told this terrible story, and he said, 'oh no'...I think he was, I can't remember totally, but I think he was in the camp that it put Aboriginal people on the screen, and that that Tudawali wasn't kept in a cage!! (laughter). I mean they probably had to keep him home a couple of times – he probably went out – I've had that, with blackfellas coming in from the bush to do a soundmix and then they just disappear.



RS: My mum used to teach a class at TAFE, of Aboriginal students, and they would all disappear for a few weeks. That's just the way it is.

MN: That's just the way it is. Get over it. (laughter)

RS: Have you ever met Marcia Langton?

MN: Yes.

RS: She's got quite a sophisticated take...

MN: Have you talked to Marcia?

RS: No, I haven't. Maybe I should.

MN: Marcia's a handful. Marcia's absolutely brilliant and a very good friend of Tracey Moffatt's. As you know she was in *Night Cries*?

RS: Yeah.

MN: Um, she's a brilliant mind, but Marcia's one of those people like Rachel Perkins, she's an earlier generation, where they had too much loaded on their shoulders.

RS: She's got a lot – she has to speak for so many people.

MN: She has to speak for so many people. One of my favourite images was of her standing outside Buckingham Palace when they went to see the Queen!

RS: I've never seen that.

MN: That was just hilarious. Her little sticky legs and I thought... 'Marcia, I just wish that I could hear the stories.' You know, cause she is so bad, Marcia. She's really naughty, really funny, really brilliant. She's formidable. A formidable person to take on. You would never want to get on the wrong side of Marcia. Terrifying.

RS: Where does she fit?

MN: She's an academic, up at Darwin at the university.

RS: So how do the Aboriginal people respond to this brilliant sophisticated mind?

MN: She cops shit! Everybody in the Aboriginal community cops shit if they put their head up.

RS: So she's sort of in the same position as Tracey Moffatt?

MN: No, not at all. Because Marcia has never been as individualistic, and she's not an artist the way Tracey is. Marcia is a political animal. She's trained as an, she's an anthropologist. You know, Rachel Perkins tells fabulous stories



about when they were shooting, have you seen the *Blood Brothers* documentary series?

RS: No.

MN: No well Marcia worked on scripts for that, Ned Lander produced it, Rachel did one episode, Ned did an episode, Trevor Graham did an episode. Fantastic documentary series, and when they did Jadiwampur, which was a fire ceremony out bush, and the fire ceremony hadn't been performed for years, and they had to bring 200 people in and feed them, you know, like it was full on, a fantastic film. Um, Rachel, young black woman, sort of very, you know, she's had a strong black father, you know very nervous about the old fellas, and dealing with all the – cause it's a men's story, and it was you know, elder men. Rachel, who didn't know how to deal with it at all, said Marcia just sat down in the dirt and talked with them. That's Marcia. She's an anthropologist, she sits right on the ground. She can sit on the dirt with an old fella, just as well as she can sit at the table with the queen.

RS: Yeah.

MN: She's extraordinary. And um, but you know, she's tricky a character too.

RS: In her monograph she talks about how it's important not to just have restorative images of Aboriginal people, you know, that to represent them all as positive successful people is really just as offensive as representing them as drunks and criminals.

MN: Yes, you want to have people who are three dimensional, and all of those things.

RS: Which is why your film was good, because there was that sort, they were positive, but realistic, one of them had been in prison, and he did drink a lot – didn't he crash into a tree or something?

MN: Yeah. I've never talked to Marcia about *Vacant Possession* because,

RS: You're too scared?

MN: No, she's been up in Darwin. She was very good friends with a close friend of mine and they had a major falling out, and um, the last time I saw Marcia our mutual friend who she'd had a major falling out with, was actually dying of cancer, and Marcia was so touched she didn't want to see her. And she didn't want to talk to me. But I do know that when *Vacant Possession* appeared in Darwin she introduced it.

RS: Does she speak about it in her...

MN: No, it was too early. She talked to me, I was talking to Marcia when she was researching that monograph,

RS: Okay.



MN: I told her she should put stuff in about literacy, and she wouldn't.

RS: Literacy in what sense?

MN: A lot of Aboriginal people aren't literate, and a lot of problems have happened with funding bodies not understanding that, and there's a lot of Aboriginal people in high government positions who aren't literate, who talk into tape recorders and their secretaries type up notes.

RS: That's quite amazing isn't it?

MN: Oh yes. It's been going on for ages. And when you're on the ground you realise it more. Less so now, with the young ones coming up. There has been an advisory committee at the AFC at one point when anything that came in with Aboriginal content, went to the advisory committee and I knew two Aboriginal women on the committee who were handed feature film scripts to read, who could not read, and who never went back to the meetings and they were [labelled] 'lazy blackfellas'. And I said, 'you've got to put something in about literacy?' And she said, 'why should they know?' She's tough.

RS: How are they meant to fill in the forms for funding, and write the scripts?

MN: I think Marcia is right that time will sort this out, and that people have got through in their own way up until now, and that there's new ones coming up and it's not going to be a problem in the future. And I think she didn't want dirty linen washed in public.

RS: Mm.

MN: But Marcia's very, she's got very strong opinions, and she's extremely clever. If you could track her down, she's a very interesting person to talk to about representation. But I don't know that she's thinking about film these days.

RS: Yeah,

MN: She's been much more involved with native title and all of that and with her university stuff.

RS: Well, this is just one chapter of my thesis. You could just go so deeply into it, and I'm thinking where do I stop? It could get out of hand.

MN: Yes, that's right. But I'm happy for you to talk about *Vacant Possession* because it was an attempt to address some of those issues and to do it in a different kind of way.

RS: How did you feel about the reception of the film?



MN: That's a terrible thing to ask a filmmaker because I hate it now, I think it's a mess.

(Tape changes sides.)

I think it's universal for filmmakers because you go why did I do that? But at the time, when it came out the critical reception was fantastic. I got really fantastic reviews from Adrian Martin,

RS: And for an Australian film that's pretty amazing,

MN: And David and Margaret gave me a good rap, and Evan Williams gave a good thing about it,

RS: There was something in Cinema Papers that was mixed – said it wore its heart too much on its sleeve or something,

MN: Yeah, that was only a little one. And there was one, I got two others – I don't remember the Cinema Papers one actually,

RS: Oh, it was basically good, but said it was a bit didactic, that sort of thing.

MN: Probably is.

RS: Yeah, but you might agree now, but criticism is never easy to take.

MN: That's right, you see its faults later. Sandra Hall wrote a hideous little paragraph in The Bulletin.

RS: Oh no.

MN: Loathed it. And what was the other one, Simon Hunt, Pauline Pantsdown, writing for the gay newspaper, and I knew him from art school, said how bad the dialogue was. I was mortified.

RS: Really?

MN: Yes, I think it was his agenda. But they were all little. The big reviews were all fantastic. And, I've also had success with the film internationally. Not with distribution. But with festivals.

RS: There's a real I don't know, opposition between commercial success and critical success isn't there? They just hardly ever coincide.

MN: Well I think what I did in *Vacant Possession* is give people some meaty things to write about and think about. And um, which is why it's not surprising that someone like you wants to write about it, because it does contain all those issues, that have concerned many of us for a long time. But it doesn't mean that it's a commercial success in the market place, and



you know, I want my next film to be more commercially successful. I don't want it with not many people seeing. It's too much work. It's too hard. I want something that gets out a bit broader if you're going to put that much into it. It was quite heartbreaking, the distribution of *Vacant Possession*, even though the critical acclaim was great and I got nominated in the AFI's for script and directing. I didn't win, but I got nominated. I won a couple of prizes overseas, but it was very heartbreaking in terms of its distribution.

RS: Why do you think it happened that way?

MN: I think overseas they didn't 'get it', you know, some of the arty festivals loved it, but the distributors didn't think they could make money on it. And um, I think at home it was too earnest, and not you know, not commercial, not cliched enough, no car chases and no sex. (laughter).

RS: No drag queens.

MN: No drag queens. But when you make a film with the AFC and it's fully funded, you're allowed to do what you want. It's your one go. You never get another go at that.

RS: Are you allowed to do what you want as long as it's about the culture, about Australia...?

MN: Yeah.

RS: But you're given a lot of freedom.

MN: You're given a lot of freedom. But once you've moved out of that sheltered workshop, you don't get that, because you have distributors and producers who all have a money agenda.

RS: So how important do you think the AFC is in fostering a national film culture?

MN: Very important.

RS: Mm, do you think it would exist without it?

MN: No. I wouldn't be filming without it, and many of my friends wouldn't be either, you know over the years the different films we've made and been supported through and been able to find our voices, in the same way that the AFC has put energy into the indigenous initiative, you know, it's been very good. It's in restructure at the moment as you probably know, a new brew.

RS: Mm, how do you think that's going to turn out?

MN: I don't know. I don't know. The staff aren't very happy, but I think it's quite good for producers. I think the producer initiative is quite interesting, because you can't move without



having a producer these days. You just can't – it's not the old days, the auteur is sort of over.

RS: That's what I'm finding, the more people I talk to, the more important the role of the producer is coming to appear to me. Because before I sort of talk about a film and talk about the director, but really, if you're going to talk about getting it out there, and even creatively speaking, a lot of producers are quite involved aren't they?

MN: Yes. Oh yes. Absolutely.

RS: Have you got one for your next film?

MN: Yes, Ned Lander and Andrew Barr who did *Radiance* are producing.

RS: Okay, so you think you'll probably be starting that in 2001?

MN: Yes, hopefully. Hopefully. One never know, but it's looking pretty good. And I've got Faithful on my side. It's very exciting.

RS: Yeah. Is she a good actress?

MN: Fantastic. She's done quite a lot of films. Like she did films when she was younger, she was at the Royal Court when she was very young. She's been doing quite a lot of European art movies, she's about to go to, in March she's got a part in Patrice Chéroux's new film, and Kerry Fox is starring in the film, and she's got a small part in it, so she's going off to do that in March. And another feature in London that she's playing the lead in might come off. So she's sort of in the film mode at the moment. But you know, she's lived. She's an artist. She's got a great intellect. She's perfect for the film.

RS: What's the book you're filming?

MN: The Toucher. I've adapted it. It's quite different from the book, but I've adapted it.

RS: Okay. So why do you make films, Margot?

MN: (Laughter)

RS: Tell me about your mother...

MN: (Laughter)

RS: I was speaking to my analyst this morning you see!

MN: My mother, was a frustrated actress.

RS: Oh, like Tessa's.

MN: Like Tessa's. Funny about that. Um, who kind of groomed me to do what she didn't do. And I actually started out as an actress.



RS: Okay.

MN: I was at the Melbourne Theatre Company when I was 19. Back in the 60s. And I was at the Pram Factory, La Mama, and did all those sorts of things before I came to Sydney, so I went through a whole...

RS: Are you a Melbourne girl?

MN: Yeah. Brought up in Ringwood! Born in New Zealand. I was always pushed – I was always the arty one, and I think it took me a while to discover that I was a filmmaker because I thought I was going to be an actress. And um, that's a very tough life. And I did do it for quite a long time, but I started taking photographs, and I made a short film back in the 70s, that was very very provocative, with my friend Robin Laurie, who used to be artistic director of Circus Oz, Pram Factory. We made a little film in the 70s called 'We Aim To Please'.

RS: I think I've read about that somewhere.

MN: It's like a little feminist classic. Extremely naughty.

RS: I'll have to look it up.

MN: It's fabulous. I still love it the best. It's extremely provocative. Outrageous even for now, and um, I just got the bug, you know. When I made 'We Aim to Please' and cut it in my bedroom on a picsync, shot it in the dead of night while I was camera assisting John Hughes on docos, you know, I just got the bug of actually putting something together in images and sounds. That's it. I've never sort of looked back. I've had to shed my acting career, and I just got obsessed with film, and it's I don't know why I'm so driven, but I am.

RS: That's great. Do you think, you said that you had to make a specific effort to make *Vacant Possession* a narrative film, do you think images and sounds rather than telling stories is kind of your thing?

MN: Yes and no. I think it was for a long time. Because I came out of, well initially really straight theatre, and then went off into experimental theatre, political experimental theatre, street theatre, you know all that sort of stuff. Walked away from *The Crucible* and *Girl in My Soup*, and started doing 'happenings' in the street. (Laughter)

RS: Events.

MN: That's right,

RS: Installations!

MN: (Laughter) We used to do living theatre, so I think I was always drawn to the Avante garde, the experimental, the poets. I was always drawn to the poets. The poetic soul I suppose.



And so those early films that I made were experimental, but when I hit documentary, and Sydney filmmakers co-op, and when I hit Sydney filmmakers co-op I hit documentary, and politics, and I think throughout the years it's all about storytelling, whether it's experimental, documentary, narrative drama, it's all about storytelling. But cinema is about images and sound. It's not just about telling a yarn, it's a visual medium, you know, and I believe very much in a visual cinematic approach. I love it. That's what I love about films.

RS: We need more films like that here, especially.

MN: Mm.

RS: And why do you make films in Australia?

MN: Because that's where I live.

RS: That's what they all say. Have you considered doing it elsewhere?

MN: No.

RS: Despite the fact you have to practically have to pay to do it here?

MN: I've never had the opportunity to do it elsewhere, and the thought of setting up shop elsewhere is too daunting at my age. Unless I had a big offer. But I have no desire to go to Hollywood. None.

RS: So autonomy is fairly important to you, in terms of creative freedom?

MN: Yes. I mean I would never be able to be a hack and write soaps. I've never been able to do things like that. Um, you know if I'm not being autonomous in my own work, then I'm usually teaching other people to find their voice.

RS: Yeah, well I should let you go.

MN: I think so, yes. I don't know how long it's going to get all that stuff together to send you. It's quite a whack of stuff to have to post you. I'll have to print out my thesis for you.

RS: It's not on disk and you can just email it?

MN: It probably is. Okay, can you convert documents if I send them RTF? Because my CV will go all over the shop. The press kit, done by the publicist, and I don't know if I've got it on disk. I've got my CV on disk. I can email those to you quite quickly. Press kit I won't because it's...

RS: That's great. I really appreciate that.



MN: surrounded by mess.

RS: Are you unpacked yet?

MN: I have unpacked, but it's just chaos everywhere.

RS: And do you have an email address?

MN: Yes...

RS: Thanks. I've got it.

MN: Yes, ASIF stands for anarcho surrealist insurrectionary feminist!

RS: Oh my goodness!

MN: (laughter) That was me and Robin Laurie back in the 70s when we wrote a manifesto,

RS: How excellent.

MN: Um, yes small letter. At net.au

RS: Well, thanks.

MN: Sure. Okay. This has been a bit anecdotal.

RS: That's good though. Make my thesis a bit lighter.

MN: My MFAs a bit embarrassing like that. It was it's a paper, and I won't send you this I painted a storyboard, a script. I'll send you the paper. Because that's got a lot of my very earnest research.

RS: Earnestness is nothing to be ashamed of.

MN: (laughter). Okay. Bye.

RS: Okay, thanks for your time. Talk to you soon. Bye.



## Interview with Nicholas Parsons

(This interview took place by telephone on 28/8/00.)

- R. Siemienowicz: Hello, it's Rochelle Siemienowicz here. We had an appointment to speak this afternoon. Is that still convenient?
- Nicholas Parsons: Yes, yes. That's right. That's fine.
- RS: Great. Maybe if I just start by telling you a little bit about the study that I'm doing, and then you might be able to see if you can answer some of my questions.
- NP: Yes.
- RS: I'm looking at the ideas of exile imprisonment and alienation as continuing metaphors for authentic Australian experience.
- NP: Right.
- RS: Yeah, and the nation as constituted by the stories that it tells about itself, and um, how that we might be trapped in an imagination that's stuck in a place that allows for little transcendence. So I'm sort of looking at um, quite a few contemporary films, but also at the industry itself, and how the autonomy of the industry might be being undermined.
- NP: It's a broad brief you've given yourself there.
- RS: Yes, yes. I liked very much your film, because it deals with a lot of those complexities...it doesn't really have any easy answers does it?
- NP: Well no. Not any that I came across anyway. The Ernie Dingo character, his line about – well he's always being asked if he's a blackfella or a whitefella, and at the very end he chooses a middle way, says 'I'm just a fella'.
- RS: Mmm.
- NP: That's kind of a tongue in cheek line, but it might also suggest that even if we don't know exactly where that middle road exists, it still exists somewhere, without trying to pose any easy solutions.
- RS: Yeah, there's a real sense of entrapment there, for both the blacks and the whites.
- NP: Yeah.
- RS: There's no easy road to freedom there.



- NP: Um, no. One of the metaphors of the film was of the map, which appears in some kind of form for each of the characters, whether it's a formal map, or it's lines on the ground, or a picture, or whatever.
- RS: I don't think I fully recognised that.
- NP: When Ray takes Tony's boots and matches them against the tracks that Tony is supposed to have made. I was trying to introduce that idea of trying to find a path, trying to find a way. If you want to find the way that the dead man's gone, you have to take his boots, use his boots. That sort of idea. There's that whole idea of getting lost in the desert and wandering around, trying to find himself, find a path in the desert.
- RS: Yeah, it's good that you don't fall into that trap of collapsing the distinction between the Aborigine and nature. Dave, the Ernie Dingo character is very much alien in nature, in much the same way as Ray is very much at home in nature.
- NP: Yeah. I'm trying to really avoid that. In lots of ways I've tried to avoid images that were monotonous, or very common in a lot of Australian films, of subverting that. It seems that a lot of film have constructed Aboriginal culture as a culture that is passed, lots of stories are based on this idea that their time has gone, and they're kind of disenfranchised. *Blackfellas* did this. *The Fringe Dwellers* did the same thing. They're excluded from mainstream white society, but they're also excluded from their own culture. Jimmy Blacksmith, the young boy's being initiated, but then he's taken out of it. He's taken out of it by the pastor and tries to be a white man. He doesn't really fit in either culture. The lost Eden. It's actually quite a judeo christian concept that we've imposed. We sort of see Aboriginal people as being...as being...
- RS: Uncorrupted?
- NP: Well, having been excluded, they are uncorrupted but they're Adam and Eve thrown out of the garden, you know what I mean? We have a sense that their own culture was a paradise from which they are currently excluded. But the sin, as it were, the original sin is ours not theirs.
- RS: Yeah.
- NP: That's the image that I think most non-Aboriginal people have of what Aboriginal culture's about, and what I try to do in the film is to sort of sidestep all that and present Aboriginal culture as a really vibrant thing which exists now, which is a mixture of the original culture, plus elements of the the white culture that the characters have taken. Poppy as a character is in no



way, he doesn't feel at all compromised by the fact that he dresses in a cowboy shirt and wants a Toyota.

RS: He's enormously powerful,

NP: That's right. He's absolutely happy with the way that he's, the culture that he has. He doesn't see a contradiction between Aboriginal culture and white culture. He simply exists, and so I was trying to sidestep the issue of Aboriginal disenfranchisement and say, 'This is a culture as it exists now. This is how it works.' And it's a powerful culture that you don't want to mess with. It's a curious thing about film audiences, but they don't need to like characters so much as they need to respect them.

RS: Yeah.

NP: And they respect power. And so Poppy's an interesting character because he's powerful. But if he's not put in a position to exercise that power he becomes less interesting.

RS: Mmm.

NP: The idea was to kind of show him as representative of Aboriginal culture as it exists now. Mannga, Tjulpu's grandfather is a representation of Aboriginal culture as it was. But ultimately they're less powerful, less significant characters than Poppy. But they all kind of coexist. That was the idea.

RS: Yes, it was interesting with the white male character, Bryan Brown, is almost disenfranchised, like his time has passed, and at the end of the film we kind of feel that he's dispossessed of his identity because he's been kicked out of the place that he loves, and I don't know where he'll go from there.

NP: Well, that's right. I suppose the other stereotype around Aboriginals is that they have a mysterious and unknowable relationship with the land. That white people just can't match. But I don't necessarily think that that's true. There are lots of white people who have a profound relationship with the place that they come from. And Ray, he feels he has a perfect right to be in this place that he loves. Yet Poppy as one of the elders feels that he doesn't. And that's a situation that certainly a lot of people in Aboriginal settlements feel, that if you get on the wrong side of the community, and they tell you you've got to go, well you've got to go.

RS: Did you do a lot of research before you wrote the play?

NP: Um. I did a fair bit. Well, it depends what you mean by a lot. An anthropologist can spend two years living with a community learning the ins and outs. I didn't do that. I'd read a



fair bit of anthropology, and I spent two weeks living on an Aboriginal settlement, and by the end of that I certainly felt I had enough to write about the situation with confidence. So far I haven't struck anyone from there so far who's said it wasn't convincing. It was more 'how did you make it so real?'

RS: It seems real to me, but I wouldn't necessarily know!

NP: Well that's right. It's interesting that the two negative reviews that it got were from Melbourne.

RS: Really?

NP: Yes, one was in the \*\*\* and one was in The Age. And the gist of it was that 'life wouldn't be like that'.

RS: Well they'd know wouldn't they? Because they live in Melbourne.

NP: That thought crossed my mind. But I think it crossed some sort of ideological boundary.

RS: Yeah, What happened with the distribution and exhibition? It didn't get widely exhibited did it?

NP: Well. It was reasonably wide. I think we released about 20 prints Australia-wide, which was...

RS: Medium.

NP: Yes, medium. But I think the film was a bit of a conundrum for the distributors, because it didn't fit easily into any of the genres they were used to promoting. It sort of didn't take off. But it was down to about one cinema in Sydney, which was the Chauvel, and it stayed there, doing well, for about seven months.

RS: That's amazing isn't it.

NP: Yeah. And on the back of that they then tried to reopen it at the Longford, but it didn't do good business there. Yet it just hung on at the Chauvel and did amazing business there. I think it was the highest, or second highest grossing Australian production they'd had there. So the distribution of it was kind of odd. I suppose I was left with the feeling that if it could do well in one place, what was it that went wrong with the rest of the distribution. But distribution is one of those tricky things.

RS: I saw it at the Lumiere, which is really tiny.

NP: Yes, that was in its second release.

RS: And Bryan Brown was the producer?



NP: Yeah.

RS: And did you come to him with the idea or?

NP: No, I wrote a version of the screenplay before I wrote the stage play.

RS: Oh, right.

NP: Because I'd actually approached another producer years previously to do a film based on a story that I'd heard from the 1930s.

RS: Oh, right.

NP: So at that stage I didn't have the resources to go out into the territory. I wrote a version of the screenplay. Then nothing happened and I thought that was the end of it. Then Bryan saw a play that I'd done, I'd written and directed it. And I heard via someone else that he liked it and I rang and said why don't we get together...oh that's right, he rang me and the meeting was arranged by someone else who knew us both, and we talked about this other play, and I gave Bryan a copy of the original screenplay of *Dead Heart*. I was at NIDA and I wrote a play for them, and then they wanted me to write another play, so I decided to go on a research trip to Alice Springs, and that was when I got a phonecall from Bryan saying he'd just read the script and wanted to make the film. And I said that I was working on the stage version at the moment, and could he wait until I'd done that. And in the end I chucked out, there was only probably a couple of lines from the original screenplay that remained in the final screenplay. After working on the play, and the whole research trip, changed the story.

RS: So they're pretty much the same, the screenplay and the stageplay?

NP: Well...

RS: I can get hold of the stageplay, but I haven't compared the two very closely yet.

NP: To read them both you would get the impression – it's hard to judge for me – but if you read them both it feels like they're remarkably close, but there are some differences if you break them down. But they do tell exactly the same story. The characters are exactly the same. Most of the dialogue in the film comes from the stageplay, so that the way that the stories are assembled, I suppose, are, the film tells it much more visually, whereas the play is more dialogue based. We're actually doing a production of the play in Vietnam next year, with a Vietnamese cast,



RS: Goodness! Weird.

NP: Yeah, so I want to just rewrite some bits of the play, things that bothered me in the film script, to make it that much better.

RS: So your work is predominantly in theatre? I haven't been able to find out that much about you, if could just tell me a little bit about your background...

NP: Well, um, I suppose I come from a theatre background in the sense that my parents, well, my father was an academic and NSW uni, he taught drama in the department of theatre studies, and my mother, she was a theatre critic for many years, and then they both started a company called Currency Press, and published most of the screenplays, and much of the drama that we have in this country. It was really started for that reason, in 1971, because they thought that Australians should have access to their own plays. If you can't read your own stories, you can't do them.

RS: Yes.

NP: So, um, so

RS: Do they still do that?

NP: Yes, Currency still runs. I'm the chairman of the company, looking after the screen publishing program. So anyway I had that kind of theatre background, but I did the course at the film and TV school, so all my early training was in film.

RS: Oh, okay.

NP: I did the writing and the directing course concurrently and got out of the film school, and graduated in 86 which was a terrible time for the film industry because the 10BA had just closed,

RS: Yeah,

NP: So there were no jobs in film, so everyone who graduated that year were out of work. It was interesting the year that I made Dead Heart, David Cesar and Monica Pellazari all made their first features, and they were in my, they were a year behind me, so it was that, it was ten years to make it over that hump getting out of film school and not having anywhere to go. So I thought at the time I'd go to NIDA, develop the skills that I wanted to have. You know you can go years between making films, you know, so I went back to theatre which was my earliest experience of storytelling anyway, and so I've kind of worked between the two mediums ever since.

RS: So Dead Heart was your feature debut. You'd made other short films and that sort of thing?



NP: Yes. I made short films in film school. Since then I haven't shot them. I've done a bit of writing for television and film, since then, I've done other stage plays. I've written three screenplays, which I believe are out in the marketplace, two of which I wrote and one of which was something Bryan approached me to work on, but was written by another bloke. I've been working fairly consistently but those films haven't come to fruition yet.

RS: So being in Sydney at the moment, what's the feeling about making films? Is it a positive atmosphere at the moment?

NP: Um, that's very hard to say. It's positive to people who are making films and it's not positive to people who aren't making films, you know?

RS: Yeah.

NP: Everybody feels that. I guess my own feeling is that the ah, is that certainly last year, I don't know about this year, I haven't perused the figures for that yet, but certainly last year there was a perception that the film industry was doing well, because a lot of films were getting made, but they were all in the one million dollar range, there was nothing in the mid range, or you were getting 60 million dollar films made. There was the perception that...

RS: What was the budget for Dead Heart?

NP: 2.7 million. It was 2.5 originally.

RS: That's modest.

NP: It is modest. It was probably a bit tight. It was more generous than it is now. These days you would spend 3.5 on the same result, the same kind of production value. We certainly worked – like every cent we spent is on the screen. Out of 700 slates we probably didn't drop more than 25 or 30. Which is very...

RS: Efficient.

NP: Yes, very efficient shooting. And um, anyway so I think the film industry is in a kind of a dangerous period at the moment. Film and television is at a dangerous period at the moment. We've got a whole stack of new technologies coming in.

(Tape changes sides)

In the next few years there'll be television broadcasting across the Internet. Um, as well as cable, as well as free to air. And yet the amount of money being spent to support that program output is not getting bigger.

RS: Yeah.



NP: It's all driven by advertising revenue, and that revenue is not going to increase just because there's more stations, so...

RS: There's even pressure on you know with trade liberalisation to decrease the amount of support that is given.

NP: That's right. That's the other thing that's going on. You've got the US pushing very hard to stop the subsidy of our films and television.

RS: You wonder why don't you. I mean we're so marginal.

NP: Yes, it's not so much us, they're trying to build,

RS: It's Europe

NP: Yeah, there is a perception at the moment that market forces will lead imminently to an improvement in people's quality of life, and therefore they should not be opposed. I just don't think that's true. And I think we are in danger of allowing our culture to be defined as a commodity, and if it can be produced cheaper and better overseas, then why not let other people do it, and get on with things we do well. We don't have access to those overseas markets yet they have access to ours. You know if we can't get the dollars behind promoting our stuff overseas, then why keep fighting? You know, that's a very strong, a very strong attitude of the present government. They just don't particularly see the importance or significance of telling our own stories.

RS: Or else they support the most visible signs of that, like they still want the films to be made, but they undermine the whole infrastructure that's allowed that to happen.

NP: Yes, well they don't particularly care what movies are made. They're quite happy if those movies can be...those movies have American stars in them or they look at plot and they think there's all these...

RS: Jobs.

NP: Jobs, all these jobs are coming in and they don't understand that just because a lot of American product is made over here, the yanks are not going to reciprocate and allow us to export our stories as well. They sort of go 'oh well, that doesn't – the yanks don't need subsidies to tell their stories, so why do we need subsidies to tell ours?' Why can't we compete on the world stage? That's the feeling and they don't see that that's not really, for practical purposes, possible.

RS: Mmm.



NP: They don't understand the significance of, to me the significance of being able to – I'm preaching to the converted – the significance of telling your own stories is that it ultimately allows you to be able to identify as a culture. And we are particularly vulnerable because of our history to the notion that other people's culture is better than ours. I think the cultural cringe is making a pretty strong comeback at the moment, and um, you know I'm quite happy to accept other people's stories as being their own. And unless we are there to instil a certain confidence in the nation's identity, I think that is the first step towards our own disenfranchisement as a nation from you know, um, our economic disenfranchisement. I mean if you're not confident of who you are you're not going to be able to compete as a nation.

RS: Yeah, well it's happening in every area of society, medicine, education. It wouldn't just be the film industry, theatre as well, dance, journalism. The one principle is coming to dominate in every field and that's flattening everything out.

NP: I think so. I notice it's happening in science as well,

RS: Oh yes, definitely

NP: I was fairly scandalised to see the Olympics Arts Festival doesn't have an Australian play in it.

RS: Are you serious?

NP: Absolutely. Dead serious.

R: What's the one with Hugo Weaving in it?

NP: The White Devil.

RS: What's that?

NP: It's Webster.

RS: Okay.

NP: We're perfectly willing to – and let's face it, The White Devil is not a great play,

RS: I don't know it.

NP: Well, Webster was a, one of the, an epigon of Shakespeare, and you know, without the same talent. And The White Devil is not one of his best plays. It's a very funny revenge tragedy, probably the last gasp of that genre, the Jacobean. What have we got? The Marriage of Figaro. Belvoir street is doing that. The White Devil on at the Theatre Royal. What else have we got? The Royal Shakespeare company are obviously doing



Shakespeare, but they've imported a British director to do it for us.

RS: Surely the audiences coming over here would want to see an Australian play when they're in Australia.

NP: Of course they would. And the whole idea that you might go to an Olympic games in America for instance, and not see an American play is an absurdity. It would be absurd if it happened in the UK, or if it happened in China. Here it's 'oh well,' – I just find it... The one thing that's kind of, is Barry Kosky is doing an improvised work here which will be part of the Olympic Arts Festival, and that qualifies in some way as being an Australian play. But it's not really, it's an improvised performance, and the subject is Sigmund Freud.

RS: Mm.

NP: Right, so like a 19<sup>th</sup> century Viennese character. Not that any of those works is – not that we shouldn't be doing any of those works, but,

RS: To not have one Australian work,

NP: To not have a single Australian play in the entire festival seems absurd. I mean if you look at the concert program as well, you'll find out of 30 or 40 concert pieces, you'll find two short Australian pieces. You know, the rest of it's all the usual suspects, Shostakovich, Beethoven, Mahler, Mozart and so on. And you sort of think 'what for? Here's all these Europeans coming over here, and what are they going to see? More of the same. Our version of their culture.' I kind of go... that's not right.

RS: There's something wrong there.

NP: There is indeed something very wrong.

RS: The thing is that when you try to defend a national film industry you get accused of being parochial, or excluding other cultures.

NP: One does not say the same, for instance, about the UK film industry, or the German or the French film industry.

RS: Well, they are accused of being chauvenistic, the French, good on them.

NP: Well,

RS: In a way.

NP: Well every nation protects it's own culture except us. Or the nations that don't, don't because they can't afford to. I mean if



you said to the East Timorese would they like a cultural program, of course they bloody would. We're the only ones who go 'oh, is it really necessary?'

RS: I think the whole idea of the nation though is somehow put on the economic bandwagon. Our nation is just an economy really.

NP: Yes, and there's a perception in this country that it's a worldwide trend, but it's actually not.

RS: No.

NP: The term economic rationalism, I found out the other day, is an Australian term. It's not used anywhere else.

RS: Really?

NP: Yeah, it's a term that's been coined by conservatives in this country, and they are preaching a world

RS: It's kind of passe now, really,

NP: Well in lots of ways certainly there is a trend toward breaking down economic barriers between countries, but nobody is pretending, the French are not saying 'oh we need to be a bit more English and German or American, otherwise we're not going to make it on the world stage.' 'We've got to speak English because that's the international language.' Nobody in France or Germany is saying that.

RS: Or Canada even.

NP: No, exactly. It's just...the fact that our culture is tacked on to the economic bandwagon, as you say, I find absurd and wrong.

RS: Mm. So do find you have a lot of autonomy in terms of the projects you do?

NP: Yes. I do. Nobody has ever told me what I have to do, really. Bryan [Brown] was a very good producer. He never in any way tried to affect what Dead Heart was trying to say or mean. He simply wanted it to be the best story it could be. Everything he said to me in script editing was like 'this scene is too long' or 'this scene is wandering off'. It was never in terms of 'will the audience accept this?' And certainly in theatre no one has ever tried to interfere with what I wanted to say. The last play I wrote was called Hollow Ground, which was a fairly, taking a fairly controversial line on a story about pedophilia. You know, I was taking the line of the pedophile who was the main character in the story. Trying to say, 'well if that's your sexual proclivity, and you can't help it, well how do you live?' You know that was profoundly offensive to many people. It moved



many people but it was profoundly offensive to a number of critics.

RS: That's art for you.

NP: That's right. And nobody ever tried to tell me that I shouldn't be saying that.

RS: Mm. So where did the idea for Dead Heart come from?

NP: It came from...there was another film producer, called Mallory, when I'd just come out of film school, he was ringing the film school and asking if there were any students who were good and could work on something. I was acknowledged as someone he should talk to. He received a letter from a priest working in the Northern Territory, heard a story about an Aboriginal bloke that came out of the desert in the 1930s to join a settlement, and he'd been instructed the elders to kill another man, according to Aboriginal lore, which he did. And he was arrested by the police for the murder and put on trial and sentenced to 20 years in jail. And he broke out of jail, went back to the desert, and though he was pursued he was never found.

RS: Mm.

NP: And then there was a real story which was eventually, many years later, in the 1960s he was found, or he turned himself in, and he spent something like 6 weeks in jail, and then he was released. So that was the story that I was given originally. I was given it at a time where I really knew very little about Aboriginal culture, but I was fascinated by the story, fascinated by the idea of being ordered to do something under one law and being punished for it under another. It was a very good vice to turn a story on. Apart from the fact that I was completely terrified by the material but I decided to take it on. It wasn't until ten years later that we actually got to make the film.

RS: Mm. It would be good if it got another release. It would still be seen as very very relevant at the moment.

NP: It's interesting. It seems to have kind of grown in stature since it was released. I think at the time it kind of came and went. It got some great reviews and that was it, but more and more I find, you know people such as yourself, come to me and say to me, 'I remember that film as being an important one.'

RS: It was on telly recently too wasn't it?

NP: Yeah, yeah it was. Channel 7. They broadcast it, but they cut it and didn't show it in a very comprehensive form. I didn't



watch the whole thing. I only watched the first 20 minutes and I couldn't stand it, because they had to take about ten, 15 minutes out of it.

RS: It's quite a complex story in places.

NP: It is, and I know from working on it that there's actually no cuts that you can make in it and still have the story make sense. Pretty much every line in every scene tells you something that you need to know in order to understand the next bit, so I think the bloke who broadcast it kind of got the gist of it but didn't understand it. But anyway. It's a shame. I hope people get out the video.

RS: There's just a couple of other things I wanted to ask you.

NP: Yep.

RS: Situating the film as a story within a story, was that a deliberate device to distance yourself from any of the ideological positions within it?

NP: Um, not for that purpose. You mean me as a writer being identified with what any of the characters are saying?

RS: Or even with the story itself – it's kind of a fictional device that allows you not to be trapped by any of the representations.

NP: Yeah I guess,

RS: Maybe because it came to you as a story.

NP: Yeah maybe. I was in love with this idea of these three blokes playing cards in the desert.

RS: And Daddy Cool playing! That was great.

NP: I suppose the thing was that I wanted to establish that we were entering a different moral universe. If you look at the way the scene is constructed. These three blokes arrive. One bloke tells how he kills someone. Another tells how he saved someone's life by doing this magical thing. And Poppy says, 'well I just wiped out this whole society, this whole community' and you don't know why he did it, whether it's a good reason or a bad reason. Because these other two are like the angel of death and the angel of life, and it's not like they're even good or bad, it's simply their job. So I was trying to establish for the audience that this was going to be a moral universe is not a normal one where things happen for completely different reasons. Good or bad. You kind of get the hang of the fact that Danny's dead, the fact of death in custody and then go to the payback scene. And a system of punishment is established for the audience which doesn't rely on guilt, it just relies on who is connected.



This man died and who is connected to that in some way. And as long as someone is hurt they'll be satisfied. Which is actually the approach taken by certain Aboriginal societies in central Australia. The notion of justice is not to seek out the guilty parties it's to provide satisfaction to the injured party or the injured relatives. So you kind of see this punishment take place, and Billy submits to this, even though clearly he's the only one who had nothing to do with it. But he does so in order to restore harmony to the community. That's not the end of it but it establishes the rivalry between Ray and Poppy. And it also establishes that Ray is someone who knows the territory, isn't simply the image of the thuggish copper, the image we usually get of these, particularly coppers dealing with Aboriginal people as people who bash them up and put them in jail. I wanted to establish that here was somebody who had a stake in the community who was capable of bad and capable of good, and clearly felt things for the people he was working for. Was not in any conventional way a racist, even though...I wanted to really challenge the idea of what racism was, you know what I mean?

RS: Yes.

NP: So he's, even though a lot of the audience would have thought, 'yes he is racist' nevertheless he doesn't approach David, the pastor, the Ernie Dingo character, as anything other than an equal.

RS: Yeah.

NP: He approaches Billy as his subordinate, but it's not inferior in any other way.

RS: He's superior because Billy's not that bright.

NP: Yes, but it's not to do with his Aboriginality. He doesn't treat Poppy as being inferior. He's not racist in the sense that he sees the people as inferior, and he stays there because he loves them. And he says that. But he has a particular angle on what's happening to Aboriginal culture, and what the future of it must be, but in a way, it's his actions connected to that belief that make him into the villain in the piece. You know what I mean.

RS: Mm.

NP: To get back to your question about the opening sequence, it probably...it's just easier. It establishes we're entering a different world. It establishes Aboriginal culture as being a living powerful thing – this is not a story about a disenfranchised people.

RS: No.



- NP: It's a story about a bunch of people who live as they want to live now. And I guess it's intriguing because it gives the audience of that buzz of 'now we're going to be told a story. We'll sit around the campfire and hear a great story.' And there's always something exciting about that to me.
- RS: Is that how you think of yourself as a storyteller?
- NP: Yes. Definitely.
- RS: Okay. Just one question, and you might have come across the answer in your anthropological research, the death in custody issue, um the fact that so many Aborigines seem to commit suicide in custody, do you think that's a function of the sheer quantity of them in the system, or is it something, is there some other cultural reason that they feel so desolate?
- NP: Yes, I think that's a really interesting question. As I understand it, the statistical view, as I understand it, the ratio of Aboriginal deaths in custody to white deaths in custody is not significantly different. I'm wondering if more recent numbers might prove that wrong, but as I understand it Aboriginal prisoners do not kill themselves at a significantly different rate than white prisoners do. On the other hand, there is something that is particularly devastating about being locked up for Aborigines is to do with being excluded from family, and the social um, the structure of Aboriginal communities, certainly in the central desert anyway, is based on the notion of shame to your family, rather than guilt.
- RS: Yes.
- NP: That's why the punishment is so much more...so the punishment that is ultimately meted out is exclusion from your community, you know, and rather than run away from your community, Aboriginal people will rather be speared in the leg, or beaten up, or, I mean most of them would rather undergo traditional punishments than feel that they have to run away from where they were born. So if you take somebody and put them in jail, for them it's a peculiarly cruel punishment when you compare it to white prisoners. And I think in the Territory now, a lot of Aboriginal prisoners are given the option of being punished in the traditional way, and a lot of them opt for it. But you know, it's a very very murky area that one, because a lot of them have had a long exposure to European Australian culture. And um, so a lot of those old loyalties and phobias have lost the force that they used to have.
- RS: Yeah. I think we'd all feel fairly hopeless!



NP: Yes! But there's a particular Aboriginal thing about being locked up away from your family.

RS: Well thanks for you time. Were there any points you wanted to make that I haven't allowed you to cover?

NP: Um, I don't think so.

RS: I'll probably think of ten million more questions when I'm trying to write up.

NP: I'll probably think of a really good reason why I wanted those three Aboriginal blokes in the desert. But anyway, certainly if you want to call again feel free.

RS: Or maybe email.

NP: Yeah. Sure.

RS: Thanks

Tape concludes.



## Interview with Cherie Nowlan

(This interview took place in person on 9/2/00.)

- R. Siemienowicz: Okay, first of all, I've been commanded to tell you by a friend of mine, who's a visual arts critic, that he just loved that scene in the film where it's sort of a time-lapse scene of an outdoor garden that changes from winter to autumn to summer,
- Cherie Nowlan: Yeah, yeah, I wish I could take full credit for that. Catherine Millars, she and I worked that out. She did this very low-tech motion control shot, I can't even remember how we did it now, but motion control's actually a very expensive thing to do, but she came up with the um, a way of doing it so that we had a camera there over a long period of time. I remember the camera sunk into the ground...good, I'm glad he liked it.
- RS: Yeah, and let me see, where shall we start. Okay, maybe if you could just tell me a bit about your background and how you got into making films, the things that interest you about being in the Australian film industry.
- CN: Okay, well I'll try and give you an abridged version. I only ever wanted to work in film, and when I left school, I grew up in the country, I'm from a working class rural family, I went to the local catholic school, and um, really the cinema world was a long long way away from Singleton, even though it's only two and a half hours from Sydney. It may as well have been Timbuktu. But I was very ambitious, very focused, and I managed to get a job writing about entertainment. I'd been working on the local paper as a journalist, and I thought that was a logical step. At least I'll be *in* the world,
- RS: Yeah,
- CN: If not *of* it. So I got a job on two magazines for two years, *TV Week* and *New Idea*. So how on earth I got there from there! Well, I do know, I'd go to sets a lot; I'd do a lot of publicity writing, I remember I went to Bodyline. I met Heather Mitchell, who later became a good friend, and Hugo Weaving and all those guys. So I was on sets, and I thought 'I love this. If only I weren't doing what I'm doing.' And I hounded a producer who was working on a television series and I knew she was leaving to start another one, and I bombarded her with ideas for telemovies and series and things. I don't know that I had any series, but definitely telemovies. Eventually I think it



was easier for her to give me a job than to return my phonecalls. I went to work for her for four months as a production assistant, which I was terrible at because I wasn't used to being in a lowly position. I was used to being my own boss a bit, being a journalist, a fair bit of freedom. And I also researched drama, the series I was working on. And I got pretty sick of that quick smart and got a job at Kennedy Miller as a researcher on another drama. And at the time Kennedy Miller were producing a massive amount of television, Phil Noyce was preparing *Dead Calm*, George was coming back and forth doing *Witches of Eastwick* and I met a lot of people who became close friends and really that probably underscored my ambition even more. I left, went overseas, had my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, and thought, 'I'm going to be a director or die'. I was that dramatic. I just felt that unless I was going to be doing what I wanted to do, I didn't see the point of being here really. I just thought this is what I want to do. Done lots of jobs by that stage...

RS: Like the research job?

CN: Yeah, but I'd done market research, I'd been a waitress. I'd done lots of other jobs in and around that.

RS: But you hadn't been behind the camera?

CN: No, I'd only done research. But when I came back from overseas I'd worked in documentary and done a bit more sort of fieldwork. I did an interview series, and I worked on a pilot of a quiz show. But what happened was I had an idea for a documentary, and my friend Marcus Darcy, who's an editor, and was working at Kennedy Miller as a post-production supervisor there, said why don't you talk to Chris Noonan's wife, Glenys Rowe, pitch it to her. And I thought, 'yeah she'd be perfect,' because she'd done *Bodywork*. And Chris I'd met at Kennedy Miller too. So it was easy to pick up the phone and call her. Went over and because she's the sort of person she is and the sort of producer that she is, she liked the idea and she put to me 'of course you'll direct it' and I went 'yeah'.

RS: (laughter)

CN: I walked out of the building and thought, 'my god! I've just become a director.' So I then had to of course write the documentary, an ABC, BBC, FFC financed film. I had to research and write it before I shot it. There was no sort of verite – I couldn't shoot it over months, and I shot it on film, so it had to be very structured.

RS: What was it about?



CN: It was about the nuns who taught me. It's called *God's Girls*. And they had made a film in the 60s to promote the vocation, and they'd shown it to me when I was in Year 7 and I just never forgot this film. It was incredible. I was just so fascinated by it. It was very funny too, of course. And my teacher's were in it, and I thought that was great. So I had this idea to go back and make a new film around the old film, and it ended up becoming a sort of potted history of this particular order of nuns. And so I basically had to learn about directing from doing it. And after that I did, I wanted to do drama. I suppose I was logical about the process. I thought I should do short dramas. A friend of mine was applying to film school to do some of the short courses. At that stage I probably could have applied and got in as a full-time student, but at that stage it was a three-year course, and I just didn't have the money. And you know, you pay to do what you do here, in this country, unfortunately because you know, you're trying to make a career out of a hobby.

RS: Is it very expensive to go to film school?

CN: Yeah, because even though you get a stipend, I don't have family in Sydney so I couldn't live at home and go to school, which a lot of students do. And Sydney's an incredibly expensive city to live in, so it was never an option for me to do that. A short course was the only option. And so I applied with a friend. She didn't get in, I got in. And in that time I'd read Lexie's [Alexandra Long's] second book of short stories, had loved the first one years before, like four years before I'd read that, and I wondered where the hell this woman had gone. I'd read her first book, *The Year of Christiana Cleeves*, I remember thinking to myself that if I was a writer I'd want to be able to write like that. So it was fate I suppose. And then went to, as I said to you on the phone, went to this course, knowing that she was at the course somewhere, and hoped that I would run into her and that she was in my class. And then I thought, 'shit, maybe we won't get on.' And we got on like a house on fire. It would be impossible not to get on with her because she's so funny. So yeah, we worked on my short film, which was an adaptation of her short story, she had two ideas for a feature film which she had to write for her final year, sorry, her course was only a year, she was a writing extension student, and *Lizzie* was one of them. And we went for a walk along Balmoral, and she pitched it to me. She pitched them both to me actually and said which one did I like, and I said that one, *Lizzie*. I can't remember why, except that it was quite well formed right from the pitch stage, even though in the script development there were I suppose major shifts. It wasn't



a radical alteration of her original idea at all. So that was kind of – I'd produced a short too at film school, and I'd done a stupid little short for SBS as part of a short comedy series. So that was it. And then on to a feature film.

RS: Quite a big step.

CN: Yeah, big leaps every time. But I had no choice. It was just the way. If I'd been at film school for three years, you know I would have been making films every year and, but I had to be coming up with the ideas, making them happen, and learning as quickly as I could on the job. But obviously the best film school in the world is watching the movies over and over again. So clearly I watch a lot of films.

RS: So when you were living in the country, in the middle of nowhere, you went to the cinema a lot?

CN: Yeah, as often as I could. The cinema unfortunately closed down. They had a beautiful old sort of picture palace that closed when I was in the later years of high school. But I had a wonderful English teacher, who was a priest, and he loved movies, and it was Year 7 he took us to see *Star Wars*, and Year 9 it was *Apocalypse Now* and *Catch-22*. So we were seeing – and I was learning to see that film could achieve the kind of depth that literature can, and he really played an important part I suppose, in opening my eyes to that possibility.

RS: You never wanted to write novels instead?

CN: I knew damn well I didn't have the ability. It was as simple as that. I like to write and I do write, but I just don't have that kind of skill. I was good at acting and that's really where I come from.

RS: You never wanted to be an actor?

CN: Yes I did. I desperately wanted to be an actor. But that's so long ago I can barely recall the desire, but I did very much want to do it, but Mum and Dad were horrified. They tried to run me off it as much as they could, but they gave up pretty early on, they didn't talk about what I wanted to do. They hoped that I'd be a teacher I think. And I think there's not such a big difference between what I do and being a teacher, actually. I think I've got that kind of personality. I was always a prefect, you know a school captain at school. I was happiest when I was leading a team of you know fewer than 50 people. I produced a talent quest when I was in Year 6 and raised money for the missions, and we took it on tour to the high school, and I remember thinking, 'no I won't perform this time. I'll just sit



back and audition everyone', even though everyone that auditioned was able to go in the talent quest, I don't remember rejecting anyone. But I just...And I MC-ed the whole thing. So I just have that kind of directing personality. I ticked enough of the boxes I suppose.

RS: When you were at Kennedy Miller did you see a lot of the stuff that went on as far as directing? You must have got a feel for...?

CN: No, what I got a feel for, was probably the politics of filmmaking and a lot of the realities of the film business I got to see.

**The rest of this paragraph deleted at Cherie Nowlan's request: *'I don't want to be on the record saying anything about Kennedy Miller.'***

CN: I find the filmmaking world a sexist – though unconsciously sexist – world.

RS: The Australian film industry is perhaps less so?

CN: It's definitely less so. I think that's because there's no money in it!

RS: (laughter)

CN: The men go where there is money, and that's why so many of our film bodies are run by women, because the men who are qualified to do that job are earning a lot more money in other businesses. That's my theory. You go to LA and it's just surprising. The women are in executive positions, but it's still, while ever we don't own the means of production, we won't really have an effect, because you're always bowing down to the man who's in charge Rupert Murdoch or whoever.

RS: Mm.

CN: And it's just, the women aren't any different I don't think – you wouldn't be any more likely to get a female-oriented production assistant through, greenlighted by a woman than a man. It's six of one, half a dozen of the other. In fact you're possibly more likely to get it made through a male executive, possibly. Because the women are very hard-nosed. Actually, you'd have to be in order to survive. It's not a criticism. Just a description of what happens.

RS: Mm. And are you still in touch with Kennedy-Miller?

CN: Oh yeah, I see them all. I see George around. He's great. I really admire him. He's a brilliant man. And I'm certainly in touch with all the people that I worked with.

RS: Chris Noonan?



CN: Yeah, I tend to run into Chris.

RS: I interviewed him for my thesis, about *Babe*.

CN: That would have been great.

RS: It was brilliant.

CN: Well obviously he would have had a very different experience of George than me.

RS: Well yeah, obviously he's very careful not to – that relationship's broken down a bit I suppose, but um, he just had a very different take on whether they should do a sequel to that film. He felt that it was selling out a bit to go and make a sequel to a film that was so complete.

CN: A franchise.

RS: Yeah.

CN: See that's the thing, the business. The temptation to make money from a franchise. They calculate what you'll make from a sequel from what you've taken in the first instance.

RS: But it did do very well, the second one.

CN: Did it?

RS: Maybe not compared to the first one. I think I've got the notes printed out here...um, well it was the top Australian film in 98, but that doesn't really mean much does it.

CN: No, you'd need to look at the US figures. Yes, there's no talk of a third one.

RS: I didn't mind it, you know.

CN: I really liked it too.

RS: I maybe didn't like the idea of it, but it was very creative,

CN: I loved the first 40 minutes. I thought it was very clever.

RS: It wasn't as much of a classic maybe as the first one, which was just lovely.

CN: It's very Chris, the first film.

RS: Yeah.

CN: And the second one is something else again. But the other thing is the producer director relationship is fraught anyway. It's a very difficult relationship to get right, and I think very few people do. I feel that...I think my work in commercials has...this is my latest theory. Producers like to produce films, they don't like to produce directors, and that's where all the problems happen, because you have to produce a director.



Because it is at the end of the day, the director, whether you like it or not, when you're tallying up the score of who did what, they're there the longest, they have the most effect across the board, and um,

RS: And their name's attached to it.

CN: Ah, but their name's attached to it for a reason. It's not an arbitrary thing. When people looked at who did what, or who contributed what, it's no accident that the director comes out probably being on top of that.

RS: Mm.

CN: You are there the longest. You are the last man standing on a film. You are often the person who cares most about it. Because...and that's just part of the process. There are different pressures brought to bear on a producer, different pressures brought to bear on a distributor. And as a director you have to negotiate your way through all of those difficulties, while trying to get as much of your vision, if not all of it, on the screen as you possibly can. Did you see the Stephen Elliot documentary?

RS: No, I taped it but haven't watched it yet.

CN: Oh, please watch it because it's not that far from what happens on every film. It's kind of an extreme case. Yeah.

RS: Yeah. I must investigate the role of the producer a bit more. I guess I understand that they're very important and that they have a lot of say in terms of budget, and the production of that film,

CN: Well, they can have a lot to do with it if they've initiated a project. See it depends who initiates a project as to who what they contribute, creatively, and what you'll tolerate to be contributed creatively, I guess. There's the creative producer, which I've always hated, because they're the director's worst enemy a creative producer, and yet there are a lot of producers in Australia particularly who see themselves as that, and who want to be seen as creative, and contribute on that and are very very good at it. And then there are producers who are happy to play a more executive role in getting a deal together and taking on I suppose a more of a paternal approach of looking after the director and looking after the film. It depends on the personality I guess of the individual, but...

RS: Who produced *Lizzie*?

CN: We brought on a guy called Jonathan Shteinman to produce our film, and that was a very difficult relationship. But we sort of salvaged something by the end of it. But it was very very hard, as I think I alluded to you on the



phone. I don't know if Alexandra talked about it to you, but getting that film finished was very trying, because the distributor who we'd brought on board at the last minute to try to beef up the Jonathan bit of the board was a friend of his, to beef up the budget a bit more, because we were really trying to do a lot with very little.

RS: This is from REP?

CN: Yeah, REP. They came on board for probably the wrong reasons. Um, it was a very very good deal financially for them. They were going to get their money back pretty quickly, but you know they wanted a conventional ending. And they'd actually passed on the project. The woman who I think was managing director at the time. I felt very sorry for her, because she then had to work on a film that she actually disagreed with, right from the get-go and it was very hard for her. It was most unfair actually. And I was crying on her floor at one stage, begging her to support me, and she was in a tough position. She could see from cuts that I was trying to do to illustrate that I could, if I changed the ending, the whole infrastructure of the film, the narrative, fell apart. She could see that clearly. She knew I was in a bind, and yet they wanted to win one, you know. Dick swinging is sort of the biggest sport in filmmaking. It's not really about what's right. It's about winning the argument, and someone very early on, Richard took the attitude, I think anyway, that I wouldn't listen. That was just not true. It was just a very unfair conclusion to come to. And then he made up his mind and that was it then. It was horrible. And in the end I had to – and you find the money-people tend to treat directors like they're children...and you know you can cry. I more or less pulled every trick out of the book. I tried crying. In the end, it didn't matter. I only ended up exhausting myself emotionally and physically, and really I probably could have achieved the end in a much more efficient way by not doing any of that and staying a bit more calm. But I was so frustrated. I was literally abandoned by everybody, and in the end my project coordinator, Philippa Bateman, came on board and helped me, and I went in and said, 'look, I've run out of people to turn to. Nobody is helping me. Can you look at what I've done and tell me what you think.' And she said, 'look it's a disaster.'

RS: Helping you in terms of what?

CN: Supporting me. Supporting me in terms of getting the cut. Basically, I was threatened that even – see I had final cut of the film, because it was an AFC funded film. Jonathan after that said he'd never ever give a director final cut ever again, because he felt so compromised in his relationship with the distributor, and the money folk, and felt that in future perhaps



he might have difficulty getting a picture funded. Of course I couldn't have cared less about what he would have to contend with after this film, because by that stage I didn't like him very much!

RS: (laughter)

CN: If you write this in, you must say that we did end up talking about, apologising, and becoming friends of sorts after that. I'm always pleased to see him, but at the time it was just awful. He wouldn't help. He said to me, even if you don't do what Richard says, he can dump your film. He'll release it at a time when you can't compete. He'll do the minimum amount of work possible to do the release. I was lucky that it was the Australian Film Commission and so they couldn't really do a bad bad job, and also it would look bad for the future...and so he informed me that there were other ways of getting to me. And there were numerous things that they then did do, I think. But then there were people in the company that really tried their hardest to do a good job, but ultimately a distributor can fulfil a prophecy if they want to. And if they decide they don't like it and it's not going to work, then they can make sure that it doesn't work, very easily.

RS: And what actually happened with the distribution?

CN: Well, it was released three weeks before Christmas. Three weeks before Christmas nobody goes to the cinemas because everyone's out shopping. So we had to, all the money we made we more or less had to make, then after Christmas, Boxing Day, you've got all the big American releases, so you lose your screens. It's difficult enough to hold your screens. You lose session times, if your figures aren't up at a certain level. We certainly had no television advertising. They spent around \$200,000 on the P&A (publicity and advertising). It could have been a little more or a little less. I don't know for sure. A lot of people haven't heard of my film, which is pretty mad, considering the cast is Cate Blanchett, who at that stage was already well and truly established as an Australian star, here and overseas,

RS: And Frances O'Connor,

CN: Exactly, she was everywhere. She was *Kiss or Kill*-ing, winning awards all over the shop, and so, and Richard's profile was also similarly elevated, so it wasn't as though there weren't actors who were willing to market the film, and they were all more than willing to do their bit, because they were all really proud of it.



RS: There wasn't much publicity about it at the time, I remember.

CN: Well, they did what they could, with the time and money they had. That's the thing. It wasn't that the publicist wasn't doing her job. She was doing her job as well as she possibly could. But, and I should also add, that it doesn't matter what film you are, you're up against the same kinds of obstacles. My experience was no worse than any other small film, trying to be distributed. So in that sense I don't think um REP did any more or less to me, but they were probably fair, actually, at the end of the day. But I felt that the film had more potential than that, they could have made more money by not releasing it when they did, by releasing it a bit earlier, by maybe even holding it off, until the following year, perhaps, although that probably would have annoyed me.

RS: It was actually finished – I think I saw it in July, August of that year?

CN: Where did you see it? AFI screenings? Because it wasn't released till November 20.

RS: It was the preview screenings for the Melbourne Film Festival.

CN: Oh, yes, you would have seen it before its release. I should add too, that the first week it was second to *Airforce One*, and it had the second highest screen average, so when you look at the figures, you look at what...which was pretty amazing, given the amount of, or lack of exposure I should say.

RS: Mm. What was the relationship between the AFC who provided the support to sort of get the project up, and the distributor – did you have the distributor first?

CN: That was unusual because it was the first time there was a market attachment to an AFC film. Normally they're struggling to get a distributor attached, but Jonathan did have a previous relationship with Richard Becker. He had distributed *Angel Baby*, and done a very good job actually on that film, so there were some good things that he's done. It was very personal I should say between me and Richard. I don't feel it was anything other than that, but that's problem. It's made personal, it becomes personal. And that can bring you undone, and bring your film undone. It didn't bring me undone personally. It taught me a lot, actually – sorry, what was I saying? So Jonathan brought him on board, so there wasn't – there should have been more of a relationship actually, in hindsight. I had invited him personally to screenings during the cutting of the film. He only turned up to the last one. And that was actually part of the problem. If there'd been distributor



participation a bit earlier on, we probably could have avoided some of the expense, for example. We were also going back cap in hand for music, which he did come through for. That was difficult. I was trading needing to get the ending of the film, which was the whole reason we wanted to make the goddam thing. He hated the ending. We needed 50 more grand for the music, so I was in a very difficult position. Plus he'd taken an instant dislike to me. So these were all the kinds of things that I was juggling. We needed the money. We'd under-budgeted the score, because Jonathan knew that I needed it for, because I was protecting the 7-week shoot. We had a huge cast. Two separate stories, with different casts and locations. There was an enormous amount to achieve. So he was trying to do the right thing, leaning on his friend, hoping he'd be good for this 50 grand, but then having this problem over the ending, and then...

RS: What did he want the ending to be?

CN: He didn't want that scene in the hotel room where Lizzie talks about having an open marriage. He felt that that really emasculated the male character, emasculated Guy. He didn't like it, and he said well, no guy...well they were really hung up on the fact that he couldn't get it up on the night of the wedding. You know they come in and...

RS: They flop on the bed...

CN: No, you know the scene where he can't get it up when they're buying the teapot and they haven't had sex for ages. [They were saying] "For a start, I don't understand a guy who hasn't had sex for that long, and *I* say that *I* never have had an instance where *I* couldn't get it up..." Yeah right.

RS: (laughter) Are you serious?

CN: Yes. That was one of the fights I've had. And Lexie was saying, 'well, sorry but I *have* had that experience. And that is not the point.' The point is that it's meant to mean...we're saying something else about how he feels about the relationship. The pressures brought to bear on a long-term relationship. Obviously you're not lusty all the time, the sex does drop off, and we're not saying there's something wrong with him, and he's less of a man because of it. We're saying it's just another phase in a relationship. They're the sort of comments. Like that entry in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, [about Richard Roxburgh lacking the romantic charisma of Cary Grant], those kinds of comments and criticisms come up all the time. When Lizzie said, 'there's no such thing as a perfect marriage. It would be boring if we all



had a perfect marriage, and I think if we started seeing other people that would be okay. That wouldn't be a threat, because I love you, that's a given.' That was more or less the speech. Well, they'd say 'I'd walk out there and then.' And what I said was, 'hang on, there's a time cut between that scene, where he sees Jenny for the last time in the street. You don't know what has happened between that moment and when we see Lizzie for the last time. Clearly they had kids straight away. She might have even been pregnant the night of the honeymoon.' I was sort of saying, you don't know until the end. And yes, I'm leaving a bit of the story up to the audience to tell, but there's enough clues there for you to be able to work it out, that he hasn't walked away for a couple of reasons. One, because he probably does love her. He's just married her. They probably went to four months of counselling over this night. He's seen his ex-girlfriend who has not been able to speak to him, so clearly she's walked away and is too hurt and broken to ever have anything to do with him. So there's all these sorts of things that we were, I was hoping to convey to the audience through the performances and the script obviously, that I thought explained all of that.

RS: I wasn't sure if he was...

CN: Have you got lots of tape because I feel like I'm going to use up all your tape.

RS: Yeah, I've got another one.

CN: Who's BM, who's the writer of this [*Oxford Companion* entry for *Thank God He Met Lizzie*]?

RS: Brian McFarlane. An academic. It's pretty good, generally.

CN: Thanks, it's so nice that he picked it up – 'its originality lies in it starting where romantic comedy has most often ended.' I can't tell you how many times have I had to explain that – to distributors, and the whole first act is really the end of this whole romantic comedy, the cute meet, the getting married. That's usually the end of the romantic comedy and that's the beginning of our film.

RS: It's basically a good review. You can keep that...

CN: Thank you. He should have asked a few women whether they thought Guy was spunky. Anyway, whatever...there were lots of things like that. Because they said that a man would never behave that way, that meant that that was fact. Yet we'd all of us [women] had experiences of this kind of thing. And it was that they didn't want that to be the case.



RS: I really...I really identified with the film because I saw it when I'd left my husband three months previously. And we'd been married for five years, and for most of those years he hadn't wanted to have sex with me. And we'd had an open relationship, so I picked up on that scene, which other people who saw the film said 'I don't think that was what she was really saying. She wouldn't...' And I was like, no that's what she's saying.

CN: Yeah.

RS: Yeah.

CN: How interesting.

RS: So I really thought this was real. I really get this.

CN: Oh good.

RS: It sort of devastated me a bit,

CN: Oooh, you would have been one of the people crying in the park afterwards. Rowan Woods came up to me after the cast and crew screening, with his wife Jacquelyn, and they'd both had long term relationships in their 20s and met each other at film school, actually, when Lexie and I were there. Jacquelyn came up to me sobbing, and said 'I just wanted to show you how I felt...' And Rowan with tears in his eyes. And I thought, God, what have I got on my hands? Other sensitive men and honest men like Rowan were very upset by it, and they knew that they were guy. I was all three of them, including Lizzie.

RS: Yeah, well Alexandra and I were talking about how she does have children straight afterwards, and that it's kind of, she's an odd woman. She's successful and charming and calculating, and yet you do think she loves him. She's a complicated character.

CN: She's a wise woman, Lizzie.

RS: And we were both saying, 'yeah, it's not some sort of um, calculated thing, 'Now I'm 30' but it happens organically like, this man would be a good father for my child, you know.

CN: Right.Yeah. Her agent Jill Hickson, I remember her saying once, and I hope Jill doesn't mind me quoting her, but we were saying how everyone didn't like Lizzie, and this was going to be a terrible problem for me, that there was a character in there that the audience didn't like. It's such a joke. Of course there are always characters in there that you don't like. Anyway, I knew you wouldn't hate her because Cate was going to play her, and it's impossible to hate her. But I remember Jill saying, 'I don't know what all the fuss is about Lizzie. I think she's a



terribly sensible clear-eyed girl!’ So, did I answer your question? I didn’t answer your question? I didn’t talk about what it’s like to work in the Australian film industry. Do you want me to talk about that?

RS: Yes, that would be good.

CN: Otherwise I’ll ramble on forever, and you won’t have what you want. What do you need?

RS: Okay, I’d really like to talk about autonomy, and how much creative control you get as a director, and how much creative control the AFC allows you when they’ve funded a project.

CN: Okay. With the AFC I found them to be incredibly supportive. I was lucky I had two really brilliant women as project coordinators, Sonia Armstrong first up, and then Philippa Batemen. That’s not to say we didn’t disagree. We did disagree, and we fought a lot, and Philippa and I, the good thing about us is we can fight and we can go on, say sorry and get over it. Um, and they’re very bright. They always knew what I was trying to do. Most of my problems were solved at least in the development phase, and it was only at the end where I needed to bring Philippa back in, she was off busy doing *The Boys*, and she became supportive. There are other people that reckon they get lorded over by the AFC. They do restrict you in some ways. Like with first time heads of department, I wasn’t allowed to have a first time editor, DOP and production designer, so the editor had to go. But I knew he was going to cop *The Boys*, so it was kind of okay, but you know Philippa’s point was that it was my first time and that I needed to surround myself with someone who’s really experienced, and in the end I worked with someone very experienced and beautiful person, and very well suited to the subject matter, he loved it. So it was a happy story in the end, but they can influence you in that way, by insisting...but she tried to be supportive and have as many of my original team as I could get through. But you know you negotiate these things. Autonomy, look, it’s what you can negotiate. If you go in being a brat, with the funding body, then they’ll probably fight you. If you go in and try and understand what everyone’s concerns are, what they need from you, what do the commercials all say, ‘what the imperatives are’, and you try and give them something so that they might give you something else that’s really important to you. So you’re learning to compromise, but I had final cut of the film, I would accept no less of a government-funded film. I think that the whole reason that they’re there is to support the director and the director/writer team in this instance. The producer was



someone who joined later. If they were supporting a first time um...see it's just different, say with *The Boys* for example, Robert and John Maynard give their writers final cut. They do everything to protect that. Jan Chapman does that. It depends on the kind of producer that you work with. If that's their ethic, then you know that you'll be protected, and they've demonstrated it time and time again. They know they'll be on your side fighting the distributor, who will always want you to go for the easiest route, go for the cheap shot, makes them feel comfortable, and naturally make their dollar back. So we're saying, 'yes we want you to make money too' – that's the other thing, this idea that we're...

RS: That you don't want money.

CN: That we're stupid artists that aren't interested in money. Hello. We're all interested in making money. But what we're saying is that the audience is smarter than you think. That there is more room to move, and let's not tell them what to think before they've seen the movie. Let's give them a chance to find out. That's why films that are discovered in festivals will often go against the grain of a whole lot of distributors who've said no to it.

RS: Mm.

CN: Because they're making up their minds for their audience. So my film for example was decided that Americans, there was no way the Americans could tolerate this kind of ending. Even though when you look at some of the greatest cinema ever made, and certainly a lot of the American films of the 70s were unhappy endings, or you know.

RS: Or films like *American Beauty*.

CN: Yes.

RS: And that film's going to make lots of money. And nobody's going in there expecting it to be a happy ending. They're expecting to be challenged.

CN: You have an insight by the end, and it's not...so it is emotionally satisfying, but they have all these very simple attitudes to what works in cinema, and if you don't kind of agree with that, or pay homage to it, they don't really like it. So you've got to find ways, either finding distributors who are intelligent and, sometimes you'll find a distributor who shares your views, but they'll say 'but you know my boss, I've got to answer to the board. My hands are tied.' So the only hope you've then got is if you get into a Sundance or something or a Cannes and it goes off.



(Tape changes sides)

The other argument I always love and I think it's totally valid, is that if we're making films now for young men between 16 and 24, which is really what we're doing, even though there'll be films like *Titanic* and people are saying you've got to make it for 13 year old girls, largely it's for boys. But they are sophisticated. They don't want easy answers, they know life is complicated.

RS: They watch *The Simpsons*!

CN: Exactly. They know that morality is a complex issue, that characters can sometimes be deeply conflicted. And they can keep all that in their head, just like they can keep complicated imagery and sound and you know, they've got fast reflexes because they're playing stupid games all the time. There's no need to be so conservative when it comes to film narrative. But what was I talking about? Autonomy. Autonomy, you get what you negotiate. That's the rule. Whether it's the AFC or whatever. I find that you've got to build a relationship with these people. They're more or less our industry. So you have to find a project coordinator who you have empathy with, and for, and work together, just as you would a studio executive. So that relationship you duplicate for the rest of your life. So it's a good idea not to think of the funding body as the enemy. They are there to help you and you know, yes they'll have concerns. They've got people to answer to too, and you must understand that.

RS: Mm.

CN: And then, the question of autonomy is to do with your relationship with your producer, and that is, that's the most critical relationship, I think.

RS: It's very different from artists in other fields isn't it, where you do, at the end of the day it's your painting or novel.

CN: Exactly.

RS: But this is collaborative.

CN: That's true, and as technology enables us to have fewer and fewer people involved, and makes filmmaking cheaper and cheaper, I think you'll find that there'll be more and more auteurs popping up all over the place, more writer directors, or producer directors, and people going the other way. In other words there won't necessarily be this triumvirate. You'll have one or two people being a creative team. It will probably be a great leveler actually. As production becomes cheaper, so there's not, the stakes aren't as high.



RS: It's very interesting isn't it because I guess I wouldn't have predicted that it would necessarily be such a democratising thing, the new technologies.

CN: I hope it is. But also the distribution. If you're able to distribute your film on the net, you're bypassing all those people and those middlemen to collect all your dollars. So suddenly, I think, I would like to see the landscape completely change. I reckon there'll come a day when you can make a feature film for your HSC.

RS: Mm.

CN: It will be good to break down all these monopolies. And really challenge them to be fairer to the creators, because really, and the Americans have got a lot to answer for in this regard, by turning filmmaking into a factory, into a bulk, what do you call it?

RS: Sausage machine?

CN: I'm trying to think of a kinder word. You know factory line I guess, they're there to exploit the people who make the product, and we're trying to even that up a bit. Trying to empower writers and directors about their rights, and try to find producers who don't think it's obscene to profits with the originators of the project.

RS: Is that...?

CN: Yes, absolutely. This is a big thing. You know, the Robert Connellys and John Maynards and Jan Chapmans of the world, they protect you. They do what's fair. There are other producers who think you're a joke for doing that. You're there to exploit these people, not to be fair to them.

RS: Mm.

CN: And when you're a director and a writer, for example Lexie and I, we had to sign over all our rights to the producer, so I could have been fired from the project, and had it not been an AFC funded film, who'd developed me as a talent, and so therefore their allegiances were naturally with me, and Alexandra as a first time screenwriter, um, I could well have been fired off my own film. So why are we asked to sign these contracts? Because SPAA says, and distributors say, 'oh no, we need to know the producer can do whatever it takes to protect our dollar and if that means firing you and the writer, then so be it.' I remember even on my first film, Glenys saying to me, after I signed the director's contract, she said, 'Cherie, you know that now I'm the producer of the film, and the film's greater than me needing to look after you.' I remember going



away and thinking 'That's a bit nasty'. I mean she wasn't being nasty, she was being totally realistic.

RS: Mm.

CN: But I remember walking away and thinking, well that shouldn't be the case. We should be even-steven. We should all be in this together. You shouldn't be allowed to be one of them because you will compromise the film and compromise me. Not that she ever did that. She wouldn't. Because she's another one of these good producers that everyone wants to work with.

RS: It's the same with writers isn't it? I think I went to something, who wrote *The Boys*?

CN: It was a play originally and eventually Steven Sewell came on board and did the final drafts.

RS: Yeah, yeah. It was some conference he was talking about writer's rights and, how especially the Australian film industry gives no respect to the writer. I mean I don't know if this is true, but, um, once your words are sold, you'd think if the film went on to make a lot of money, maybe it should trace back to you.

CN: I think the writer's in a very difficult position. I think – I know writers say that, that they're treated very badly. My experience is that they're treated no more badly than anyone else, and actually, there is an end to their pain, whereas a director's pain can go on for a very very long time. So in some ways they're very lucky, that once their film is produced they get their money. And really if you've got any understanding of the filmmaking process and you like the director that you're working with, and trust them, and hopefully you trust the producer as well, they may be the same person, I don't know. You should be able to walk away feeling good about it. And I don't know why actually you'd want to stay on to rehearsal stage. You should go away and write your next film. Don't worry about it. That's my theory. What writers get upset about is the possessory credit and um, Lex and I had a ding-dong about that, but I took a possessory credit not because of anything she did, but because I was so pissed off with my producer,

RS: What is the possessory credit?

CN: 'A film by...'

RS: Okay.

CN: In another situation I probably wouldn't have bothered. Um, but I do, as a result of that experience, for instance my next project, you know I would only split the rights with the



producer on that because I found the book. It's my relationship and my project, and I'll maintain a producing role, um if not in that credit, I will maintain ownership of that script so I am in effect executive producer. In other words I can't be fired from my own film. Because that's what I'm trying to protect.

RS: Mm, so you said the other day on the phone that the AFC probably wouldn't have wanted the project if it was a normal genre romantic comedy?

CN: No. If it was a normal romantic comedy it ought to be able to get up in the marketplace. They were only interested in it – that was the difficulty, particularly with my fight with Beckers, and why it seemed so unfair to me, that it took as long as it did, the only reason they put the money in there was because we broke all these rules, it was an anti-genre piece. Otherwise they would have had a lot of people to answer to if they'd funded a you know, a boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back story. That's not what they're there for.

RS: It's interesting when you read their objectives, to tell Australian stories, to foster creativity and um, artforms that maybe are not funded by the market.

CN: And they do do that.

RS: And yet they're kind of expected to produce films that are big financial hits as well.

CN: Good point. Very good point. And so there needs to be more of a meeting between...I was so sick of reading about how the problem with the Australian film industry is that directors and writers aren't aware of their audience. I just...that's just crazy talk. How is it that it's our fault again all of a sudden? Again, they're making up – there possibly is an argument that we make too many dark films, that we should be making happy films, or the phrase I really hate is 'the quirky Australian comedy.'

RS: Oh, I hate 'quirky' – it's a word that's just gone now.

CN: When you think of quirky describing *Muriel's Wedding* or *Strictly Ballroom*, there's so many other words you could use, like eccentric, idiosyncratic. Not quirky. It's such a desultory word to use isn't it? And there's also this illusion that comedy's easy. You know Orson Welles said that comedy is considered a second class tourist entertainment, and that attitude is really pervasive I think particularly with film critics. I know a lot of film critics who I think write brilliant reviews of dramas, and give them a comedy and they almost dismiss it



every time. Unless it's something crazy like *Being John Malkovich*, and they have to sort of...

RS: Did you see that?

CN: I loved it.

RS: Yeah. I really loved the first 40 minutes was just so fresh and delicious, but it kind of lost me towards the end.

CN: I was just, I just sat there and thought I can't believe this got made. But it got made because it had huge names attached to it. See that's what you do, if you want to break the rules, and now they want famous people in your films all the time and you just can't get them. They're very difficult to get. They're off doing their own thing.

RS: Mm.

CN: What else can I say about autonomy? I think that's probably covered it. It's about the relationship with the producer and um, from then on it's a compromise. But you can just, you have to aim at getting a hundred percent of your vision on the screen but you probably won't get it, but you can just try and get as much as you can, and accept that until you can make the film entirely on your own, with your money, then you're going to have to play by those rules.

RS: And if the right project came along, and the right freedoms, you'd consider working elsewhere?

CN: Or vast sums of money. It's amazing how much difference being paid to work on someone else's project makes. You know you can spend six months on something – I worked on, Lexie and I worked on an adaptation of a low budget independent American film, and I ended up wasting eight months, and I got paid very little. And I thought, 'I wouldn't be so bitter about this if I'd been paid a lot of money.' I would have walked away and thought 'great, I can buy a new car.' In Australia you're so used to working and virtually paying to do what you do.

RS: It's supposed to be a privilege to just be there, doing what you're doing because there isn't this culture of, there aren't very many people who are making a lot of money out there, so when you get into it I suppose...do you think many young film directors getting into it now imagine they'll hit it big?

CN: Yeah, I do, and I think that they need to...I try to, whenever I'm asked to talk to students, I always try to give them the real picture, even though it comes across sometimes as being pessimistic.



RS: You'll probably be on the dole at certain periods of your life.

CN: You'll be on the dole a lot. And you have to understand that you'll never make money making Australian films here. If you have a breakaway hit, and you've got some back-end, you might make some money. But you think of Stephen Elliot. They gave all the points away, more or less, I think – you probably should check that – but you don't often have back-end participation in order to get yourself there. You might be lucky say if you made *The Piano*, and you have private investors and have real back-end as opposed to studio back-end that doesn't exist. So in other words you're only making your fee. Your fee might be \$50,000, for what amounts to four years work. You're not going to make money doing that. You're going to be living like a student until you're very old. That's why I make commercials. It's only when I make commercials that I can see a way that I can live in Australia, otherwise you've got to go and go to America and make a telemovie or something to earn, because you've got to pay for your funeral, you know. And I don't know how anyone does it who has children. People who I know who make livings as directors, are either in the TV directors pool which consists of about five people, or people who make commercials who have been lucky enough to break into that. People like Rowan or Sam.

RS: A lot of film directors would do commercials?

CN: Oh god yes.

RS: To pay the bills,

CN: Yes, but also because it's enjoyable.

RS: Yeah, there's a lot of creativity available there, within the confines of what you're trying to do.

CN: Yeah. You have to realise that the filmmaking, yes you might be doing it, yes you might be lucky enough to get a runaway hit, yes you might have some profit participation in or it will launch you in the international scene and you'll be able to get your films financed more easily. Clearly that's an option, and you know, your fees will go up, but living off your fee, so in order to increase your income, if you have any income at all, your film budget has to go up. Now our film industry has been marginalised into a low-budget film industry, and so there's this attempt to get it back up to the 5 million mark. Well if you think of films like *Muriel's* and *Strictly Ballroom*, they were all over 3.5. I made my film for 2.2. I still couldn't shoot on 35mm.

RS: Amazing.

CN: And those films had much much more money eight years ago. So you know, you're being asked to, you're being expected to deliver more for less all the time. So that limits the kinds of



films that you can make too. You know if you've got a grungy kind of a subject matter, then you can go that route, and it won't...

RS: You won't go for special effects,

CN: Yeah. Our film was a middle-class anti-genre kind of film, so it really probably would have benefited from a bigger film look, and I think we probably copped some criticism because it didn't look like *My Best Friend's Wedding*.

RS: Well, that's interesting because in many ways that was an anti-genre film as well.

CN: Oh yes. PJ Hogan's very clever.

RS: I really liked that actually. That was a film I saw with my mother and she was devastated by.

CN: What about *Muriel's Wedding*? Has her going off with her crippled friend as a happy ending. Upbeat music. And *My Best Friend's Wedding* she gets to sing a song with her best gay friend. Anyway.

RS: It's interesting that it's an Australian director that did that, because I think in Australia there is no great romantic tradition – not between men and women anyway.

CN: No, well you think about *My Brilliant Career*. That was a very romantic film, with an anti-romantic ending.

RS: But we don't have this great tradition of the couple.

CN: Romantic comedy,

RS: Well no, or even of the man and the woman having these great deep even dark European type...

CN: True.

RS: Lots of men and men, men and horses.

CN: That's right. That's what the French make, relationship films.

RS: That's why *Love and Other Catastrophes* kind of struck me because it did tap into screwball conventions, and that was really nice.

CN: Yeah, which we were trying to do too.

RS: Yeah.

CN: But you're right. That was more on the money.

RS: But I really liked your film the way you set up the scene so they were on the picnic rug, sun's shining, and he say's 'You've got beautiful hair,' 'it's from a bottle'. You know. The



cat has kittens. What happens to the kittens? They got put down.

CN: The reality behind it. Nothing is as it seems.

RS: Yeah.

CN: Did she [Alexandra] say anything you might want me to comment on. There's a big difference between her interpretation and my interpretation of the film. The sort of interaction between the writer and director is interesting as well. I like her characters more than she likes them, for example. She writes types, she doesn't write people. She considers that to be my job and the actor's job. She doesn't like explaining anything. She says, 'that's your job' because her authorial point of view is the only thing that really concerns her. There is a lot of room for me and, particularly Richard, to colour in the characters and add some dimensions to his character. More real I guess. Once she had someone say 'none of your characters are likeable' and she said, 'that's not my job. That's the job of the actor.'

RS: She's a funny one. You said she's quite Victorian in some of her ideals, and yet she's an unconventional woman. You know, we were talking about how I'm with this man and we want to have a child eventually. We want to stay together, but we're not going to get married. Because we've both been married, and we feel like that's a tainted situation for us. And she was like, 'you have to get married because, I really think you should. Because men will just turn on you, and that marriage will produce some sort of security. And weddings are great.' And I'm like, 'I hate weddings'.

CN: Yeah. She loves a wedding. But also it's interesting she has that point of view because marriage hasn't been a protection for her on any front. So yeah, she's complex. You just can't predict.

RS: She longs for it. I think she'd really like to have another wedding. Whereas for me another wedding is my personal version of hell.

CN: She thought if we just ran the wedding scenes of Cate and Richard going to a wedding everyone would go, because there's a whole genre of wedding films and people just love a wedding. And I think that's true actually. But they never wanted to...

RS: It was kind of marketed as a wedding film

CN: Was it?



RS: I love wedding films. I don't want a wedding and I don't really like going to them, but there's something very appealing about brides, the image of brides on the screen.

CN: Mm.

RS: It was interesting because your film didn't end with the bride. It started with the bride, and ended with the bride getting pissed and tripping over her train.

CN: (laughter). That's right. And that scene where they're trying to do the bridal waltz and she just looks at her mother like. 'Whaaa!'

RS: It's very funny. And the wedding coordinator. She's great.

CN: Oh, Jane, yeah.

RS: So what's your next feature project – if you're allowed to talk about it at all?

CN: Well...I've been developing a film for a couple of years which is an adaptation of an Australian memoir, *Dreamtime Alice*, written by Mandy Sayers.

RS: Oh, Okay. Does that have Cate Blanchett?

CN: Cate was attached. But unfortunately it's taken too long and she's kind of aged too much to play a 20-year-old. Not – I mean that sounds terrible, but she's kind of matured. And when we first started working on it she was right for it. But I don't think so anymore. So, unfortunately the writer's father, who was the other character in the story, was dying for most of last year, for seven or eight months, and he died just three weeks ago. So the film has been really interrupted by that, and I'm committed to her writing the screenplay. For better for worse.

RS: Has she written a screenplay before?

CN: No. And she'll never write one again, either. I think this has killed her forever wanting to do one, because it's trying to satisfy so many different opinions and they can't all be satisfied. In other words it's like directing. Your role. So um, we're just, I'm just patiently waiting for her to till she can pick it up again. We've got to, so we'll take it on to the next stage. Soon I hope. See life has a very annoying habit of interfering with art.

RS: Yes. Yeah.

CN: But you know, the story kept writing itself. That was the whole thing. It's about, it's another love story. The ultimate love between a parent and child, how to some extent that story plays itself out forever and ever in your life.



RS: Mm.

CN: The greatest love story ever. This very unusual love story between father and daughter.

RS: They went tap-dancing around the States didn't they?

CN: Yes a very unusual father to say the least. He remained so until the end. Quite a character.

RS: You've got funding for that?

CN: We've had script development funding and that's Jan's job to take that to the next stage, Jan Chapman.

RS: And how have you found having Fox setting up in Sydney?

CN: It's completely irrelevant to my life. It doesn't have anything to do with me and I wish them all the best. I'm glad they're there and giving some of my good friends lots of good work and money. It has nothing to do with me. Unless I get a star attached to my next project and then no doubt they'll put their hands up, because it's just so celebrity driven, the industry at that level.

RS: You don't think it's going to um, produce a drain on technical and production people?

CN: Look if it does it will be good, because it will mean other people will get a crack at making films. I think it's apples and oranges. I don't think one...the only threat it poses is if people, and particularly the government, perceive that that will replace the national industry, that's where the problem is. It has nothing to do with our industry. It's just cream, if you like. So that's where the problem is.

RS: I guess one of the things I sort of feel a little bit maybe resentful about is that, you know, we've had what, thirty years of government support of our industry, setting up the infrastructure, and then now we've got people from overseas coming over, taking advantage of that and making huge profits, and we're the Mexican labour of the industry.

CN: Of course. But it's been Groundhog Day for the Australian industry since 1926. If you read the Royal Commission into the film industry, nothing has changed. And sometimes, when I get really hard, I think, 'well, maybe it's got to die. Maybe it has to die again before people realise they care about it.' It shouldn't be – why is it a political issue? We have to protect cultural industries. We cannot possibly ever, in a month of Sundays, compete like any other industry. The government wants us to be like the wine industry, or like any other. But we're not. We're dominated by the Americans, and that's just the way it



is. So I say don't try and fight it, just find a way of working around it and I think we also as an industry need to be able to articulate our argument a bit better and that is what is it that the film industry contributes to Australia's brand name internationally? And it contributes significantly. Okay then, how do you measure that? We've got to find a way to research that out of the evidence to prove to the polities that, if you like, it's their marketing budget. I don't care. We've got to explain it to them in a way that makes them realise that however much they sponsor, 10 million dollars it's not, I'm not sure how much they pour into our industry, it's a fair bit at the end of the day, but...

RS: It's a fair bit, and yet it's not really that much. You look at what the budget is for the AFC compared with what a big American film, one film's budget, is, and 90% of our films are getting made for under a million dollars, or under 5 million anyway.

CN: And then SPAA or whatever turn around and say it's our writers, we don't have good writers here. Excuse me, pardon? Our top writers can look forward to earning \$32,000 a year. You might get \$8,000 for a draft of a script. And can I just tell you as a commercial director, you can earn that in a day. How fucking dare they say we don't have good writers? I just hate them so much. We have writers here as good as any in the world, and, but you can't pay them peanuts and underwork them and expect them to you know, it's just outrageous. We get 2% of our budget spent on script development, I think. And the English spend about 9 of 10 and the Americans 15, or something. You can check that. But it's those kinds of gaps. So Australians don't take enough time to write. Well fuck you, they're off busy washing dishes supporting their children so that they can write! If you're an independently wealthy writer or producer, it doesn't matter. But most of us aren't rich.

RS: Why are producers involved with film if they're so interested in making money and it's so hard to make money in Australian films?

CN: Well because at one point in their lives some of them did make money in the Australian industry, the 80s, the 10BA days, and the good old days. They would have been the producers of the revival.

RS: Is it the cultural cache, you know, some sort of a prestige associated with being...?

CN: The 'glamour'? Of course. And I think we're all attracted by that, and we all want to be applauded, and I think that's why we do what we do. But you know, you wouldn't possibly continue being a producer unless you were genuinely committed to filmmaking, and so it would be, it's a vocation. You'd be mad to continue it if you didn't love doing it. A lot of



people have managed to make enough money I guess to survive, and maybe invested in something else, and so they're able to continue producing. Like you know, one of the producers I worked with, runs family businesses, for example. And so is able to kind of have some career parallel to that. Other people have made profit on some earlier films, that you know, they've invested wisely so they're able to continue to be able to work. It's very hard if you're young though, and doing it. I guess you're chasing the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, that you will have that hit, or you'll get a big offer. But producers often say – and this has been said to me, that one of her justifications for not giving a more generous profit sweep, which was all academic anyway, but these things do matter, by saying, 'it's alright for you. You can go to America and continue your career there and earn lots of money. We can't. Producers can't do that.' I was like 'hang on, why not?'

RS: What makes it so easy for the director?

CN: Just run that by me again. Surely we're a global industry now. It doesn't matter if you're Australian. Why can't you...? Because you don't want to go and live in America? Okay, fine. Well, guess what, maybe I don't either.

RS: Do you? Don't you?

CN: No. I mean I love going there and I love LA. It's a fab city and I've got heaps of friends there, but I'm very happy where I live. It's my home. I don't want to...I was so depressed living in LA for 2 months. It was awful, and not because I don't like the city or the people. I do. But it's not home.

RS: We might talk about being global citizens, but at the end of the day, we've all got a home.

CN: There's no need for me to live there. I can go there and work and come back. Enough people do that. No big deal. This idea that directors can go and work overseas, but producers can't. That's one I've heard so many times. I'm sorry. How do you reckon that? How do you come to that conclusion? Why am I any more mobile than you. Surely...I suppose they say their attitude is, 'well, you can get offered a job, therefore you're not having to come up with an idea and having to fund it all the time.' But it's never as simple as that. You've got, you know your job has to come off, and that's one of the problems with the system. You can be attached to a film and work on it for three or four years, and it will never actually get made. So yes you might be getting paid a handsome development fee, or kind of concurrent development fees if you're attached to a



project, but you're not working, you're not directing. So you're paying a price in other words.

RS: Mm. And so you've been involved in the industry for about ten years I suppose?

CN: Eight as a director. But thirteen years of...

RS: Have you noticed any changes that you could generalise about?

CN: Yes, it's getting harder. Much harder. Definitely.

RS: Is that because more people want to do it or...?

CN: Yeah, well there never seems to be a shortage of people wanting to do it. It's getting harder just because our funding is always being threatened, and, although, look it is kind of a constantly changing thing. You know where some doors close others open and you're having to always think of new ways of doing things. So that's probably not a bad thing, because the best films comes out of the most difficult situations. I'm just so glad I'm not starting out now. I'm really glad I don't have to do that again. I mean you do always have to start again to some extent. With directing you're only as good as your last film and all that sort of stuff. It seems to me that, yes, possibly there are more people wanting to do it. But there are also new areas coming up, you know, with the web, and new technologies, and to some extent the studios coming in, and people perhaps becoming more interested in cinematography or other aspects of film, other disciplines within filmmaking. So I don't know. Maybe I just think it's getting harder. But at the end of the day I do what I do, regardless of recognition. As far as I'm concerned it's always been tough. It's just degrees of being tough.

RS: Yes.

CN: So I just do what I do.

RS: And there's nothing else you can possibly imagine wanting to do?

CN: No, not really. I often ask myself if I had lots and lots of money, what would I change? I think the only difference would be I'd probably own a house rather than rent one. Maybe I would produce more. But nothing else would change for me. Maybe I would not be so compelled to be a director. Because I quite like producing. I'd probably do a bit more of that as time goes on. Because directing is very hard work. It's so mentally and physically exhausting. The hours you work in a day. I mean I just did a three- day shoot on a commercial. And I have no idea how I ever got through seven weeks! And



that's another problem when you're a director is that your resources are pretty low and unless you're being supported, particularly by a producer, it's very easy to go off, and once you go off they'll be very happy because you've thrown a tanty and you can be officially labeled a bitch from that day forth. Everyone can feel justified when they dump the picture. So you have to be really careful about that, about protecting yourself, looking after yourself.

RS: There's a real art of the deal, creating a deal in which you can work and be supported and have some chance of having your film seen by a few people at the end of it.

CN: Yeah. And to get that sort of wide distribution at the moment anyway, you do have to have certain elements, whether that be a significant actor attached, or you know a sensational element, or a groovy look. You're always trying to think, 'how can I hook in a major distributor here?' And maximise my chances for a wide release. Because unless you get a wide release you won't make the numbers on that first weekend.

RS: It's such a business isn't it?

CN: Yes, the content's being defined by architecture. The multiplex, you know. It affects what you make.

RS: Because it's really hard to get exhibition spaces.

CN: That's right it's hard to get screens, it's hard to keep screens. So you can make a film that's really different, like *Go*, but it's aimed at that youth market. So even though it's fantastic, but it's about youth. You don't see films about older women, for example, on the screen anymore. Sydney Pollack said when he came out to Australia last year, and I was horrified to hear him say what I've thought for a long time. He said, 'really cable television is the only place for grown up cinema, grown up stories.'

RS: It's really tragic isn't it. Because young people are interesting, but surely with more years comes more complexity.

CN: And also young people are capable of being interested things other than themselves.

RS: Exactly.

CN: Let's not sell them short again.

RS: Yeah.

CN: So these things are happening all the time. It's interesting to sit back and it's a battle. People like Pollack say you've got to



make movies on cable now. Unless it's a thriller or...I mean you can make interesting films.

RS: Have you seen *Cut*?

CN: No, not yet.

RS: I saw it last week.

CN: Is it fun?

RS: It is. I really liked it. I was ready for it to be just crap, trash, and I told Alexandra this and she was thrilled because her next picture's going to be done by Mushroom I think, so she was worried if it was going to be crap. And I said no, it's fun. I hope it does well. It's really intertextual, it's really about films, making films.

CN: Like *Scream*.

RS: Yeah. You know, it's not a masterpiece.

CN: As long as it works.

RS: It's entertaining and it works. It's Australian and yet it's broadly appealing. So I'm interviewing Molly Ringwald next week and that'll be fun. She's just like...She left at the height of all her success I think, and just decided, 'nup'.

CN: Her father's a blind musician. I think Warren Beatty had a big crush on her too.

RS: Did he?

CN: He likes Redheads. It's just gossip.

RS: Was it you or maybe it was Samantha Lang who wrote an article in *Vanity Fair*?

CN: No, Shirley Barrett.

RS: That's right, about Warren Beatty,

CN: Yeah, that's a funny story, inviting her for dinner. Hilarious.

RS: Okay. I've guess you've sort of touched on it, and I can imagine what your answer might be, but you know why do you think it's important to have a national film industry?

CN: Because, I just can't imagine a world where the only cinema and television we see is American. We are very different people. It just gives Australians a very false view of the world. And why do we want a monoculture in our world? Yes we're English speaking, but we don't need to have American accents or all that rap business. It's fabulous for them, but why do we have to have it? We have a totally different identity, and I think, you know we haven't touched on the death of Australian



television yet. Talk about funding, look what's happened to our television. It's completely... Since the ABC's budget has been slashed over the years, all our drama output has dramatically declined, and that was a great employer of Australian writers and directors and actors. It's just – that is a tragedy, what's happened with television. It doesn't seem to interest anyone, making television. When I was first working in the industry you had people like the Mackelroys and Kennedy Miller making TV and there was a lot of money in them. And do you remember all those miniseries that used to rate through the roof? It's not as if Australians don't like watching great Australian drama. They're hanging out for it.

RS: *Bangkok Hilton*, I loved that.

CN: Or *Brides of Christ*. Um, um, *Vietnam*, which of course launched Nicole and made Terry Hayes want to cast her in everything. That's how it happened. Cate did a lot of television. She did a series with Ernie Dingo. She did um, that other thing that's Sue Smith and John Allsop wrote, um, where she played an Albino about the migrant camps... I'm just terrible I can't remember the name of it. And in those days Jacqueline McKenzie got every film role going, so she did television and theatre, and worked her butt off, and eventually, the rest is history. That's just an actor. What about all the writers who made a living from working on television and writing interesting groundbreaking shows?

(Tape changes sides)

I think that – and I don't know if you'll agree with this, but there's something important about our evolution as a country. I think telling our own stories plays an important role in developing us as a country. We have to talk about the things that need to be talked about in order for our society to evolve and change. Telling stories, whether it be on the stage or in film and television, is really the only way of doing that outside – there are only some things, I mean you can achieve a fair bit with news and documentary and current affairs, I suppose, but the drama is able to comment and illuminate us in a different way. Perhaps a deeper way.

RS: It opens up possibilities of what might be instead of just what is. Even what...

CN: Yeah, and you're able to say more unpalatable things, get away with more in drama than you can in documentary. You're able to open up in a way that perhaps people aren't prepared to do in real life. So um,



- RS: That's interesting you should say that because that's partly what my thesis is about, narrative and um, how our national narratives are changing in response to globalisation. And I'm looking at films. And your film, I'm talking about it being in a dialogue with Hollywood romantic comedy, and it's kind of a voice from the periphery that's answering back to it.
- CN: That's very true. As opposed to being a bushranger story. That's very true. So we love American cinema. I'm not saying...I mean I love it. I'll go and see just about anything. But that doesn't mean we don't get to tell our stories. It seems to me that it is critical to us having some awareness of who we are, and what our place is in the globe, and how I suppose we can pitch ourselves to the world. That is, by being able to define and articulate what makes us different. There's no point in us doing the same thing as they do because they do it better. So you've got to be able to work out what that is.
- RS: Mm.
- CN: So, um,
- RS: It's good that we've moved away from the outback – I mean that had a place, in both historical and costume dramas, AFI genre films, that were great and I love a lot of them. But they're not who we are, now.
- CN: No, we don't all live on 2000 acre properties in the middle of nowhere, even though that's a really interesting and dramatic story to tell. Yeah, we live in towns and cities,
- RS: Suburbs.
- CN: That's right. And also because people don't read as much, I think film and television take on an even more critical role.
- RS: Well yeah, they're the narrative form of this age, really. The novel isn't what it used to be.
- CN: No, it's not so popularly consumed anymore, so...
- RS: In a way you could argue that television is even more important in terms of telling our stories because the masses are going to be watching it. How many people will go and see an Australian film? Well let's hope they would, but in general it's television that's really going to affect the popular psyche isn't it.
- CN: I agree fully. If only there were more opportunities. I was hoping for instance that in this recent broadband issue, you know, that was a sort of disappointing outcome for me because I think it should be a broad network. They shouldn't have a stranglehold, there should be content levels, um, for cable, and



if that happened there'd be whole new fertile ground for filmmakers and storytellers to come through.

RS: Mm.

CN: And now it's being put on hold again until 2006 or something. So that's my hope for television that cable kind of \*\*\* for drama. It has been in the states.

RS: Has it?

CN: Yeah. The HBO, in England the Channel 4 telemovie phenomena, BBC films. Actually it's a bit different in America theatrical, but still HBO has a huge audience. I can't remember what other, but there are some sort of broader channels that make family telemovies, can't remember what they're all called, but there are a few. Anyway.

RS: Okay.

CN: Hope I haven't bored you too much.

RS: No! It's been fascinating. Thank you.

(Tape concludes.)



## Interview with Chris Noonan

(This interview took place by telephone on 24/3/98.)

(...conversation before taping began)

Chris Noonan: The original accents for all the animals were very different to the final accents

R. Siemienowicz: That would have been...As far as the voices were concerned, did that upset you when you had to redo them and make them more acceptable to American audiences.

CN: It did initially, but once...in the final analysis, at least I found a way of justifying it, in that they aren't American American accents, and the neutralising of the accents in some ways made it more of a storybook world, a fantasy world, than, you know, as it had been planned, it was going to be a fairly British world, and um, so this made it more in the realms of the imagination, and I didn't mind that in the end. In fact it also meant that it probably did penetrate further into the rest of the world, and so you know, that's not a bad thing. So you know, there's an upside and a downside. In the purely purist art sense I would have preferred to have retained the original accents that we'd done a lot of work on um, and which somehow more purely expressed the original story, but um, at the same time, the new accents put it into another realm, so you know I think it's alright.

RS: Yeah, maybe I should just tell you a little bit about my thesis so you know where I'm coming from.

CN: Yeah, do.

RS: Um, the title thus far is globalisation and national identity in Australian cinema,

CN: How interesting.

RS: I'm sort of looking at films from the 70s through to now, and looking at some kind of industry factors as well as narrative themes that are coming through or not being continued or whatever. And my chapter on your film I've entitled globalisation and universal stories, so I'm looking at myths and universal narratives and the way that these operate within a global cinematic field. And um, so I've sort of looked at yours as the hero story, and Joseph Campbell and,

CN: Which it is.

RS: And then I've sort of contrasted it with – a rather unusual choice – *Bad Boy Bubby* – which I see as a very very different



film obviously, but it's a sort of Oedipal narrative, yet it's a coming of age story as well, and I'm looking at the different ways those universal narratives are used and um, yes, so.

CN: It's a very interesting subject area.

RS: Yes, it is and it's rather overwhelming and huge, and I suppose what I'd like to get from you is just your perspective on your position within Australian cinema, and how that's changed since you've become successful in the global arena, and um, some of your ideas about national cinemas and universal stories.

CN: Right, well, I think it's a very big subject area. Um, I think it's possible to make films that penetrate internationally – okay let's go back to basics. It's a very expensive medium to work in, and I believe that really you have to endeavour to make films that will recoup their money. I think – maybe it's just my protestant work ethic – but I basically believe that someone puts the money into films and film-makers owe it to the people who put their money into films, to try and make films that will repay those investors. I mean I think that's a good idea not just from an honour point of view, but also from the point of view of when you next come to want to make a film, um, it, you know, if your investors haven't been burnt then you're in a good position.

RS: But I suppose there is a big difference between recouping you money and making enormous enormous profits, like as far a motivations go.

CN: True, that's true. But at least I think you have to try to recoup your money. Um, now I mean no-one can predict what film is going to make an enormous enormous profit. There's just no-one – I mean no-one was predicting that *Titanic* would everyone was predicting that *Titanic* would make a huge loss, and *Babe*...

RS: Yeah *Babe*, although it was conceived as a universal story it wasn't really conceived as being blockbuster.

CN: Absolutely true. There was...I had enormous faith in it, I had enormous faith that it would communicate with people, even from the very beginnings of the writing process I just had great belief in it, but I never would have predicted that it would do as well as it did. On the other hand I wouldn't have been surprised if it had done twice as well, because of my faith in it, but one's faith in your – for me anyway – my faith in a film is about its success as a film rather than its commercial success. I



see films like *Ice Storm* – I don't know if you've seen that, an Ang Lee film?

RS: No, but I do want to see it.

CN: And there is what I believe is a completely beautiful piece of film making, a wonderfully successful piece of film making, which has bombed at the box office, hasn't been nominated for any awards, and so who can predict? So that as the sort of precursor, ah, the I think it's possible for films that really come out of the national mindset, out of a national cinema, that have a very one country perspective on the texture of life, it's still possible for those films to break out and be successful in the international arena. Um, so I don't think you can say that you have to strip your stories of all national characteristics before they have a chance of success internationally. For example, *Full Monty*, which is very very British, has done extremely well in America, and ah, and there are other examples. So you know, it seems to me that it's a very bad argument to say, "well we must strip our films of their Australian identity in order to maximise their returns internationally. Partly I think because when you see films where that has happened, um, where people have bent over backwards to incorporate American characters into stories or to make stories as neutral as possible, then they start to lose something as well, or they can, depending on the stories. So, um,

RS: Yes I suppose that is one of the things I'm looking at in my thesis is that globalisation entails these two processes. One is homogenisation, and the other one is an intense concentration on the local and specific, and um, you know it's not just the bland Americanisation of culture, it's also the interest in the smaller more peripheral, grittier...

CN: Well I hope that's true.

RS: Well, I'm actually wondering whether that's an optimistic position.

CN: Well it may be. But then when you look at *The Full Monty* it is interesting that that film has done so well. But it's a film that plays to doesn't particularly select out the British psyche to appeal to, but it is still very much of its place. The other thing about globalisation that I thought of just as you were saying that last thing, was that is that one of the effects of globalisation is to concentrate the power of the distributors of film. Um, and all through Europe and throughout the world really with a few notable exceptions of some big markets, the American distributors, or the American dominated distributors um do dominate the marketing of films internationally. And



that means that the bigger they get, the more natural advantages they have because they can spend up big on a marketing campaign and then just use it again and again and again and again in different countries, with maybe some minor adjustments. But they don't have to you know there's a lot of investment in a marketing campaign of a film for example, and if you can amortise that investment over a lot of territories, then you can market very effectively and get very elaborate campaigns together in markets that don't really promise the returns for such an elaborate campaign if you were just marketing to that territory on its own. The other thing about that, about the size of those American distributors is that they very often in the territories that they distribute to have strong links to the exhibitors as well, so in many ways they can control what um, control what films get shown in cinemas. And when I was in France last year and there was a lawsuit going on where someone was suing UIP for, in fact it was in the European court, for the practice of excluding local films – in other words saying to exhibitors, if you want Titanic, you'll have to take these other ten films and show them. So you know, using their muscle and their access to the what are international blockbusters, what are very attractive films to a lot of people, and using that muscle to flood the market with other product, so um, the bigger they get, the more powerful they get, the more powerful they get ...I mean that's real globalisation. Real economic globalisation of the cinema market.

RS: Yes well I see globalisation as primarily an economic logic, but there are small patches of resistance or cultural sharing that goes on while this...

CN: Absolutely.

RS: So what do you think is Australian film's position in the global market. Are we very very marginal?

CN: I think we're pretty marginal. Um, on the other hand, ten years of films that have you know a number of which have been impressive, or twenty years or twenty five years even, has created a following. So you know I think that ah well, people think...I think people think of Australian films as a certain type of film, that they're a little bit different, that they're a little bit off the wall, you know everyone uses the word quirky...

RS: Yeah, it's horrible isn't it?

CN: It is. And it's often used to sell Australian films internationally, so you know there is an expectation about Australian film with international with you know a population of other countries.



- RS: Is that fulfilling a sort of niche of semi-arthouse, product?
- CN: I think that's right. I think that's right. Yeah. You know no-one thinks of Australia as the producers of big international blockbusters, and I can't think of a big international blockbuster that was made.
- RS: Mad Max?
- CN: Yeah, I suppose Mad Max was really. But ah, you know we are semi-marginal. We're better off...for a start we have a huge advantage because we speak English and that allows us immediately into a whole lot of markets. Um, many of the non English speaking markets most of the European non english speaking markets are very accustomed to seeing American films that have been dubbed or subtitled and so that's part of a culture that they can cope with English-originating material. But the biggest markets in the world are the English speaking markets, so we have you know a natural entrée into those markets.
- RS: I've heard it put as a disadvantage. That's interesting. That we have to compete, that we don't have a national language audience that will specifically watch our films, like say the French do.
- CN: Well that's probably true. That's the down side to it. Yeah exactly. The following for French films is very strong in France and you know, it's not just cultural it's also language because it's very nice to watch a film without subtitles or that isn't badly dubbed. Um, but I do think that the balance weighs in favour of it being an advantage to be able to put your films out in English in their natural form.
- RS: Mmm. That's interesting. As a film maker do you feel any particular responsibility to depict our local experience or do you think that's an old fashioned AFI kind of philosophy?
- CN: Um, I don't feel a responsibility. I do enjoy films myself which do depict a local, a more local perspective, but I don't really feel a responsibility to make those sorts of films. If I were to raise money from governments here, in other words if the taxpayer was going to support a film I made, then I would feel a greater responsibility to reflect local values, you know, local culture. Um, even *Babe* I think, is a film that is actually a very Australian film. I don't think that the same film would have been made even if it had been made in Britain. Um, because I think it does reflect an Australian culture, even though the film itself is set in nevernever land, nowhere world. Um, and so I think even subtly one does project the values of your own



culture if it's a project that's been originated from your own culture. It's very different if you go to America and accept a studio film which the studio is going to want to project as an American product.

RS: What do you think are the particularly Australian qualities of *Babe*? Are you talking about the very sort of understated ending, um...

CN: Um no, I'm talking about its sense of humour, generally its sensibility. I think that's what people responded to about it. That's why it was successful, because it had an unusual sensibility in the world of film stories. It had a sort of wry sense of humour, which is increasingly being shown by American films I find, but you know they've learnt from the British and the Australians and the non-Americans I think. That's basically it. It's an abstract sort of quality to pin down.

RS: I suppose the inclusion of Magda Szubanski gives us as Australians a feeling of knowing that it's from here.

CN: Yeah, but that's not so much what I was thinking about. I wasn't so much thinking about satisfying an Australian audience as um, projecting an Australian ethos or something I guess. It's also...it's theme is pretty, you know, the success of the least likely to succeed I suppose is a universal theme, but it's also been traditionally a very Australian theme. You know, the success of the underdog.

RS: Or the failure of the underdog, but the celebration of that anyway!

CN: Yes,

RS: Yeah, I was talking to someone *about Strictly Ballroom* the other day – you've seen it I'm sure – how the ending, they don't win the competition, they declare the competition invalid, so nobody wins. Which I thought was very Australian, but there's the feeling of celebration and an upbeat finish, but it's on its terms. Um, what motivates you when you make films? What are your personal objectives when you're making a film? Is it to tell a story, or is it to um...

CN: It's principally to tell a story, but that is hardly an answer. Um, it depends on what my interests are at the time. At the moment I'm writing a script which is very much, coincidentally about globalisation, and the um, the surrender of governments to corporations. It's set in that sort of world where that's happening. And that's a particular interest I have at the moment, and so I'm sort of pursuing that through script.

RS: That's very interesting.



- CN: It's very much on your wavelength I think. Um, and I'm having a lot of trouble with it, because everyone in the world at the moment likes happy films, and the films that do well generally are very happy films, and the films that are a bit bleak...or don't offer a hopeful view of the world, people just don't want to know about those now. So, I'm trying to make what is essentially a bleak story into a funny story. Anyway, you know, I'm motivated by politics partly, um, and you know a myriad of interests.
- RS: Do you see yourself as an artist?
- CN: Well, you know, a commercial artist I guess.
- RS: It's very hard to separate those...
- CN: When you're really doing it well, with films, you can make art. When you're doing it really well you can do art and commerce together. And that's the balance that I'm constantly seeking to make. The balance between art and commerce. It's the essential connundrum of the film industry I think.
- RS: Yeah, well I've been using a cultural theorist called Pierre Bourdieu, and he talks about cultural fields and that a field is a separate social universe that has its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force independent of politics and economy. And I'm thinking well, you can't really have a cinematic field in those sort of terms can you? I mean, its very hard to have any sort of artistic field in those sort of terms, but particularly a cinematic one.
- CN: Yeah, I think so. It's just such an expensive medium, that's the connundrum. Um, it's a medium that in many ways logically lends itself to huge corporations making these risky investments. You know, unlike resources like coal and iron and that sort of thing you can produce, it's incredibly speculative as an investment, so it requires organisations with huge backing, either the backing of huge corporations or the backing of government to do that investment, usually.
- RS: Do you think that's a good thing, the backing of governments?
- CN: Well I think definitely, in the context of any nation other than the United States I think it's absolutely essential, if any sort of national identity in cinema is going to survive. Um, there's no question that Australia wouldn't have a film industry unless the government had decided back in the 60s to foster the film industry, and it wouldn't continue now, at least it would only continue in a fraction of the size that it is if it hadn't been for the ongoing backing of the state and federal governments, but mostly federal. It is part of what we are as Australians now,



- that we are a country with a film industry, and you know I think if governments tried to stop that process of subsidising the film industry now it would be met with a lot of criticism.
- RS: Yeah, well it's a very public face that we present to the world isn't it?
- CN: Yeah, and it is the popular medium of modern times, so...
- RS: But do Australian films get seen by Australian audiences. I suppose a lot of Australian films don't get seen by anyone!
- CN: Yeah, well that's true, that's true. But the ratio of success to failure for American films is just as bad. It's just that we make far fewer, so in any one year we're probably only going to have one or two successful films in terms of recouping their money. It's always been and always will be a risky investment I think.
- RS: I read somewhere that the large studios were trying to increase their profit margins by perhaps putting less money into blockbusters and betting on smaller kind of films that might make less of a return...
- CN: More profit but less return. I've read the same thing and I've seen the same thing happening but you know, all it takes is a year like this one, where the most expensive film in history probably gets all the academy awards, and here is an advertisement for what can happen when you put 300 million dollars into a film. So, is that going to turn them around saying, 'what we need next year is a blockbuster, get me a blockbuster. What's James Cameron's number?'
- RS: Yeah, what did you think of Titanic?
- CN: I think it's extremely successful as a piece of craft. And quite sophisticated in the way it appeals to modern sensibilities. You know, the girl rescues the man, rather than the man rescues the girl, sort of thing, um and beautifully made from a technical point of view and so on, but in the end pretty soulless and forgettable.
- RS: I actually thought the computer graphics were quite obvious. You know where they show the long shots of the ship and the people on it, it just looks like some sort of mathematical equation the way people are spread out on the deck.
- CN: I agree. I agree.
- RS: I expected more. I mean I don't really understand how difficult it is to do those things, so I expect very high quality.
- CN: Yeah, no same here. Yeah I could pick them, or some of them.



RS: Like the seagull that continually recurs. Some computer nerd had decided this seagull would help with continuity.

CN: Really? I didn't notice that one. It's good entertainment. It's good consumer entertainment. And consumer entertainment, they're not the sort of films that I love, but you know you've got to admire the craft of being able to make a beautiful piece of consumer entertainment as well. It's just not the sort of film that you would collect and hold dear.

RS: No, and what are some of the films that you hold dear?

CN: Well, the best film that I've seen this year is *Ice Storm*, Ang Lee's film which I think is a really startling film that has done badly at the box office, but it's a tremendously fine and inventive film. A bit out of the mainstream. Though I did like *Full Monty* a lot. Um,

RS: Are you talking about classic French Film or...?

CN: Oh, there's lots of classics that I like. Probably one of my favourite films of all time is called *The Tin Drum*, a Victor Schlöndorff film, which I just think is a miracle of film making. It's, you know, films that lots of people haven't heard of and many people haven't seen that I tend to like.

RS: You're working on a film with a Queensland director at the moment?

CN: That's right.

RS: It's a thriller kind of romance?

CN: No, it's not a thriller, but a domestic comedy, very wacky, with a writer and director who's a Queensland artist called Davida Allen, and ah who's never made a film before, who's never been on a film set before, so it's sort of a risky venture, um...

RS: Is it receiving government funding?

CN: It is, lots of it and from various sources, government and private. But ah...

RS: Is there any reason why you chose this to be your next project after *Babe*?

CN: Well, it's not really my next project. But really the film's being produced by Glennys Rowe, ah, and it's on account of her that I...she's the producer, I'm executive producer and being script editor at the moment, so it's not my film. I have no proprietorial connection with it. But I'm supporting it and doing some work on it and it's being produced by a company that I own, so you know that's my connection with it. What



I've been doing is writing, and reading incredible numbers of scripts that have been submitted to me.

RS: And are they crap?

CN: Mostly, 99.9 per cent of them are very well crafted crap, you know that ring the bells, and hit the right plot points and give you a slow moment when you want a slow moment and a fast moment when you want a fast moment, and have absolutely nothing in them.

RS: Um, how would you sum up a script that just grabs you. What qualities would you be looking for?

CN: Something that's a bit startling. Something that's a bit audacious, that...partly because when you read a lot scripts, which I do, it gets so boring, such a horrible process after a while, you just feel like you're being tortured. And something that sort of um, jolts you out of your complacency in one way or another, whether through some outrageous humour, or something...just surprises, something surprising. I think that's generally what people pay for at the cinema as well, something...

RS: To be surprised.

CN: I think that's one of the victories of *Babe*, that it is constantly surprising within itself.

RS: It is, very much. And I suppose now that you have your own company and a bit more prestige, well, a lot more prestige, do you find you have a fair degree of autonomy as far as working on the projects you want to work on, and directing them in the direction that you...

CN: Well, I have a lot on offer to me, um, at the same time, um, I now have...you know having had a big success, I now have more to lose with a sort of lacklustre film, and so it, you know, it's bittersweet, if you like. You know, I've been very reluctant to jump into something where I thought, 'well, that could be good, but...' but unless I'm absolutely sure I don't want to do it. Unless I'm absolutely convinced that something I can do that will be startling or that will be very audacious, then my inclination is not to jump.

RS: It must be quite scary.

CN: It is in a way. But it's forced me to write, so that's good. It's pushed me into doing my own writing which is good.

RS: Yeah, it's probably quite unique to have a director of your stature writing your own scripts and material – in a hollywood sense. It's more differentiated there isn't it?



CN: Yeah, it's less common. In Australia it's very common. Most of the really stand-out films, you know, at least the director's been a co-writer. I think directors make quite good writers. They maybe lack discipline to sit in the seat for too long, but they, you know, they make good writers.

RS: And what are some Australian films that you consider quite highly?

CN: Um,

RS: If any!

CN: Oh, yeah, there are some. Um, well I love Paul J Hogan. I love *Muriel's Wedding*. That's one of my favourites

RS: Mine too. Did you see *My Best Friend's Wedding*?

CN: I did.

RS: I thought that was quite interesting as an Australian...

CN: As an Australian American film?

RS: Yeah.

CN: Yeah, I thought so too. But I thought that – partly because I'd read the original script and I knew where he'd varied it, I saw it as two very different things that didn't quite marry. Like there was his stuff, that I loved, which was the musical numbers and stuff like that, the more audacious ingredients that I thought were Hogan, and then there were the sort of schlocky Hollywood plot which was very predictable and I didn't like. So there were elements of that film I really didn't like. But I really like what I read of his input.

RS: Did you...I'm sorry, I just lost plot! Okay, what else?

CN: I hate being asked this sort of thing. I can never produce the right example at the right time. And I leave things out which I think later, oh my god, that's my favourite film of all time! Why did I not say?

RS: Well, I suppose I better not take up any more of your time. Thank you so much for talking to me.

CN: A pleasure.

RS: It's been very very interesting and I'm sure I'm going to think of heaps and heaps of questions that would have been much more pertinent, but um,

CN: Well, you're welcome to ring again and ask, so feel free.

RS: I might do that. Just a final question. Do you you feel positive about Australian film surviving?



CN: Um, yes I do. Um one thing that we haven't addressed is the fact that Fox has set up here. I mean that's a real example of the global globalisation getting very close and I think there are dangers in that. Um, but...

RS: Are they becoming apparent yet, or...?

CN: Um, not really.

RS: We're not suffering yet?

CN: I don't think so. But it's something to keep an eye on I think. Um, you know what I...it's potentially possible that the arrival of the US studios here, to make films here, could be very damaging to the local industry...

RS: Or it could be really quite stimulating.

CN: Exactly. It's six of one, half a dozen of the other at the moment. Um, but I think generally as long as governments...I think in the very broad term I'm fairly pessimistic about the direction of the role of government in national life. It seems to me that there's a broad trend internationally, which we find, and individual countries find very hard to resist, for government to shrink, for government to withdraw from various areas that they've been involved in. When they start withdrawing even from healthcare and from the sort of what you would think of as the core purposes of government, you've got to wonder whether government is going to continue to support a film industry here. So I think there's likely to be, in the long term, a withdrawal of government support from the film industry as.. if that trend continues for the government to withdraw from...

RS: from health, education

CN: From life. It's a trend that I find extremely worrying, not just from a film industry point of view, but from the existence of...from a cultural point of view, from a view of the welfare of the people and the survival of democracy.

RS: Yes, I think it's a very disturbing trend. My supervisor, who is an environmental philosopher, sees it in those terms. As governments withdraw more and more, we have less and less control over our physical environment, that really it's nations that can make the most practical environmental movements.

CN: Yes, I agree completely with that. And I think that it's dangerous times that we live in. But, you know, I think what's likely to happen is that, if the trend continues, and I see no sign of it abating, and I see all kinds of barriers to any government of any nation resisting the process of globalisation,



ah, you know you can see how much countries get punished for their resistance to globalisation. You look at Asia at the moment. Then I think it's very likely that government subsidy of the film industry is going to decline. And then you see Fox and other American studios slowly courting the Australian film scene. And I think very likely what we'll find over time is the corporations where real power in the international film scene resides will slowly start to take over some of the functions of government in terms of film financing. And that could be a very dangerous thing. If on the other hand, maybe they'll be extremely clever and say the reason we're coming in here is because we want that local flavour and maybe they will foster it. But there is the real danger that we'll just become more and more and more Americanised in our output, because those selecting which films get made don't have those sorts of cultural imperatives at the forefront of their mind.

(Tape concludes.)



## Interview with Rolf de Heer

(This interview took place by telephone on 14/02/00)

- R. Siemienowicz: Hello, how are you?
- Rolf de Heer: Okay.
- RS: Busy in the cutting room?
- Rolf: Oh yes. We're cutting a terribly complicated sequence. Terribly complicated.
- RS: Is this the film you were doing in South America?
- Rolf: Yes, that's the one.
- RS: Okay. Will it be ready next year?
- Rolf: Who knows, you know. It will be ready when it's ready. April I suppose.
- RS: Thanks very much for taking the time to talk to me.
- Rolf: That's alright.
- RS: I mentioned in my letter that I'm doing my thesis on Globalisation and Australian cinema, and looking at, well it's a dual focus, looking at the stories that we're telling, and some of the factors that influence the way we tell those stories. So I'm looking at your film *Bad Boy Bubby*, in terms of it being a universal narrative that's set in a local context, and I'm just wondering if that's how you conceived of it, as being a new take on the Wild Child/Coming of Age story.
- Rolf: Um, okay, it's a question of how one goes about these things, and what are the things that form a story that one tells. I'd have to say the simple answer is no, because that's not how I think. I don't sit down and think, 'I'm going to use a universal this' or anything like that. The script's evolution and therefore the evolution of the ideas in it and how to tell that story, took a very long time. It's quite the longest I've spent on something. It had a particular and almost strange evolution, where for practical reasons, what I tend to do is I have a problem, and then I try to solve that problem. Not just solve that problem but use that problem as a strength. I think, 'okay, I've got this problem. How do I turn it around and instead of it being a problem, it becomes an advantage?' So, to give an example of it in the *Bubby* saga, when I started out with it it was, 'okay, I want to make a film.' Because I'd been out of film school for a while, and I thought okay, the way to do it is to make an



extremely low budget film, and so I...what I might have to do is shoot at weekends. Save up some money, buy a roll of film, and shoot. Save up some money, buy a roll of film, and shoot. Might take two years to shoot. Okay, then I have a problem. How do I get any sort of consistency in the look of the film? Because it's unlikely that I'd have the same crew for every weekend for two years, or particularly like a cinematographer. It's usually one cinematographer shoots a film and that's it. So, oh, it's going to be like a lot of little film shoots, where you organise it and, okay, the idea to lock him up came from that problem. Because by locking him up I could make it subjective to him, and by locking him up and removing any external influences, everything that he saw he would be seeing for the first time. So it could look like anything.

RS: Mm.

Rolf: So, my way into telling that story was almost like the opposite of sitting down and thinking 'I'm going to make a film like this.' In fact, it was the opposite. It was, 'I'm going to make a film, how do I do it?' Okay, there were some ideas floating around, but the practicality of how the story is told, where it is set and how it is set, come from solving just practical filmmaking problems.

RS: It's kind of like an enabling constraint isn't it?

Rolf: Yes, yes, yes.

RS: Total freedom can be just as constraining as total limitations, I suppose.

Rolf: Yep. Yep.

RS: Okay, so by the time you got to the stage of Bubby singing up on stage and singing with the band and telling his own story, was that storytelling kind of part of his becoming a complete human being, someone who could reflect back on what had made them what they are?

Rolf: Okay, let's look at that one. The actual, the reality of how that came about...okay, the reality of how that came about, compared to what one might think. The very Genesis of the film, the first idea about the film, was um, there was a friend of mine who was an actor who was at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts, because we were going to make another comedy together and for him to be the lead he sort of had to learn to act, so he went to NIDA. We never made that film, but still...Now he was in a play at NIDA called Buried Child, by Sam Shepard. He was in his early 30s and he played the part of the old bloke. The old man. And he was on stage from



beginning to end. And some friends came to see it, and said, 'when is he on? When is he on?' and he'd been on the whole first half, it was just that he was unrecognisable. It was an extraordinary performance. And still possibly the best thing he's ever done. He played Dodge, that's it, Dodge. Now, the Genesis for the film was, okay, Ritchie is amazing at being Dodge, so how can we use this? He plays this extraordinary old man. Now, film is much less forgiving than theatre is in terms of making someone who is 30 look like 70.

RS: Yeah.

Rolf: So, the idea became that he is in fact 30 but he pretends to be older, takes on the persona of an older person. That's how Pop came into it, and that's how the idea of Pop came into it, so that Bubby would copy Pop. And then you set up this almost this thematic of how he chooses to deal with the outside world, which is as Pop. But clearly he himself can't deal with the outside world, but as Pop he will. Then when he's on stage doing his music stuff – one of the other foundation points for me, thinking about the film, was perception and music, so to be able to use lots of different music, stuff that I really liked, this that and so on, natural to just start to channel him into a band. You know, get into that area. Now all those things put together is how we arrive at Bubby on stage for the first time. When one actually writes the detailed words, it has to have its place in the film, and has to have its function in the film. And then you come up with an answer that's not dissimilar to your question. Okay. Because that's what makes it work, just to do it. Nothing no meaning. We're in a position we want to get him into the band, he's a great mimic...now, the resolution of all those threads in that scene is that...I can't remember the question you asked but that's the answer, that's the resolution.

RS: Yeah, yes. Do you see it in any way as a kind of a kind of Oedipal story?

Rolf: I know it can be seen as one. You know the first six months of the existence of the film in public, I got asked endless questions about my parents and my mother! And I had to say, 'look I'm sorry, this is the opposite of my experience!' But that in a sense came, not because I'm interested in telling Oedipal stories or anything – I'm not disinterested – but that's not what it was. I had, in a sense, the starting point. He had to be locked up. He has to go out and pretend to be an older man. Pop comes into it. Okay who locks him up? How do we make this interesting and believable? When I say believable I mean in a normal suspension of belief thing rather than a complete reality, although I'm going to read you an email that I received



shortly. Um, so that's how Mom came into it. And then to fulfil the functions that she has to fulfil, it becomes...one of the readings of it becomes an Oedipal reading.

RS: But obviously that's not the impetus in telling the story.

Rolf: No, that's not what I set out to do. I tend to work, I say instinctively, but I'm really not sure that that's accurate either. I tend to work instinctively, although afterwards, when I'm asked I think, 'yeah, that was sort of in my mind,' like the intellectual explanation of it is made, and I think, well, I wouldn't have said that that is what I set out to do, but there certainly was an aspect of that in my subconsciousness, and I do sort of remember that vaguely in the back of my mind, that passing through and being part of it.

RS: Yeah, I think the more I research – I'm interviewing a number of directors – the more I realise it's very much about pragmatics – those aspects are often more important than they're given credit for.

Rolf: Yeah, but at the same time what we mustn't forget is that when we look at a film like *Bubby* and it isn't me, but it does represent some of the ways that I think about things, and that's sort of what I mean by working intuitively and so on, there's a lot more in there than on the surface I give myself credit for. I put a lot more in there than I give myself credit for. I can talk about it from the pragmatic point of view of how it happened, and yes, a reading of it that's not inaccurate, but it's so much the incomplete picture, because the...okay, the, well some of the themes in it are some of the things that I think about, or don't like, or do like, or object to. And they're much more deeply thought about than an analysis from the point of view of the pragmatic approach. Which is a sort of a truth. But they're much more thought about than that would give. I think it's an incredibly complex area.

RS: Creation is, I guess...

Rolf: Yeah, and I try not to think about it too much. For me it's such an organic process. Now, the easiest thing for me to talk about are the practicalities and the pragmatism, that end of things. It's much easier to talk about than...because you can tell stories, describe what happened. Whereas describing a thought process, and understanding that although I did this to solve this problem, what actually lies behind it is a whole lifetime of existing and thinking about the nature of life. Okay, why I make that particular decision to solve that particular problem, instead of a different one, I think that's where it is. That's



where the analysis ought to start. But the analysis gets so complex and it's much easier to talk about the practicalities.

RS: I was reading an interview that you did quite a while ago where you said that *Bad Boy Bubby* is as commercial as a film with a big budget and that you insisted on a low budget to make it more commercial. Um, what exactly do you mean by that?

Rolf: I guess it's one of my theories of filmmaking. People say this is commercial and that isn't. Well, I'm sorry, being commercial is returns weighed against outlay. So anything is commercial if the budget is low enough.

RS: Yeah.

Rolf: Um, and so because it's a capital intensive field of endeavour and you owe, in a sense, the people who put the money up, you owe at least a half chance to get some of it back, that's for me a sort of a starting point. So you think, okay, how much ought this film cost in order to give it a chance to be commercial. You could make exactly the same film for 5 times as much money, and it's as fifth as much commercial. So in the process of devising it I was, yes, at various times it was suggested to me that I could have access to far larger amounts of money than I did, but by then, firstly it felt to me that it would make it uncommercial. And the second thing is when you're already down the road and planning something, those sorts of things start to upset the balance of how you plan it. So if you've got a budget of 3 million then everybody is really entitled to be paid more than if you've got a budget of 800,000. And the nature of working on the film becomes different. The expectations are different, the pressures are different. And so on. So my preference was to stick with the amount of money we had because it was coming together as a shoot, and as a project, with the right sort of dynamic.

RS: That would be a sort of unique position to be in, being offered more money and deciding that...most Australian filmmakers would be in the opposite predicament wouldn't they? Of needing more money to finish?

Rolf: Or thinking they need more money. It's for me very much a question of approach. It was really interesting because yes, the suggestion to me was that yes we put the budget up substantially, that was early pre-production and the money was available to do so. It would have taken some recontracting and other bits and pieces, but it could have been done. But then in the fifth week of the nine week shoot, the Italian partner, Domenico Procacci came over and saw all the rushes, and it was the first time I'd worked with him. He was...he said, 'you



are creating a small miracle here'. He was then concerned that we would fall short for lack of resources. Not that there was any evidence that we would, but we had yet to shoot all the band stuff, and we had arranged for extras to be there in a certain way. It was all kind of controlled, but not conventional. And he basically said, 'Don't not do something just because of the money, from this point. Just give me a call and I'll send you the money. It will be there within a day. Don't think twice about it.' Now, for a week, it was extraordinarily difficult to shoot because there were suddenly no limits. It took me the week to work out that the reason it was a small miracle was because we were doing it in the way that we were, and this opening up of it, was the thing that began to paralyse us. Because suddenly you can begin to shoot more. And the whole thing had been running on certain disciplines, and once the disciplines disappear, you've got nothing... We could have kept shooting for another but it wouldn't have been the same, and if we'd paid extras from an extras agency they wouldn't have been as good as the extras that we got ourselves, in the way that we got them. So, yeah, it's for me quite important in terms of filmmaking, learning not just to live within the limitations, but how to make them work for you. What is commercial to me is very simple. And the film has just about broken even, and that's... I think some people are just on a profit and some people are still waiting for a little bit, so I think the call was pretty correct.

- RS: Yeah. So obviously you're not out to make bucketloads of money.
- Rolf: No. Certainly not. Not the faintest bit interested in making lots of money. I don't know anyone with bucketloads of money who is happier than... If they're not happy, they're certainly not going to be happier with lots of money.
- RS: The nature of the international coproductions that you've been involved with, how have you gone about setting those up? Has it been luck? Or the festival circuit?
- Rolf: With *Dingo*, which was the first coproduction I did and it was an official French Australian coproduction and it was set up in a certain way and it was in the only way the film could get financed, because coproductions have certain advantages to them. *Bubby* happened, lucked out on finding Domenico as an Italian partner. He suggested we might try and make an official Italian Australian coproduction, but that was too limiting. You start to think it's not worth it, the amount of paperwork that has to be done. So it was completely informal. He happens to be Italian with Italian money. *Bubby* is really the first film for me



that struck it big on the festival circuit. But the next 1,2,3 films that I made were all with the Italians. *Epsilon* was half Italian, half FFC, the same as *Bubby* was. *The Quiet Room* was 25 per cent SBS and 75 per cent the Italians, and *Dance me to my Song* was 100 per cent the Italians.

RS: Was it really?

Rolf: Yep. Yes. Because everything we did was interesting or got somewhere or made money and so they would just come back for me. Doesn't matter how crazy the idea was.

RS: Mm. And I notice that you're a commissioner with AFC, since 98,

Rolf: Yep,

RS: And how do you find the relationship between being a filmmaker and being within the bureaucracy now I suppose?

Rolf: Well, it's sort of interesting. I've also been on the board of the South Australian Film Commission for about five years. And it's...um, I don't find it difficult, because I straddle...I produce and direct and write, um, I have to have some sort of business sense and financial sense and I'm good at budgets and stuff like that. You have to deal with bureaucracy anyway, contracts, law, the whole bullshit. You have to deal with it if you're going to produce as well, and so being a commissioner, look it's just more of the same in a way. Except that you're sort of giving something back. That sounds sort of trite I know, but that's what it is.

RS: So you obviously believe in the value of the government supported national film industry, government support of national filmmaking?

Rolf: Yeah, I guess I do. I guess it has a sort of value. I'm not sure quite to who. But if I think about it broadly, about a nation's cultural life, and you know, a people's cultural life, rather than a nation's I suppose, it has a function ...I think it's probably more of a good thing than a bad thing, on that level. Yeah. I guess I do.

RS: But you'd probably be making films regardless?

Rolf: I'd certainly be giving it a try. I don't know whether it would be as easy to get to where I'm ...hasn't been easy, but it certainly would have been more difficult without government support. For that I'm grateful. Um, it's lovely, I love doing films that have no government money in them. It's sort of like repaying the government for the times that they put money in, and it allows somebody else to make a film rather than me



using those resources. If I can get away with not using government money, then I will. You know, it's a great thing.

RS: How important is autonomy to you, in terms of making the kinds of films you want to make? – I guess you've kind of answered that already haven't you?

Rolf: Yes, it's interesting with this South American film I've learnt a lot more about it. Um, because of the way that I've made a number of films where I deal with all the aspects of it, and they all feed into each other seamlessly - the producing, directing, the writing, are all the same thing. When you separate those functions it's just a lot less efficient. For example on the film that I'm doing at the moment, it was just catastrophe after catastrophe. It was incredibly difficult. And it's almost made me want to give up making films. And it's largely because ridiculously stupid decisions were made by people who place ego above the film. Their own ego above the film. Who can't know, and you have to forgive them for this, because they can't know as well as I do, how this stuff fits together, and why these decisions have to be made and how things fit together in this particular way. And why this and why that. They can't make those kind of balances in the way that I can make them if I make them myself, and when for example, on this particular film it's a French producer I haven't worked with before, the main financing company I haven't worked with before, now you know, they're used to working with directors who don't put it all together in the way that I've learnt to do, and therefore they have to watch those things and make their own decisions and keep control of it. Now that's the worst possible thing you can do with me doing it. Because I jack up. I think, 'this is ridiculous, this is what we've got to do and this is why...' and so it was a really quite difficult experience of waste and stupidity. It meant I couldn't do certain things that I felt had to be done, because all the money's been wasted on something I didn't want in the first place. And so in that sense, autonomy is incredibly important, because making a film is so hard, that without it it's that much harder, and it's just not worth it. I think I'd rather go and sit and write a book or something.

RS: I suppose that's why being your own producer is such a good thing, because you're not having to answer to somebody else. You already know what those constraints are and you've decided what they should be.

Rolf: Yes. Yeah. And you know, I'm cognisant of the restraints, if I screw it up, it will be five times as difficult to finance the next one, or to get that sort of freedom again, so I don't. And so



what I do is if I have a problem I try and turn it around. Can't afford an orchestra. What shall we do? Well, look, great idea we do this. Have a single flute player. And that's what we do, have a track and the single flute player is it. And it's brilliant. It's just turning around a disadvantage...working that way is just the way I like to work.

RS: So you've obviously got a pretty developed take on you know, the global film industry, what it takes to make a film that involves not just your home territory.

Rolf: Yep, yeah. It's all global now. *Bad Boy Bubby*. Okay half of it financed in Italy. Where the returns came from were broadly based. *The Quiet Room* was three quarters financed from Italy and...half the profits came from the United States, came from all these other countries. It is a completely global industry in most respects.

RS: Yet you choose to live here and make your films predominantly here.

Rolf: I live here. I've got two kids. They go to school. I enjoy the space that's here. I don't enjoy the lack of space in Europe. Yeah.

RS: South Australia by all accounts is a really up and coming place to be making films.

Rolf: Um, yes and no. It fluctuates. It varies. It doesn't really matter any more for me where I am. I could as easily live on Norfolk Island. I could as easily function as a filmmaker. I wouldn't be making many films on Norfolk Island, but okay, the last one we shot in South America, the one before that was here. *Epsilon* was shot all over the place. 2 days in Adelaide out of 150 days.

RS: Was that shot all in Australia?

Rolf: No, some of it was shot in America.

RS: So how do you think globalisation affects the kinds of stories that we tell in our films?

Rolf: I'll read you the email, which is sort of about telling stories and not understanding...look my answer is I don't know. In the end I don't know how different people take these stories. There are two things involved. There's me telling the story but each member of the audience receives the story completely differently. With *The Quiet Room* for example, I thought parents with kids would be its primary audience. It turns out that most adults identified with the kid, and recalled their own childhoods from it in a way that I didn't in any way expect.



Okay, I'll read you this email. It's extraordinary. It's written by the actor who played Bubby [Nicholas Hope].

*"I was out in the middle of the desert, Lightning Ridge to be precise, filming with Clara Law. One night we all go to one of the pubs – you know Lightning Ridge, opal mining town in Western New South Wales. I am approached by a local character, popularly known as 'the Ox' for obvious reasons. He asks me if I am indeed the man who played Bubby. I say yes. 'It is one of the town's favourite films', he cries. Then quieter, 'My friends and I would appreciate it if you came and had a smoke with us.' What the hell? I think. I'm here another week, no point snubbing people. So off we go. Four people join us. Mike, his wife, some other guy. We chat amiably and have a little but highly effective smoke. Then Mike turns to me. 'That film,' he says, 'that film was wild. Who makes films like that? An average film about an average family.'*

RS: (laughter)

Rolf: *It blew my mind. It blew my mind. I looked at him, wondering if I am the butt of some cruel setup. The others are nodding sagely. 'Average family?' I ask. Mike looks at me a little too intensely. 'You heard of Pad Thy?' He says. I refrain from saying it sounds like a Thai dish, though it goes through my mind. Perhaps it's where the name came from. 'Pad Thy,' he continues, 'was my father. He died two weeks ago and we had the biggest party. He'd killed about ten people around here. He'd kept me and my brother in a cage, hauled us up into the attic at night and fed us through the bars. Only let us out one at a time so's he could keep us in a headlock. Even when he screwed mum. Happens all the time here. And your film showed it. An average film about an average family mate. Should be more like it.'* The night went on from there, but I made inquiries over the next few days, and it seems Mike was telling the truth about his up-bringing.

begin... Now, just how that film was received, you know. I can't

RS: That's extraordinary.

Rolf: I can't begin to...to...See I think the question is more about how a story is going to be received, than how are they going to be told. And yes the telling of it is changing and it always does, but you know, look I just think I'll have a go and do it like this or that and it seems to work to me, and I don't...either people respond to it or they don't. And once people stop responding to the way I tell stories, however that changes over the years, and it will, because I'm changing - my kids are 11 and 7 - they're not 2 anymore, my attitudes are different, my responses to particular things are different. My storytelling will change. I'm not consciously thinking I have to do it this or that way. Once people stop responding to the way I tell stories, then either I



reinvent myself as a storyteller or I'm history. I don't tell stories anymore because it costs too much money.

RS: Mm. That's just an extraordinary letter.

Rolf: Isn't it?

RS: I mean you come up with this kind of grim fairytale and it turns out to be somebody's reality.

Rolf: Yeah.

RS: Do you...I mean you're in a pretty unique position in that you, at least with this film, and I think with the others, but particularly *Bubby*, which has made a great impression on everybody I've talked to, you've kind of overcome the divide between arthouse and more popular mainstream films, do you think?

Rolf: No. I don't think so. In most territories of the world *Bubby* was absolutely squarely arthouse. It was only in Norway that it wasn't. In Norway it was the second highest grossing film of the year. Beating all the American blockbusters. It ran for 12 months.

RS: Probably says something about the Norwegians!

Rolf: It does say something about the Norwegians. I'm not sure what! Um, *Epsilon* has never seen the light of day. *The Quiet Room*,

RS: Did *Epsilon* open in Australia?

Rolf: Yeah, they opened it for a week. They didn't advertise or do anything. They just opened it and it didn't work. What did they think? Um, that is a saga, an epic saga. Can't blame the distributor for that. One of Harvey Weinstein Miramax stories. It goes on and on and on. One of these days I'll write the book, and it's called 'Death of a Film: the making and breaking of *Epsilon*'. It's great. Great story. Um, *Quiet Room*, there were serious attempts in numerous territories to make it work, and everybody said it should work, and polls said it should work, and testing said it should work. And it didn't work anywhere. It was a catastrophe everywhere it was released.

RS: Really?

Rolf: Yeah.

RS: And yet critically it was quite well received.

Rolf: Yes critically it was extremely well received. Wonderful reviews all over the place. Great festival favourite all over the



place. I could have travelled for 12 months without touching Australia, just going from festival to festival.

RS: Does that appeal to you?

Rolf: Nah!

RS: It sounds hideous to me.

Rolf: It is. It's completely corrupt. A bankrupt existence. And *Dance me to My Song*, even more...no it did better in Australia than *Quiet Room* did. Better in France, but not much.

RS: It was out longer in Australia than *Quiet Room*?

Rolf: Yes, it did work better, but not beyond anything you might call arthouse. And look, the film I'm making now, who knows? I don't know. It cost a lot more money. It's got some actors in it that people might know about so maybe.

RS: Is that at all Australian financed?

Rolf: Um, 25 per cent.

RS: Okay.

Rolf: But it's got Richard Drefuss and Hugo Weaving. Some names in it.

RS: *Bubby* I think has probably been a great video hit – it has been seen a lot on video.

Rolf: Yes, a huge success on video in Australia. It seems to have been per unit sold one of the most profitable ones, if not the most profitable release for the year.

RS: That's interesting isn't it? Because there are some other Australian films that I've been looking at that did absolutely terribly at the box office, and yet they are video favourites that people go back again and again asking for.

Rolf: Yep.

RS: Do you see any of the proceeds of that?

Rolf: No, not usually. I mean in the long run if it was all – if everybody made their money back I would, because what tends to happen is the distributor pays an advance and then they earn so much money to earn their advance back, and then that money begins to split, goes first of all to investors, then you start to share, well...In the case of *Bubby*, for example, Roadshow paid a big advance, went wide with a big publicity campaign. They've done alright out of it. They haven't made a fortune with it, but they haven't lost much, if anything.



Probably sitting on break even point for them. Till it starts to make serious money, nup,

RS: And how do you think the field of Australian film has changed in the last 20 years since you started to make films?

Rolf: The field?

RS: Is there a field?

Rolf: I don't know. I'm not so sure. I don't know. I mean yes, obviously it's changed. 10BA was one thing, and you learnt how to exploit 10BA. Then FFC came about and you had to learn to deal with the bureaucracy and different systems, you change the way that you operate, or you go under. FFC is changing again. You know, it is...there is, for me anyway, the emphasis is more on money from overseas than it is locally, because I have a strange but interesting reputation overseas that one day I might make a film that will make a lot of money, so people are willing to keep giving it a try.

RS: Let's hope they keep believing that hey.

Rolf: Well, yes.

RS: It's quite surprising to me that you haven't made much money, because it's quite easy to equate critical success with commercial success, even though that's not often the reality.

Rolf: Yes. The last four films that I've made, the four films have returned in percentage terms, more than most other four films you could pick, but that's because most films lose money, hand over fist. Huge amounts of it. And they've been such small films, the budgets have been so low, that it would have \*\*

(tape changes sides)

RS: So why do you keep doing it?

Rolf: Why do I? Um, it's a privileged existence really. You get to do largely what you want to do, but more than that. You experience intensities of emotion that few people get a chance to do. Every day is different. You sit in the mixing theatre and a bit of music comes in and you think, 'My god, it's just right, it's fantastic, just wonderful.' The process is just so wonderful if it's not screwed up by incompetence I suppose. But, like Epsilon, for example, which is a sad case of a film that you know, it was 10 months of shooting...

RS: It was a major exercise wasn't it?

Rolf: Yeah yeah. The film has completely disappeared. Completely.

RS: It's on video though isn't it?



Rolf: Yes. Even that they sold cut price before they started. But to all intents and purposes the film has completely disappeared. And for ridiculous reasons, court cases and this and that and god knows everything else. But the process was so extraordinary, so wonderful. It changed me, how I perceived the meaning of life. Now, there's not a lot else that you can do that gives you that sort of stuff.

RS: Mm. So do you see yourself as an auteur?

Rolf: I don't think about it in that way. I suppose to some degree I am by definitions and so on. I am. That's okay. I just see myself as one of a mob who get together to make a film, and I tend to have the most to say. That's about it really. (laughter).

RS: That's about it for the questions I had prepared to ask you. Would it be possible to get hold of a press kit for *Bubby* if you've got one around?

Rolf: You'd be lucky. I have no knowledge of having one. I have no recollection of there being one or what it looked like. I know Roadshow must have done one. In Italy they probably did one. But they were my young and stupid days and I didn't know what the hell was going on. So...

RS: That's okay. I'll try the AFI.

Rolf: It would be interesting if you could find one there. Because there's all sorts of issues about funding the AFI of course.

RS: Well, yeah, the research centre is just a great resource. I use it all the time.

Rolf: Oh, good.

RS: Was there anything else that you wanted to say that hasn't come out in the interview?

Rolf: Nup. Cause I don't know what you want. I only want to say what you want to hear!

RS: Oh no!!

Rolf: No, you know I could sit here and talk for 24 hours about any or all of my films but I'm not sure what's relevant to you.

RS: No, that's good. As I said, I really loved the film, and I've got out a copy of the *Tale of the Tiger* on video which I want to watch.

Rolf: Oh, you found a copy of it!

RS: Yeah. Thought that would be interesting.

Rolf: It's very much a first film. It's got some nice things in it.

RS: And *The Incident at Raven's Creek*, I haven't been able to see yet.



Rolf: It's also hard to get hold of. I'm very fond of *Tale of the Tiger*. When I saw it again recently the best of it was much better than I remembered, and the worst of it was much worse! There was more good in it than I'd remembered.

RS: So which of your films do you feel has most fulfilled the ideas of what you were trying to do?

Rolf: In terms of achieving what I set out to achieve I think the most complete film I've made is *The Quiet Room*. Um, just in terms of starting out with a particular way of trying to do it. I think it's the most complete film. Bubby is one of the best achievements in a way – this is just me talking about the way I feel about it, but it's a bit more rambly and less straight forward. It's allowed to have its imperfections and its flaws and they work for it. And so I don't mind them at all. But somehow, *Quiet Room* was the...and in terms of the process, Epsilon was the best process. It was extraordinary. But you know it was a mad film, and it's a privilege to be able get to make mad films. So we'll see if we can make another one.

RS: Okay, thanks for your time, and maybe one day we'll meet up at a preview or something. Would you like me to send you what I end up writing?

Rolf: Well, yeah. I occasionally get sent things like that. I've got sitting on my desk a Kristevian reading of *Bad Boy Bubby*! Somebody's thesis.

RS: Oh my goodness, that sounds dry. (laughter). Thanks and all the best with the South American debacle.

Rolf: Thanks, hopefully something will come out of it.

RS: Bye.

Tape Concludes.



## Interview with Rob Sitch

(This interview took place in person, 12/10/00 in conjunction with publicity for *The Dish*.)

- R. Siemienowicz: What number am I?
- Rob Sitch: Number 1!
- RS: *The Dish* Looks good. Looks expensive!
- Rob Sitch: Expensive in comparison with *The Castle*. More in line with what normal films cost. *The Castle* was a bit of an odd one. *The Castle* was odd. I wouldn't advocate that people try and make a movie on a budget like that too often. Not on film anyway, because whatever you do on film is expensive. Even *The Castle* cost a lot on film stock. But moving to digital video and then you can edit them on a personal computer. The new Nikon camera is starting to...It won't be long. But you can't beat film stock.
- RS: It's really good to see some Australian scientists on film.
- Rob Sitch: Yeah, not usually, as opposed to sportsmen.
- RS: No. Have they seen it, the guys at CSIRO?
- Rob Sitch: Yeah, they have.
- RS: They must be pretty chuffed.
- Rob Sitch: They were. They really enjoyed it. Because I think that early on they always knew that - they're so used to being so exacting and so particular, but storytelling is not about that, storytelling is about the spirit of things. So I think it was a nice release for them to actually, to release themselves to be emotional and not worry about the detail.
- RS: I read an article in *The Age* about some guy who was at the Honeysuckle Creek station...
- Rob Sitch: Yeah, we were just talking about that. It's a bit of an old...it's actually a bit of a, that article I think incorrectly portrayed us as the arbiters of it. But that's what's been going on for 31 years.
- RS: Yeah.
- Rob Sitch: I think they all, I think one of the good things about this film is that I mean we credit the Honeysuckle guys, and there were people at OTC. I think everyone involved in the lunar mission



will be able to put up their hand and I think they should be proud. I think it's a fantastic effort, and those guys that we had dealings with, those guys, they were very very helpful, and I think after 30 years I hope they can point to somebody and say, 'in our heads, *The Dish* is about them,' they can all happily say that *The Dish* was one of those people.

RS: Yeah.

Rob Sitch: I think that's what the film does well too. I mean everyone knows that Leonardo di Caprio was not the main person on the *Titanic* when it sank, but he represented, you know, a thousand people that died.

RS: Yeah, well I read that article before I saw the film, and when I saw the film I thought Honeysuckle was mentioned at least a couple of times. So it wasn't like it was completely ignored.

Rob Sitch: No, and we had the attitude early on that we wouldn't be the arbiter of, we wouldn't use real names, we wouldn't be the arbiter of the facts. But in the promotion of it we would credit all the people. We know that it all happened in Australia. That's not in question. All the pictures came from Australia.

RS: Pretty amazing.

Rob Sitch: Incredible.

RS: That it's not more well known.

Rob Sitch: And whatever way that squabble turns out, the two dishes were 100 miles apart, next door to each other. It's funny, in fact it was so bizarre that it was useless for us, because people would have said they just couldn't believe it.

RS: Yeah. I was recently at the Robert McKee story seminar, and I noticed that you were there too.

Rob Sitch: Yeah.

RS: What did you think of that?

Rob Sitch: I think he's excellent. I think he's a really good challenge for people who want to write films. I understand that people would initially go to something that feels so much like art, and say that you can't teach art, but he's – You know what? I only discovered, I was only recommended his book, it was after we'd made *The Castle*, and after we'd done the early drafts of the dish, - but we'd had about 10 or 15 years of scriptwriting experience, and three chapters into his book I thought 'this is everything I know and more', so we came to it from the other end. So I've got no doubts that our respect for him is justified, because everything they we'd learnt, he described why it is. I



highly recommend him. I think you've got to do it in concert with writing. It's so dense. It's a reference book really.

RS: Mmm. Well I haven't even read the book. I just went to the seminar.

Rob Sitch: Did you enjoy it?

RS: Yeah I did, very much. Because I interviewed him, and got a freebie to the seminar, and it just made me want to go and write – it was everything I needed to go out start writing more, writing stories, because those principles are just, people assume they're just natural, but they're not necessarily.

Rob Sitch: No, they're not natural. No one teaches those principles. They're not natural. And yet if you hear a good story – you watch a film that you love you go back and watch the way they abide by a certain form, and really being aware of it we edited this film. Good scenes in *The Dish* had those classic characteristics that he's talking about.

RS: A lot of Australian films don't seem to understand the idea of all those little climaxes and...

Rob Sitch: I think a lot of films worldwide actually. I think he's right in saying there's a crisis in story, because I think it's easier – there's good reasons for it – but it's easier to say instead of sitting down for six months and agonising over a sequence of scenes that mean something, let's put in a car crash, let's put in gratuitous soft pornography of lets... You can see why people take short cuts. Let's spend 10 million dollars hiring Nicholas Cage for five scenes and we'll put him in a trailer it will probably be more effective than hiring another writer, so I understand it I just think it's a way to disappoint people.

RS: Yeah, and there's also that arthouse kind of narrative structure that assumes there's something more arty about having anti-structure, breaking with conventions. Doesn't always work. It's not necessary.

Rob Sitch: It can work, does work, but you've got to work to make it work.. As McKee says, every version of film structure has worked, it's just that certain, it doesn't mean that by merely doing it that way it's going to work for you. I mean He used *Pulp Fiction* as an example of anti-structure. And that made heaps at the US box office. It works, but I'd hate to try and write it.

RS: The thing that struck me about Robert McKee was that I'd been to the Dov Simons seminar a few months previously, and that was a completely different exercise. Very good



information, and very useful, but Dov Simons is just a real redneck really.

Rob Sitch: Is he?

RS: Well, compared to McKee who's a real intellectual gentleman isn't he, there's a lot of depth there.

Rob Sitch: I read the Robert McKee in The Big Issue.

RS: Oh, did you?

Rob Sitch: Yeah I was wondering how that got to be there. There's a guy who stands on the corner selling it round the corner from our office, so I generally get them. And I thought 'How the hell did he end up in the Big Issue?'

RS: I really wanted to go to the seminar?

Rob Sitch: Yeah, so you should.

RS: I thought this would be a great guy to interview.

Rob Sitch: Yeah, great.

RS: So where were you when you saw the moon landing?

Rob Sitch: I was with Kevin Harrington actually, we were at the same school together. West Footscray. He was back there this morning trying to get a photograph of the old schoolyard. In fact I just drew the map we were making sure that we were in the same room.

RS: Were you in the same grade?

Rob Sitch: No, we weren't. he was in the year above. It was such a big deal at the school. We were all dragged into the various collecting rooms and sat down and made to watch. It was a fantastic time. It's funny with Kathy Freeman. It was really good for us, for lots of reasons, but it was interesting to see the nation stop for something, to remember what it felt like for the nation to stop. But that happened all over the world, all for one. And I think everyone had their hearts in their mouths. It was a very close run. They could easily have all died. I don't think people...I think it was very courageous. Much more than anyone let on at the time. It was amazing that so few people died in the space program. They came close. I think Armstrong was nearly killed twice in the training. Once in the simulator and once in the generator room he span out of control, but pulled over and was saved. So it wasn't surprising that they chose him. He was a very impressive ex fighter pilot, very humble, very easy-going. It's interesting going back over that stuff. Looking over it, you associate the space program with a lot of machismo. But in actual fact the people in the Apollo



program, a lot of the machismo dissolved, and they were true professionals. They were true professionals. There were no cowboys left.

RS: Yeah, the film brought home to me just how fragile the whole thing was, even the getting the pictures, it was such a tenuous kind of, so many things could have gone wrong.

Rob Sitch: It was very tenuous. To their best estimate they had less than 15 seconds of fuel left after six hours, when they were circling the moon, in orbit, Armstrong disengaged from the command module, were in descent for about 6 hours, and on the way down alarms went off, and then when they were about to land they realised that from the earth it looked flat and smooth, when you got close in actual fact it was covered in huge boulders and they've got to land! So Armstrong took over from the computer, started hunting for a place to land while he was running out of fuel. They're the original tapes in the film, '30 Seconds', that's the original call that he's given, and you listen to it and you think 'he's trying to land on the moon, and the guy's telling him he's got 30 seconds of fuel left.' Very close. The guy in Houston literally had his finger on the abort button, and he was going to call abort. And Armstrong landed, and forgot to tell Houston that he'd landed, because he was so stressed, and all the telemetry came back and when you see the footage of they guys going, and then the guy, Charlie Duke, at Houston, said 'We copy you down Eagle' and Armstrong kind of woke up from a daze and said, It's so famous now. But what actually happened around it was so dangerous, and so blind ball. It's certainly an amazing thing to go back now with what we know now and listen to it. Very close run. It's amazing. And, take your hat off to the Americans, they decided to up the ante and televise it live. You know Russia came very close to landing on the moon too, but you know one of the biggest mistakes they made was not to publicise it.

RS: You know the Americans. It doesn't happen if it's not publicised.

Rob Sitch: You know what? It's great though. I've got a lot of respect for that. That's one of the strengths of their democracy, I think, when they are transparent.

RS: We're being told to wind it up? You don't get a very long conversation do you?

Rob Sitch: I'll give shorter answers.

RS: Um, so how come you get to direct these films? Is that because you're the bossy one in the team?



Rob Sitch: Yeah, the bossy one. No, we've all directed, I think we could all do it. Also, we prepare, prepare prepare. And I think when you prepare a lot for a film, directing is – acting if you prepare a lot it's fairly tedious process then. It's a very industrial – I think when actors prepare they turn up it and know it all. It just takes a lot of concentration, but it's not, there's no discovery. You've got to have made the film before you make the film. We story-boarded it all from top to bottom. There's a cartoon version of the film, beautiful storyboards, gorgeous thing. 300 pages of it. It was all done and all planned. All the actors went through a few read-throughs together, so I think everyone in their heads had made the film, so directing no, it's not like, for us it's not like American directing, or the Europeans directing really. We direct it, we make it before we make it on the day. I usually have one of us on a video split, watching all the takes, and then one other person watches all the rushes, so you're trying to get feedback all the way.

RS: So the rumours that you're control freaks are true?

Rob Sitch: Control freaks? I find it bemusing. It's almost like saying an author is a control freak? It's not an oxymoron but it's not far off. This is your job. You're not a control freak. This is your responsibility. It's a bit like saying because you're in charge you're a control freak, but that's your responsibility. That's all it is. I think with comedy too you have to be in control, because it's so easy for it to go wrong. The margin of error with comedy is not very big at all. Drama can be, drama's down the easier end of the piano. All the notes feel a bit soupier.

RS: But autonomy would be very important to you, as a team especially.

Rob Sitch: Yeah, but we don't have autonomy individually, because we're answerable to each other. So I think the accountability is still important. Checks and double checks are important no matter what you do, so we do that. That's why none of us have control, but I think as a group we do. And I think that's important.

RS: Within the industry though, for the creative process that autonomy would be absolutely essential.

Rob Sitch: To make it, definitely. But in selling, marketing, marketing a film is almost as important as making a film, and in that you bring on other people. I think it's good when people bring professionals in and try to marry it. Most things in life are complex like that aren't they? But marketing is important for Australian films and for American films. I think that's one area



where here we need to do a whole lot more. Not quality of marketing, just quantity of marketing.

RS: I notice you're on the advisory board for the film and television industry in Victoria.

Rob Sitch: We've just finished. We're all advised out! 130 pages. It's out. You're welcome to read it. Get yourself a good bottle of wine and get started. No, it's good, I hope a lot of it gets accepted. It's very, a really good process. It ended up being populated by a good bunch, people with a lot of history.

RS: Well, all the best with the film. I hope it does well, and I'm sure it probably will.

Rob Sitch: I hope so. I think it feels right. A good film to come out just after the Olympics. We're all sported out, time to go and see a movie.

Tape Concludes



## Interview with Clara Law

(This interview took place by telephone on 2/4/01, and was conducted in conjunction with publicity for *The Goddess of 1967*.)

Clara Law: Hello

R. Siemienowicz: It's Rochelle here.

Clara: Hi.

RS: How are you?

Clara: I'm good thanks. Just running around in the middle of things. But that's okay.

RS: Are you getting ready to go away?

Clara: No, we're leaving tomorrow. But it's just that there's one hundred and one things to do before you go, you know.

RS: Yeah. Yeah.

Clara: And last minute things that pop up. But that's okay, I can talk.

RS: That's great. I've been trying to find contact details for you for some time because I've been wanting to speak to you. You're not here in any of the industry directories here in Australia.

Clara: They probably find it hard to place me! In Hong Kong, Australia or Macau.

RS: (laughter). Congratulations on *Goddess*. I think it's a stunning film.

Clara: Thank you. You've seen it?

RS: Yeah, I saw it a few months ago at a very early preview. I really would like to see it again because...but visually it just stays with you. It's quite resonant. Yeah, one of the most painterly films that I've seen in a long time. Have you ever painted or done any of those more static visual arts?

Clara: No. Actually I think I would be a very bad painter. I would love to be a painter, but I don't think I'd be very skilful at it. I love colour and I love composition. Love framing shots. I've never tried, but I just feel that I won't be.

RS: I reckon you might be!

Clara: It could be my second stage! I have a very good painter friend, but not me. The strange thing is that when I try to remember things, pictures stay with me more than words. If



they are words, if I see it written, it stays with me longer than if I hear it from someone.

RS: Oh, okay, so you're very much more a visual person than an auditory person. You know how you can divide people into the...with an emphasis on which sense they primarily use.

Clara: It's funny, Eddie and I are working on a visual presentation on our next project, taking a lot of pictures on a reccie. We're selecting some photos to make a booklet so that you know, to show people, particularly people outside Australia who are not familiar with the landscape here. Eddie showed me some of the photos he had selected. I looked at it once and an hour later he was putting it into the computer, and he said, 'have I put this one in?' and I said, 'yes, you have, but that other one you haven't', and we'd both just looked, but I've got that all in my head already. If it's a visual thing it stays, but if we go out and try to find a place, try to read a map, I'm a hopeless case.

RS: I am too. I suppose moving to so many different cities you would have had to use maps in a lot of different situations.

Clara: Yeah, I think it's just me. All my brothers can navigate really well with maps, and I can't. But if you show me a place and I remember the look of it, I can go back there, and know that I've been here, even if it's just once, many years ago. To get there would be the hard thing for me.

RS: Well hopefully you've found your way around now.

Clara: Well, I can pass my home and forget.

RS: I'm actually studying the film *Floating Life* for a PhD thesis that I'm writing, and so I've seen it quite a few times. And then seeing *Goddess*, that's quite different. In what ways, do you think this is a progression from *Floating Life*, or...?

Clara: Um, I think you can put it that way. The thing is, I suppose *Floating Life* is for me a continuation of something that I've been doing, you know, themewise it's connected to,

RS: *Autumn Moon*?

Clara: Yes, the Chinese diaspora. I mean *Floating Life* is not just that, it's more about how we can find our roots in any circumstance, and how we can find our own bearings in very difficult circumstances, but *Goddess* is for me the first time that I have really dialogued with Australian landscape. And I think it started when Eddie and I went on our first outback trip, which was a few years ago. We thought we'd like to have a look at the country and not to just learn it through reading books or reading literature, to really have a feel for it through seeing it for ourselves. For myself I think



it's important that I see a place in order to understand it. It really is the heart of the place itself. The outback is really more Australian than say Melbourne or Sydney. I think that's more a city that you can connect to other cities in the world. But I think if you go to the real unpolluted, or not man-made yet, then I think there will be something there that will speak to me and I can communicate with directly. So that's our first trip. We took our first trip. I think it was a memorable trip. It was scary because it was so uninhabited and so very very different from any experience that I have had in the past. And there's something very different in the vegetation and the soil and the colour and the sky here in Australia. Different from any other place I've been. Different from China, different from...and for me it's a totally different experience and it stayed with me. When I went back for a second look, when we'd written our script, which was two years later, I felt then, my first intuitive experience was, um, very true. The way it was still speaking to me was exactly the way I felt the first time when I was innocent. And it's not – and when I say intuitive, I think that includes emotional and spiritual elements.

RS:  
depressing?

Mm. Did you find that landscape exhilarating or

Clara:

It's both. I think it changes all the time and there's so many layers to it. You can't just say it in one word. I suppose it's very spiritual. It's very scary. I think it raises in you all the fears that man would have when they first come to the world, I suppose, and because of the silence and vastness and infinity of it, it confronts you with life and death, mortality. And that's something that I have been very concerned with as a kid and as I grew up, as I grew older. I think more and more I felt the need to look into that all the time, and to be aware of the transience of our lives. And then that landscape raises that more than less – in the city you don't have to deal with it in the same way, there are so many distractions. But when you are out there, because of the structure of the geology, the colour of the soil or the structure of the rock, or the way the trees grow, the shape of it, all seems to be talking to me, saying that we are very very very finite and we do really just pass through here in the blink of an eye, and we're just very very small.

RS:

Yeah, *Floating Life* kind of dealt with that migration through life from birth to death, and some of the characters in that particularly were quite obsessed with their own mortality.



Clara: I suppose you have to, at least for me, keep looking into that again and again, how to live my life, how to live my life fully.

RS: Yep.

Clara: To look it in the face. To escape from that is not my way of dealing with things, and I think I have to constantly think of that and live with that before I can live my life.

RS: Yeah, I agree. You've said in several other interviews that you've found Australia to be a place where there's more of an attempt to foster the spiritual side of life. I thought that was really interesting because a lot of people find this society to be very agnostic and materialistic and without a soul. And yet you seem to have found that other side to it at least in your experience of living here.

Clara: I think probably because I live in Melbourne and Melbourne has more of a, has still retained a lot more of, something a bit like a village or a community, so it's not...it's developing to be more corporate and more cold-hearted, more severe, all of that, but I think there are some parts that I really appreciate living here and there's that other thing that we haven't forgotten yet. To be able to still take the time to greet each other in the street, to say hello. All of that. I appreciate that. If you live in a city like Hong Kong or New York you don't encounter that very often. It keeps reminding me that if men don't...the trend is that man would be having more and more of the lifestyle of the city, which I think, um, really is not good for our soul. And I think here in Australia you should still be able to find that, if you just take the time to look around, take time to appreciate nature and what's around you. Probably what I'm saying is not that it is already here, or that it's everywhere, as if it's an old culture and you can feel that spirituality. It's not that. It's the other way around. Probably because we're still young, and unshaped, in a way. It can head in different directions. And so there's no, for me at least, I don't feel that there's a very dominating culture that I feel that I have to adhere to. I can bring in my own culture and experience and knowledge and experience and philosophy of life, and try and do something here. That I couldn't find when I was living in London, or New York. So that is what I appreciate here. Probably if you go further away from the city and you travel into the outback, you'll find a bit more if you listen. Not that I'm a very kind of bush person. Certainly I'm not. I'm actually a very city person. I'm very accustomed to that kind of life. But if you do take that other route now and again it's very exhilarating, and it really creates you. And you have to go



back to your own resources and find another way of communication.

RS: Yeah. I've got great childhood memories of bush holidays, of driving across the Nullabor and you know, down the South West coast of Western Australia, and those things really shape you emotionally, even though I'm very much a city girl too. I wouldn't want to live out there.

Clara: No! When we went out there and we stayed in this hotel underground, and all night we were catching crickets! They just kept coming into the room. The people there said that they had been swarmed by crickets in the last while. I don't know why there were so many crickets. They just jump onto your head and your bed!

RS: They're quite grotesque crickets aren't they? Scary.

Clara: And noisy. We spent the whole night chasing crickets. I don't think I enjoyed it. Not being able to sleep. I had a long day's drive the next day. That kind of thing. One thing to see it, but another thing to have to live with it.

RS: Yeah, definitely. And do you feel like you've been embraced by the Australian film industry. I mean just doing the reading, people seem very very proud to have you living here and to have you working from here as a base. Is that kind of an experience that you've not had in other places?

Clara: Well I certainly feel that I haven't had that kind of support in Hong Kong. And that's one of the reasons Eddie and I left Hong Kong, because we felt we were working in such a way that we had to shut ourselves in our own room in order to fight the kind of values that were surrounding us. I mean certainly, let's put it this way, if I'm reading the same book in Hong Kong as I'm reading here, I can't read as much into it as I can if I'm reading it here, because I have the space to do so. And the same thing applies to the way you create your work. To be bombarded by all sorts of things, the values of the society, the values of the film industry, all those values that we don't agree with. And then to do things that we did, and not to have at least one article be able to interpret what you were trying to do to the public.

RS: Really? You wouldn't even have had that much acknowledgement.

Clara: No. When I won my first award, with *Farewell China*, a Special Jury Award in Torino, there was one article saying that it was a sellout, that I tried to please the West. Then with my major award from Locarno for *Autumn Moon*, when I got my Golden Leopard, I don't think people knew what it was, what Locarno is, what it means to be the first Asian to get a Locarno award. You know, awards are not



something that I chase, but I think when it comes to you, it is an acknowledgement of something that you've done, and I would hope that the place that I am from, the place I was living in, would, the people around me would also feel the same. But if you have to explain to them why you feel this is important, I feel this is really silly, you know?

RS: Yeah.

Clara: And then to try to say, try to say to the people who invest in your films that if you get an award and travel get to travel to festivals and get a lot of exposure, then the film can sell that way, is a hard thing. Because what they believe, with traditional marketing, has nothing to do with what an understanding of the festival circuit and how a film can sell. Nowadays I think they understand that, they know much more. But I was talking about 1991 and 1992, and at that time no one understood what we were trying to do. And at the time what we were trying to do was trying to build a bridge. I think at the time Eddie and I knew very well that we were trying to build a bridge. We're still trying to do that. Because of the way I was brought up, very strong in the Chinese culture, and very strong in the Western way, and that is in me. I'm bi-cultural and there's no denial of that. And I'm just trying to do that, to bring those two cultures, not just one or the other, to bring that to the world to be understandable. And nobody understood what we were trying to do. And it just felt very depressing. I feel here, at least what I can feel from reading some articles, I can feel that at least there are some people who understand us, and a kind of support often from the traditional financial bodies here,

RS: SBSI,

Clara: Yes, all those different government, either state or federal funding bodies. And I think also in one way or another they express that they appreciate what we're doing. And I think it's only in that way that you can grow. It's both ways. You can't just sit in a room and grow all on your own. You do have to do that sometimes, but you can't be constantly doing that only, and not feeling a kind of nurturing. And I think in a way there is more of a feeling of being nurtured here than anywhere else. And we appreciate that.

RS: Have you noticed that it's become a lot more difficult within the local film industry in the last...?

Clara: Oh absolutely! Oh yes. Absolutely. Exactly right. But it wasn't like that when we first came here. It was more of the situation of what I was just saying, more nurturing. When we first came here in 94, 95, it certainly isn't like that now, and we can feel that. But I also notice that it's not just here.



It's all over the world. And I think we'd still have the same hard time living in Europe as we would have here. I think that the whole trend has become very very conservative. And I can't help thinking that if Tarkovsky or Ozu lived now they would have found it very very hard to find the support that they had in their lives. Not to say that they had a lot of support then, but at least some kind of support.

RS: Do you think that that conservatism is to do with financial, you know, wanting things to be less of a financial risk, or wanting to see more of a direct return for investment or is it more of a cultural thing?

Clara: I think it's a whole lot of things. I think it's a lack of moral leadership, the lack of you know, the way that we're heading towards economic rationalism. The way that we've shunned spirituality for a long time. The way that people, I think the whole education and leadership and moral leadership – not moral in a narrow-minded way, but moral in a really bigger sense, the meaning of existence and consciousness of society. Not just cricket and football, you know. And so that doesn't happen overnight. It happens because of the way the whole world is going. That is one of the things we have been trying to go back and forth all the time. The city existence does not encourage any of the things I've just talked about. It's only for big corporations, and globalisation, and you know, it's faceless. Faceless big corporations who we could not turn to if \*\*\*. Politicians who are not leaders, they're just opportunistic. And a lack of moral conscience in society. There is no one to stick out and lead in a direction. Environmental protection is not moral conscience. It is important, but it is important as part of something, but a philosophical understanding of existence is not something we talk about nowadays, and it is not just one department, it is something that should be, like in the past, the thing that leads us. Now it is just one thing that we study. Anyway. So it is the way the whole world is going. I think a lot of people use their education not to clarify things, but to – education is more about the imparting of knowledge here, but knowledge does not give us understanding about our life. It's just knowledge from books.

(tape changes sides)

It's very disappointing. Even if the financial situation changed, I don't think it's just that. Like lately I haven't found a book that I've felt very very interested in, that I've been completely engrossed by, and so it is on a whole lot of different levels and different layers, and if that is the only way things are going then it is very scary because it leads to destruction...



RS: Yes, I guess that's why I think the State film bodies are so important – as in the State funded sector because they do provide a haven from those other kinds of imperatives. I mean that is a very small and limited space for people to work as they might want to. How did you fund *Goddess*? Was that Australian money?

Clara: Well we had to find the other 30-40% before we could approach the FFC, as you may be aware,

RS: Yeah.

Clara: When we first developed our script we were supported by the FTO. The FTO had been supporting *Floating Life* and they were very pleased with that and they already were quite open to a second project if we wanted that. So we had an idea and we gave it to the FTO and the FTO had been there from the beginning, from the first script stage through to the final and pre-production and happy to go overseas for finance. So for that we were really grateful and um because of our connection with Asia we were able to talk to investors in Japan, and from there we got some kind of response. Then the sales agent, we were unhappy with just having two sales agents in Australia, actually one of them at the time was not really functioning in a way. They were not closing down, but not investing in films. And we had worked with a sales agent called Fortissimo on *Autumn Moon* and we were very happy with them. I think actually they were, they had the kind of right distributors for the kind of films we make, and they were originally based in Holland and then they expanded to have an office in Hong Kong. And now they are expanding to having an office in Thailand too. They wanted to be in *Floating Life*, but they were at the time very small and couldn't afford the minimum guarantee, but they really really wanted to work on our next film, so they made a very hard effort to satisfy the requirement of the FFC, they also become part of the team. So from there we further went to find the money from the FFC, which we couldn't do if we didn't have the guarantee from overseas already.

RS: Mm. And have you sold the film to SBS or...?

Clara: No, they were not involved. They – we showed them the script. At the time it still was the Bridget Ikin three years and they think it is not right for them. Maybe because of the scale, maybe because it's not about...I don't know. But I think by that time we were able to find money. But it was not a short process. It was quite a long process and it was not easy.

RS: You've got releases in Italy and the Netherlands.



Clara: I think when we finished the film and were cutting, Fortissimo asked for a reel that they could take to the Berlin and Rotterdam film festivals, where they can start showing people. And I think with the scripts they'd already sent to them and with the visuals, the proper reel, the 11 minutes that we'd cut together, they took nine pre-sales, sold to nine territories. So that was really good. And from there we'd already sold to quite a lot of territories. We still haven't sold it to Germany and Britain – they're tough territories nowadays, but we've sold to America, Canada, France, Italy, and then to smaller ones like Switzerland, Spain, Mexico, Norway, Sweden. So basically mostly in Europe we were sold.

RS: Mm. And how broad is the release going to be here?

Clara: I think Palace is thinking of Sydney and Melbourne first, three cinemas in both, and then,

RS: See how it goes.

Clara: Yeah, see how it goes.

RS: Well I hope it does well, because it's very very interesting and different. Have you read the Adrian Martin article in *Cinema Papers*?

Clara: The Road Movie article?

RS: Yeah.

Clara: Yeah, I read that.

RS: It must be quite gratifying to have your film discussed in that kind of way.

Clara: Yeah, it's good. I hope it gets good response. It had very very good reviews in Italy, and did really well in Switzerland. They released it in December, just after Christmas, and it's still playing now.

RS: Wow.

Clara: It's into the fourteenth, fifteenth week. And they are very happy. Italy was also very happy. They released it February 16 and it's still going in Italy. So far so good. And I hope it will continue to build up some kind of audience. I don't think it is a really easy kind of film, but possibly people might be interested to look at something different, with different kind of content, things that they can bring home and think about later. Not just Hollywood junk food, which is easy to forget before you leave the cinema.

RS: Have you seen any good films lately?

Clara: No.

RS: You haven't been out?



Clara: I try to see films. I tried to see some in Rotterdam too, but I didn't seem to see one that I really am heart and soul happy with, content with. Actually nowadays we go less and less to the cinema because it's very frustrating to be going out with high hopes of seeing something good and coming out and feeling elated. But we don't have that experience lately.

RS: Did you see *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*?

Clara: I saw it quite some months ago. That was entertaining.

RS: It was fun.

Clara: It was quite fun, but it was also fun listening to different cultures, people from different cultures telling us different things.

RS: Really?

Clara: Yeah. I think Americans are really taken by the film. But Asians aren't.

RS: Really?

Clara: Yeah, Asians have said that they've seen it all before and that it doesn't compare to what they've seen before. It's that kind of thing. They're into the real action, like in a Jackie Chan film or Bruce Lee film. They are kind of puzzled by why the West are so overtaken by the film. And I think we understand why that is the case. Why it will be taken differently in different cultures. But it was interesting to hear those different responses.

RS: Yeah, well for me I really loved it because I hadn't really ever seen a martial arts film before. So for me it was something completely new.

Clara: Right. When I was in London and was on a panel and we were discussing about how critics, do critics have to have an understanding of the culture before they can write a review, that was the title of that panel, that seminar. And so, finally we ended up discussing *Crouching Tiger*. The Danes were not so, the Dutch were not so, at least the critics were not so taken by it. But there were a lot of people in the audience so there was some interesting discussion. It was good. At least it's not another kind of film from Hollywood. Which I'm really bored with. But I enjoyed it.

RS: There do seem to be quite a few good films coming from that cross-cultural, with the Asian influence. Like *In the Mood for Love*, which I haven't seen yet. Everyone is raving about that at the moment. It could be kind of a fashion.

Clara: I think it will be. It's interesting to look at. Maybe it's because we're bored with American film.



RS: I know I am. And do you still live in Doncaster?

Clara: Yeah.

RS: Do you find that a lot of Melbourne people are surprised that as an artist you live in Doncaster, because when I moved to Melbourne I noticed there was this real thing of if you are a creative person you live in the inner suburbs. I notice you've taken the outer suburbs in *Floating Life* and made them really interesting.

Clara: Yeah. I think for practical reasons when we moved to Australia, to Melbourne, not knowing any suburbs anywhere, we just found a suburb that was close to my parents. So that was how we settled. And through the years I think when we're working it helps, but not during shooting. During shooting we're not here all the time anyway. We're able to deal with the fact that we are away from the activities, the centre of activities.

RS: It's probably quite nice to get away sometimes.

Clara: Yeah, I think when you work – I think we're so focused in our work that it doesn't matter where we are at that stage. If we want to relax we just go out to St Kilda or to Brunswick Street, or whatever. But I think it's good you don't mix your work with your fun. But sometimes you do feel it's a drag having to drive half an hour to go to St Kilda. But it's no big deal. Even when we were living in Hong Kong we didn't live right in the centre, we lived a bit further away, so we could have some silence to ourselves if we wanted to, instead of being in the heat of activity all the time, because then you can't listen to yourself, and I think for me it's very important that I can hear myself. I can't be in noise and activity all the time. In fact I shun away from it a lot of times.

RS: Yeah. Are you a bit of a loner.

Clara: I was as a kid. My parents tell me that I was a very very independent kid, went to bed alone. I didn't need anyone to read me stories or tell me stories. I played with a lot of – when I was a kid a lot of toys were for building, like blocks, and I'd build houses and bridges, and I liked to play with those things. And I could spend hours like that. So that was how I grew up. I don't know if you'd say I was a loner, but I have to have that space to be able to listen to myself. Even when I was in London I told my professors, lecturers, that I think the best, the first thing you need to know is what you are and who you are, and I still keep doing that.

RS: You told your professors this? They didn't tell you?

Clara: No! I told them I wanted to make poetry with my films and they told me you can't. Probably because they're British.



RS: What can you expect!!

Clara: No, we shouldn't say that.

RS: No, there are some very poetic British films. A couple I'm sure!

Clara: But I said, 'why can't you make poetry?' I think film is such an artform that you can still develop. You can do anything with it. I believe you can. I ignored what they said and did what I wanted to do. I did what I wanted to do by cheating too. I was allowed to do a long film. They gave you money to do a film but they only encouraged you to do a short film. I told them it would be a short film. I wrote a script and I told them it would be 40 minutes. They said, 'it looks like a feature film'. I said, 'no, it will be 40 minutes'. It ended up 90 minutes! So I found a way to deal with them.

RS: Mm, one last question – actually two. Do you find the festival circuit really crazy?

Clara: I don't find it as interesting as I did in the past. I'm sick of it. Festivals are now becoming more and more like a market place. Especially if the Americans come in. if they smell money, and so they ruin it. Like I didn't enjoy Toronto last time I was there, and I went to Toronto from 89, and nearly all my films have been in the Toronto festival, and I created a following there. But I didn't enjoy it last time and I was very disappointed. And that was sad. I think when festivals become more and more corporate then they lose their identity and they lose their uniqueness, and I don't like going to festivals like that. So nowadays I even choose some smaller festivals, just to be in something more human.

RS: Mm, you're going to the Hong Kong one in a couple of weeks is that right?

Clara: Yes, a few week's time. The Hong Kong one is different. I came from Hong Kong, and they invited me. I'd like to see what the audience is like nowadays.

RS: They could have evolved.

Clara: Yeah! But, I think the sad thing about festivals is that there are too many and also when festivals become too big and they show too many films, there's no decent time for an individual film, then when something like a market is happening, which has the same importance as the festival, then it changes the nature of the festival itself. At the same time I know it's hard not to have this market to attract people to go there. They need to have sponsors to support it. So it's very tricky, and I don't know the solution. I enjoy going to a festival like Hof because it's the same festival as a few years ago. The festival director is the same. He's the



same nice guy who loves film, and the people who work there are volunteers who are passionate about film. So you know, when you go to festivals like that it feels really different. Like you really go there to talk about films, about the direction they're going, you talk about films really rather than just being there as a showcase.

RS: I just wanted to ask you about working with your husband. That's a pretty amazing thing to be living and working together and being so collaborative. That must be a fairly unique partnership.

Clara: I think our advantage is that we started out as director and writer, fourteen years ago. I finished my education in London and went back to Hong Kong, and I was looking for a writer, and I read two scripts that he wrote. I thought they were fantastic scripts and I'd never seen scripts so well written. And he was already into films and had directed two films. I thought he would not write for anyone, especially one like me who hasn't any financial backing. So when I approached him I said, 'look the truth is there is no money there, but I just want you to develop a script with me, and then maybe we can approach a producer and find the money. And he was keen to do that. So we started out having that kind of relationship. We respected each other's work. He was willing to do that because he didn't feel that in the whole Hong Kong environment, he felt someone like me was unusual, who still wanted to make films as an art form rather than a commercial product. So we started out having that kind of respect. Of course through the years he's also helped me out as associate producer and producer, because he understands me really well, how I work. All my faults and shortcomings, he is able to tell that to me all the time, which I really, well, not enjoy, but, you know take them seriously all the time. So you know we have our ups and downs. Of course we fight a lot. No one would want to be in the room when we fight!

RS: Get two creative people in a relationship and there's bound to be some fireworks.

Clara: Yeah, but we never had any hard feelings even after a heated fight because we know that it's for the good of the work. We look at the work as our baby and so we never...actually we feel that the bigger the fight at a certain stage, we know that there's a huge problem there and it has to be resolved. And once we got through that fight and we'd resolved it, we knew we had resolved it, and we felt really happy because we had resolved a very big problem, and so we never felt any kind of hard feelings or ego. So that's how we can keep keep doing this.

RS: Mm.



Clara: But having said that, I wish I didn't have to put such a burden on him, and he could do something totally of his own, when he wants to. I think he really wants to be able to go back to directing at some stage, and I can give him back his time.

RS: As the director you probably get – he might not mind – but you probably get a lot of the attention. Even though it's kind of probably half and half workwise.

Clara: I don't think he minds that. But what he wants is to be able to direct, the experience of directing not because of the attention or the fame. But he's a very creative person and he has this creative juice that he has to find a place for. He finds the writing very satisfying, but not as much as the directing. He has been doing that for a long time. But he really wants to be able to get some time for himself to do some work that is really purely creative.

RS: Are you working on something at the moment?

Clara: Yep. We have finished a script. Which we actually started when we were trying to raise the finance for the *Goddess*. Quite a few years ago. So we finished a draft that we're happy with a few months ago. So we are going to take that script and try to raise finance.

RS: The whole process starts again.

Clara: The trip to Tokyo tomorrow is actually part of this, talking to some people there.

Rochelle: Well all the best with that. And thank you so much for your time.

Clara: That's okay.

RS: I loved the film and good luck with it.

Clara: I'm sorry I couldn't meet you face to face.

RS: Yeah, that would have been nice, but maybe another time.

Clara: Yeah.

Rochelle: Okay, bye bye.

Clara: Bye.

Tape concludes.



## Appendix II: Film Facts

- **This purpose of this appendix** is to provide a summary of information about each of the 10 films analysed in the thesis. This information includes, where possible, production details, funding and box office figures, together with a summary of awards and critical responses.
- **All monetary figures**, unless otherwise stated, are presented in Australian dollars, not adjusted for inflation.
- **Critical Response:** This section aims to give an overview of the critical reviews given to a film and is not comprehensive. The AFC tracks and gathers this information, grouping it in the categories of ‘pro, con, mixed’. Where possible I have added to the AFC’s list.



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# Head On

**Released in Australia:** 1998

**Director:** Ana Kokkinos

**Producer:** Jane Scott

**Scriptwriter/s:** Andrew Bovell, Ana Kokkinos, Mira Robinson

**Director of Photography:** Jaems Grant

**Length:** 104 mins

**Rating:** R18+

**Production Company:** Head On Productions Pty Ltd

**Cast:** Alex Dimitriades (Ari), Paul Casis (Johnny), Julian Garner (Sean), Tony Nikolakopoulos (Dimitri), Elena Mandalis (Betty), Eugenia Fragos (Sophia), Damien Fotious (Joe), Andrea Mandalis (Alex), Maria Mercedes (Tasia), Dora Kaskanis (Dina), Alex Papps (Peter), Vassili Zappa (Vassili).

## Funding

**Budget:** \$3 million

**Government Agency Investment:** Financed by Australian Film Finance Corporation. Developed and produced with assistance of Film Victoria.

## Earnings

**Australian Gross Box Office:** \$2.7 million

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** Palace Films and Southern Star Film Sales

**International Releases:** United States, Netherlands, Israel, Taiwan, Brazil, Greece, South Africa, Spain, United Kingdom.

**Released on Video:** Australia, Roadshow, 1999

## Principal Awards

Cannes International Film Festival, 1998

Screened in Director's Fortnight (La Quinzaine des Realisateurs)

Australian Film Institute Awards, 1998

Best Achievement in Direction - Ana Kokkinos

Best Film - Jane Scott

Australian Writer's Guild, 1998

AWGIE Award - Feature Film Adaptation - Andrew Bovell, Ana Kokkinos, Mira Robertson

San Francisco International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (1999)

Best First Feature, \$10,000 cash prize



## Critical Response to *Head On*

### *Australian Reviews*

#### ***Pro:***

Andiee Paviour	Who Weekly, 31/8/98
David Stratton	The Australian, 15/8/98
Katy Alexander	IF Magazine, October 1998
Erin Free	Filmink, August 1998
Sandra Hall	Sydney Morning Herald, 14/8/98
Ruth Hessey	Sydney Morning Herald, 14/8/98
	RealTime, August 1998
Peter Crayford	Australian Financial Review, 1/8/98
Andiee Paviour	Who Weekly, 4/1/99
Andrew L. Urban	Urban Cinefile, 1998 <sup>860</sup>
Louise Keller	Urban Cinefile, as above
Paul Fischer	Urban Cinefile, as above

#### **Mixed:**

None

#### ***Con:***

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>12</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>0</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

Allan Hunter	Screen International, 29/5/98
David Stratton	Variety, 8/6/98
	Box Office August 1999

#### **Mixed:**

None

#### **Con:**

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>2</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>0</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>

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<sup>860</sup> Reviews from the Urban Cinefile website are not precisely dated. Reviews from Urban Cinefile can be found in the alphabetically indexed archive of reviews:  
<http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/home/menu.asp?s=Reviews>



# Praise

**Released in Australia:** 1999

**Director:** John Curran

**Producer:** Martha Coleman

**Scriptwriter/s:** Andrew McGahan

**Director of Photography:** Dion Beebe

**Length:** 97mins

**Rating:** R

**Production Company:** Emcee Films

**Cast:** Peter Fenton (Gordon), Sacha Horler (Cynthia), Joel Edgerton (Leo), Yvette Duncan (Molly), Ray Winston Bull (Vass), Marta Duseldorp (Rachel), Gregory 'Tex' Perkins (Raymond), Loene Carmen (Cathy)

## Funding

**Budget:** \$2.8 million

**Government Agency Investment:** Development: FFC, NSWFTO, AFC

## Earnings

Gross Earnings at Australian Box Office: \$650,000 (approximately)

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** UIP/Globe Film Company, Southern Star Sales

**International Releases:** New Zealand, USA (limited, New York, Los Angeles)

**Released on Video:** Australia, Siren, 1999

## Principal Awards

Toronto Film Festival (1998)

International Critics' Prize (FIPRESCI) for Young and Emerging Director  
– John Curran

Australian Film Institute Awards, 1999

Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role - Sacha Horler  
Best Screenplay Adapted from Another Source - Andrew McGahan

## Festival Screenings

Sundance Film Festival, 1997

Berlin International Film Festival, 1998



## Critical Response to *Praise*

### *Australian Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

Hezie Lazarov	IF Magazine, March 1999
Erin Free	Filmink, April 1999
Adrian Martin	The Age, 22/4/99
Bernard Zuel	Sydney Morning Herald, 28/2/00 (video)
	Filmink, December 1999 (video)

#### **Mixed:**

Louise Keller	Urban Cinefile, 1999
Andrew L. Urban	Urban Cinefile, 1999
Paul Fischer	Urban Cinefile, 1999

#### **Con:**

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>5</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>3</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

Leonard Klady	Variety 28/9/98
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#### **Mixed:**

None

#### **Con:**

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>1</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>0</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>



# Vacant Possession

**Released in Australia:** 1996

**Director:** Margot Nash

**Producer:** John Winter

**Scriptwriter/s:** Margot Nash

**Director of Photography:** Dion Beebe

**Length:** 95 minutes

**Production Company:** Wintertime Films

**Cast:** Pamela Rabe (Tessa), Lynden Wilkinson (Kate), John Stanton (Frank)

## Funding

**Budget:** \$1.6 million

**Government Agency Investment:** Development: AFC; Production: AFC

## Earnings

**Gross Australian Box Office:** Not publicly available – less than \$100,000

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** AFI Distribution

**Released on Video:** Australia, Siren, 1997

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, SBS, 26 January 2001 – Special Australia Day Movie

**Pay TV:** Australia, Showtime – Foxtel/Galaxy, Tue, 30 December 1991

Australia, Showtime – Foxtel, Wed, 3 June 1998

## Principal Awards

Creteil Film Fest de Femmes, France (March, 1996)

Special Jury Mention, Margot Nash

Women's Film Festival, Torino (March, 1997)

Audience Award

## Festival Screenings

International Film Forum Arsenals, Latvia, 1996

Cinema Tout Ecran, Geneva, 1996

Oldenburg Film Festival, 1996

Adelaide Festival, 1996

Portland Film Festival, 1996

Strictly Oz, UCLA, Washington, 1996

Women in Film, Seattle Film Festival, 1996

Melbourne Film Festival, 1995

Sydney Film Festival, 1995

Jump Cut Film Festival, Perth 1995

*Brisbane Film Festival, 1995*

Chicago Film Festival, 1995

Asia Pacific Film Festival, Indonesia, 1995



Hawaii Film Festival, 1995

## **Critical Response to *Vacant Possession***

### *Australian Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

Susie Eisenhuth	Sydney Morning Herald, 22/6/95
Adrian Martin	The Age, Melbourne, 24/5/96
Adrian Martin	Radio National, 17/6/95
Evan Williams	Weekend Australian, 18/5/96
Tom Ryan	Sunday Age, Melbourne, 19/5/96
Anna Dzenis	Cinema Papers, June 1996
Vicky Roach	Daily Telegraph, 16/5/96
Shelly Kay	REAL TIME, June/July 96
Anna Maria Dell'oso	Sydney Morning Herald, 16/5/96
	TV Week, 1/6/96
	TV Week, 8/6/96

#### **Mixed:**

Susan Williams	Who Weekly, 21/7/97
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#### **Con:**

None

#### **Summary:**

<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>11</b>
<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>1</b>
<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

David Stratton	Variety, 10/7/95
David Hunter	Hollywood Reporter, 1-3/3/1996

#### **Mixed:**

None

#### **Con:**

None

#### **Summary:**

<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>2</b>
<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>0</b>
<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>



# Dead Heart

**Released in Australia:** 1996

**Director:** Nick Parsons

**Producer:** Bryan Brown, Helen Watts

**Scriptwriter:** Nick Parsons

**Director of Photography:** James Bartle

**Length:** 104 mins

**Cast:** Bryan Brown (Ray Lorkin), Ernie Dingo (David), Angie Milliken (Kate), Stanley Djanwong (Tjulpu), Lewis Fitz-Gerald (Les), Aaron Pedersen (Tony), Anne Tenney (Sarah), John Jarratt (Charlie), Lafe Charlton (Billy), David Gulpilil (Desert Man), Gnarnayarrahe Waitare (Poppy), Marshall Napier (Sgt Oaks).

## Funding

**Budget:** \$2.7 million

**Government Agency Investment:** Development: NSWFTO; Production: FFC

## Earnings

**Gross Australian Box Office:** \$520,000

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** Roadshow

**Released on Video:** Australia, Roadshow, 1997  
United Kingdom, High Fliers, 1998

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, ATN7, Sun, October 10, 1999

France, ARTE, Thu, September 7, 2000

**Pay Television:** Australia, Movie Extra (Optus Vision), Sat, June 13, 1998  
Australia, Movie One (Optus Vision), Wed, June 17, 1998  
Australia, Movie Extra (Optus Vision), Tue, February 2,

1999

Germany, SAT1, Fri, June 25, 1999

## Principal Awards:

Official Selection, Toronto Film Festival, 1996

Film Critic's Circle of Australia (February 1996)

Best Screenplay adapted from another Source, Nick Parsons

## Special Screening:

Screened as part of a series, 'Ethnicity in Contemporary World Cinema', The Watson Institute for International Studies, Brown University, 18/11/98



## Critical Response to *Dead Heart*

### *Australian Reviews*

#### ***Pro:***

	Sydney Morning Herald, 2/6/97
	Courier Mail, Brisbane, 5/6/97
Mark Naglazas	West Australian, 16/11/96
Dougal McDonald	Canberra Times, 4/1/97
Paul LePetit	Sunday Telegraph, 17/11/97
	Filmink, January 98 (Video)
Andrew L. Urban	Urban Cinefile
Louise Keller	Urban Cinefile
Terry Lane	The Age, 6/1/01
David Stratton	The Weekend Australian, 16/11/96
Jan Epstein	The Melburnian, November 96
Robert Drewe	Sydney Morning Herald, 14/11/96

#### **Mixed:**

Rob Lowing	Sun Herald, 17/11/96
Adrian Martin	The Age, Melbourne, 14/11/96
Nick Place	Sunday Age, 10/11/96

#### ***Con:***

Andiee Paviour	Who Weekly, 18/11/96
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<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>12</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>3</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>1</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

David Stratton	Variety, 21/10/96
Lawrence Van Gelder, New York Times	28/11/97

#### **Mixed:**

Kathleen Murphy	Cinemanian Online, New York
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#### **Con:**

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>2</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>1</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>



# Love and Other Catastrophes

**Released in Australia:** 1996

**Director:** Emma-Kate Croghan

**Producer:** Stavros Efthymiou

**Scriptwriter/s:** Emma-Kate Croghan, Yael Bergman, Helen Bandis

**Director of Photography:** Justin Brickle

**Music:** Oleh Witer

**Length:** 76 mins

**Cast:** Frances O'Connor (Mia), Matt Dyktynski (Ari), Matt Day (Michael), Alice Garner (Alice), Kim Gyngell (Professor Leach).

## Funding

**Budget:** The filmmakers raised the initial \$45,000 themselves, and after showing a rough cut to the AFC, received \$500,00 to finish the film on 35mm and pay out the many deferrals.

## Earnings

**Gross Australian Box Office:** \$1.64 million

**International Sales:** \$2.5 million

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** New Vision

International Distribution: Fox Searchlight

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, ATN7, 12/9/2000

**Pay TV:** Australia, Movie One (Optus Vision) 26/1/98

Hong Kong, HBO, 24/4/99

Germany, Premiere – screened a total of 20 times on Premiere 2 & 3 in May/June 1998

USA, ENC, 28/4/98

HBO, 11/7/98

## Principal Awards

Film Critics' Circle of Australia (February 1996)

Best Supporting Actress – Alice Garner

Sydney Film Festival (June 1997)

Third Place, Best Film, Audience Vote Section



## Critical Response to *Love and Other Catastrophes*

### *Australian Reviews*

#### ***Pro:***

David Pearce	Movie Trader, July 1996
Margaret Pomeranz	Movie Show, SBS, 31/7/96
David Stratton	Movie Show, SBS, 31/7/96
Greg Burchall	The Age, Melbourne, 2/8/96
Vicky Roach	Daily Telegraph, 1/8/96
Andiee Paviour	Who Weekly, 5/8/96
Dougal MacDonald	Canberra Times, 9/8/96
Susan Williams	Who Weekly
Lawrie Zion	The Age, 9/1/97
Tom Ryan	The Sunday Age, 28/7/96
Peter Crayford	Financial Review, 2/8/96
Margaret Pomeranz	Herald Sun, Melbourne, 1/8/96
Barbara Creed	The Age, 1/8/96
Des Partridge	Courier Mail, 3/8/96
	Video Trader, 18/11/96

#### **Mixed:**

Evan Williams	Weekend Australian, 3/8/96
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#### ***Con:***

None

#### **Summary:**

<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>15</b>
<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>1</b>
<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

David Stratton	Variety, 20/5/96
Lael Loewenstein	Box Office, August 96
Patricia Dobson	Screen International, 13/9/96
Janet Maslin	New York Times, April 97
David Cox	ID Magazine (UK), 1/6/97
Mansel Stimpson	Gay Times (UK), 1/5/97
Neil Hampton	Loaded (UK), 1/5/97
Christopher Hemblade	Empire (UK), 1/5/97
Hutchinson	Radio 2 (UK) in Variety, 26/5/97
Brown	Times (UK) in Variety, 26/5/97
Andrews	Financial Times, in Variety, 26/5/97
French	Observer, in Variety, 26/5/97
Sheena	Variety, 26/5/97
Turan	LA Times, in Variety, 26/5/97



Hello Magazine (UK), 26/4/97  
Empire (UK), 1/6/97  
North West What's On (UK), 1/5/97  
Sheffield Telegraph (UK), 25/4/97  
Attitude Magazine (UK), 1/5/97  
Punch (UK), 26/5/97

**Mixed:**

Laura Miller  
Rose  
Charity  
Gilbey  
Walker  
Camara

Sight and Sound (UK), 1/5/97  
Daily Mirror (UK) in Variety, 26/5/97  
Time Out (UK) in Variety, 26/5/97  
Independent (UK) in Variety, 26/5/97  
Evening Standard (UK) in Variety, 26/5/97  
Univision (LA) in Variety. 26/5/97

**Con:**

Charles Grant  
Frank  
Abele

The Face, (UK) 1/5/97  
Daily Star, (UK) in Variety, 26/5/97  
LA New Times in Variety, 26/5/97

**Summary:**

<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>20</b>
<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>6</b>
<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>3</b>



# Thank God He Met Lizzie

**Released in Australia:** 1997

**Director:** Cherie Nowlan

**Producers:** Carole Hughes, Jonathan Shteinman

**Scriptwriter:** Alexandra Long

**Director of Photography:** Kathryn Milliss

**Music:** Martin Armiger

**Length:** 91 mins

**Production Company:** Stamen Films

**Cast:** Richard Roxburgh (Guy), Cate Blanchett (Lizzie), Frances O'Connor (Jenny), Linden Wilkinson (Poppy), John Gaden (Dr O'Hara), Genevieve Mooy (Mrs Jamieson), Michael Ross (Mr Jamieson).

## Funding

**Budget:** \$2.25million

**Government Agency Investment:** Development: AFC; Production: AFC, NSWFTO

## Earnings

**Gross Australian Box Office:** \$0.9million

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** REP

**Released on Video:** Australia, Becker, 1998  
United Kingdom, Red Pictures, 1999

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, TCN9, Thu, September 21, 2000

**Pay TV:** Australia, Movie One (Optus Vision), Sun, April 18, 1999  
Australia, Movie One (Optus Vision), Thu, March 2, 2000  
Australia, Movie Extra (Optus Vision), Wed, March 15, 2000  
Germany, VOX, Wed, February 25, 1998  
Germany, VOX, Mon, April 5, 1999

## Festival Screenings

Shown at the Australian Film Festival, Singapore, 1998

## Principal Awards

Australian Film Institute Awards ( November 1997)

Village Roadshow Pictures Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role – Cate Blanchett

Film Critics Circle of Australia (February 1997)

Best Actress in a Supporting Role – Cate Blanchett



## Critical Response to *Thank God He Met Lizzie*

### *Australian Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

Margaret Smith	Cinema Papers, November 97
Keith Gallasch	REALTIME/Onscreen, October/November 97
Melissa Bollinger	Filmink, November 97
Andiee Paviour	Who Weekly, 24/11/97
	The Sun Herald – Tempo, 23/11/97
Evan Williams	The Weekend Australian, 22/11/97
Vicky Roach	The Daily Telegraph, 20/11/97
Darren Devlyn	TV Week, 29/11/97
	Filmink, April 1998
Margaret Pomeranz	The Movie Show, SBS, 19/11/97
Louise Keller	Urban Cinefile

#### **Mixed:**

<i>Adam Rivett</i>	<i>Ashtray</i> , 1/9/97
Keith Gallasch	OnScreen, October 97
Dougal MacDonald	The Canberra Times, 22/11/97
Jim Schembri	The Age, Melbourne, 21/11/97
David Stratton	The Movie Show, SBS, 19/11/97
Mark Naglazas	The West Australian, 26/11/97
Tom Ryan	The Sunday Age, 23/11/97
Andrew L. Urban	Urban Cinefile
Andrew Fischer	Urban Cinefile

#### **Con:**

	Herald Sun, Melbourne, 20/11/97
Michael Bodey	The Age, 20/11/97

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>11</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>9</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>2</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

	Southern Cross Lifestyle (UK), 25/2/98
Rosanna de Lisle	Independent On Sunday (UK), 8/3/98

#### **Mixed:**

None

#### **Con:**

David Stratton	Variety, June 16-22, 97
Allan Hunter	Screen International, 15/8/97

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>2</b>
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<u>Mixed:</u>	0
<u>Con:</u>	2



# Babe

**Released in Australia:** 1995

**Director:** Chris Noonan

**Producers:** Bill Miller, Dr George Miller

**Scriptwriter/s:** George Miller, Chris Noonan, based on Dick King-Smith's novel, *The Sheep Pig*.

**Director of Photography:** Andrew Lesnie

**Music:** Nigel Westlake

**Length:** 88 mins

**Production Company:** Kennedy Miller

**Cast:** James Cromwell (Farmer Hoggett), Magda Szubanski (Mrs Hoggett), Christine Cavanagh (voice of Babe), Hugo Weaving (voice of Rex), Miriam Margolyes (voice of Fly).

## Funding

**Budget:** \$30 million (US dollars)

## Earnings

**Australian Gross Box Office:** \$37 million

**United States Gross Box Office:** \$63.6 million (US dollars)

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** UIP/Universal International Pictures

**International Releases:** North America, United Kingdom, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, France, Serbia, South Africa, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, ATN7, Sun, November 22, 1998  
Australia, ATN7, Sun, November 21, 1999  
United Kingdom, BBC1, Fri, December 25, 1998  
United Kingdom, BBC1, Sun, June 4, 2000

**Pay TV:** Australia, TNT (Foxtel Optus Vision), Tue, January 9, 1996  
Australia, Showtime (Foxtel Galaxy), Sat, October 4, 1997  
Australia, Showtime (Foxtel), Sun, May 31, 1998  
United Kingdom, Movie Channel, Sun, July 27, 1997  
United Kingdom, Sky Movies Screen 2, Thu, December 25, 1997  
United Kingdom, Sky Movies Screen 2, Sun, March 1, 1998  
Hong Kong, HBO, Fri, September 26, 1997  
Hong Kong, Pearl, Sat, February 27, 1999

## Principal Awards

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Academy Awards) (March 1996)

Best Achievement in Visual Effects – Scott E Anderson, Charles Gibson, Neal Scanlan, Robotechnology and John Cox



APRA Music Awards (November 1996)  
 Best Film Score – Nigel Westlake  
Australian Cinematographers Society Awards (May 1996)  
 Golden Tripod – Andrew Lesnie, Feature Production, Cinema Section  
 Milli Award for Cinematographer of the Year – Andrew Lesnie  
Australian Effects and Animation Festival (May 1996)  
 Best Title, Indents and Stings – Animal Logic  
Australian Teachers of Media Awards (June 1996)  
 Metro Choice Australian Feature Film  
BASF Australian Video Awards (November 1997)  
 Award for Highest Movie Sell-Thru Video  
 Multiple Platinum Sales Achievement Award  
Family Film Awards (August 1996)  
 Outstanding Comedy Film  
Film Critics' Circle of Australia (February 1996)  
 Best Director – Chris Noonan  
 Best Music Score – Nigel Westlake  
Golden Globe Awards (January 1996)  
 Best Motion Picture, Musical or Comedy Section  
Golden Reel Ceremony (April 1996)  
 Best Automated Dialogue Replacement in an Animation – Libby Villa,  
 Antony Gray and Julius Chan

## **Critical Response to *Babe***

### *Australian Reviews*

#### ***Pro:***

Rob Lowing	Sun Herald, Sydney, 17/12/95
	Sunday Herald Sun, Melbourne, 17/12/95
Evan Williams	Weekend Australian, 16/12/95
	Herald Sun, Melbourne, 14/12/95
Peter Crayford	Financial Review, 15/12/95
Mark Naglazas	West Australian, 15/12/95
Lisa McIntosh	Sunday Mail, Adelaide, 10/12/95
Vicky Roach	Telegraph Mirror, Sydney, 14/12/95
Vicky Roach	Marie Claire, December 95
Paul Byrnes	Sydney Morning Herald, 7/12/95
Tom Ryan	Sunday Age, Melbourne, 10/12/95
	TV Week, 16/12/95
	TV Week, 23/12/95
	Video Trader, 12/8/96
	Who Weekly TV Guide, 6/10/97
	Daily Telegraph, 2/10/97
Jenny Tabakoff	Sydney Morning Herald 29/9/97

#### **Mixed:**



*Adrian Martin*  
Paul Harris

*The Age, Melbourne, 16/12/95*  
The Age Green Guide, in Cinema Papers, February 96

***Con***

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>17</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>2</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>

*Foreign Reviews*

**Pro:**

Holden	New York Times, in Variety 7/8/95
Bernard	Daily Mail, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Medved	NY Post, in Variety 7/8/95
Schwarzbaum	Entertainment Weekly, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Lyons	Sneak Previews, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Reed	NY Observer, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
J Siegel	Good Morning America, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Travers	Rolling Stone, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Wloszczyna	USA Today, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
J Brown	WOR Radio, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Cunningham	WCBS-TV, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Langfield	Movie Minute, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
S Siegel	WNEW-FM Radio, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Sterritt	Christian Science Monitor, NY, in Variety 7/8/95
Berk	B'Nai Brith Messenger, LA, in Variety 7/8/95
Camara	La Opinion, LA, in Variety 7/8/95
Feeney	LA Weekly, in Variety 7/8/95
Mankin	LA Reader, in Variety 7/8/95
Turan	LA Times, in Variety 7/8/95
Ebert	Chicago Sun-Times, in Variety 7/8/95
Gire	Daily Herald, Chicago, in Variety 7/8/95
Leonard	WGN Radio/TV, Chicago, in Variety 7/8/95
Mark	WMAQ-TV NBC, Chicago, in Variety 7/8/95
Pearson	WBEZ/Southtown Economist, Chicago, in Variety 7/8/95
Siskel	Chicago Tribune, in Variety 7/8/95
Westhoff	Northwest Herald, Chicago, in Variety 7/8/95
Arnold	Washington Times, in Variety 7/8/95
Howe	Washington Post, in Variety 7/8/95
Kempley	Washington Post, in Variety 7/8/95
Kline	Journal Newspapers Washington DC, in Variety 7/8/95
Rich	Mutual Radio/Washington, in Variety 7/8/95
Leonard Klady	Variety, 24/7/95
Pat Kramer	Box Office, September 95
Ana Maria Bahiana	Screen International 1/9/95
Philip Kemp	Sight and Sound, 5/12/95
Derek Malcolm	Guardian Weekly, UK, 24/12/95
	Parent's Guide, Kids Special Mention Section



Lisa Schwarzbaum    Entertainment Weekly, US, 25/8/95  
Radio Times (UK), 28/2/98

**Mixed:**

D Brown                    Upscale, NY, in Variety 7/8/95  
Wunder                    WBAI Radio, NY, in Variety 7/8/95  
Katz                        Montgomery County Cable TV, Washinton

**Con:**

Hurley                      WBAI Radio, NY, in Variety 7/8/95

**Summary:**

**Pro:**                      39  
**Mixed:**                    3  
**Con:**                      1



# Bad Boy Bubby

**Released in Australia:** 1994

**Director:** Rolf de Heer

**Producer:** Domenico Procacci, Giorgio Draskovic, Rolf de Heer

**Scriptwriter:** Rolf de Heer

**Director of Photography:** Ian Jones (supervising)

**Music:** Graham Tardif

**Length:** 113 mins

**Rated:** R18+

**Production Company:** Fandango (Rome), Bubby Pty (Adelaide)

**Cast:** Nicholas Hope (Bubby), Claire Benito (Mom), Ralph Coterill (Pop), Carmel Johnson (Angel), Norman Kaye (Scientist), Paul Philpot (Paul), Peter Monaghan (Steve), Natalie Carr (Cherie), Rachael Huddy (Rachael), Bridget Walters (Angel's mother)

## Funding

**Budget:** \$880,000

**Government Agency Investment:** Development: Filmsouth; Production: FFC

**Major Investment (50%):** Domenico Procacci & Giorgio Draskovic (Italy)

## Earnings

**Gross Australian Box Office:** \$600,000 (approx.)

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** Roadshow

**International Releases:** France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, UK

**Released on Video:** Australia, Applause, 1995  
United Kingdom, Entertainment on Video, 1995  
Germany, Concorde Video GmbH, 1995  
Sweden, Sandrews, 1996

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, TCN9, Sat, September 27, 1997  
United Kingdom, Channel 4, Fri, August 29, 1997  
Germany, ZDF, Tue, May 12, 1998

**Pay TV:** Australia, Movie Network (Optus Vision), Mon, March 4, 1996  
Italy, Telepui, Sat, November 18, 1995  
United Kingdom, Movie Channel, Fri, September 27, 1996  
United Kingdom, Movie Channel, Mon, January 6, 1997  
Germany, 3Sat, Tue, June 8, 1999

## Principal Awards

*Venice International Film Festival, 1993*  
Jury Prize



Prize Fipresci  
 Prize of 'Cinema Avvenire' – Best Film in the Young Audience Vote  
 Prize OCIC (International Catholic Organisation)  
 Special Clak D'Oro (Clak Magazine Jury)  
*Seattle International Film Festival, 1994*  
 Best Director – Rolf de Heer  
*New South Wales State Literary Awards, 1994*  
 Scriptwriting – Rolf de Heer  
*Australian Film Institute Awards, 1994*  
 Best Direction – Rolf de Heer  
 Best Original Screenplay – Rolf de Heer  
 Best Actor – Nicholas Hope  
 Best Achievement in Editing – Suresh Ayyar  
*Action and Adventure Film Festival, France, 1995*  
 Jury Prize  
 RFM Prize  
 Students Prize  
 Public Prize

## **Critical Response to *Bad Boy Bubby***

### *Australian Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

David Stratton	The Movie Show, SBS, 27/7/94
Margaret Pomeranz	The Movie Show, SBS, 27/7/94
Peter Castaldi	Radio 2JJJ, 29/7/94
Margot Dougherty	Who Weekly, 8/8/94
Neil Jillett	The Age, Melbourne, 4/8/94
	Movie Trader, August 94
Anna Dzenis	Cinema Papers, October 94
David Stratton	The Weekend Australian, 30/7/94
	The Sunday Age Melbourne, 24/7/94
Matt White	Telegraph-Mirror, Sydney, 27/7/94
	Sun Herald, Sydney, 31/7/94
Paul Byrnes	Sydney Morning Herald, 28/7/94
Richard Waller	Courier Mail, Brisbane, 30/7/94
Stan James	Adelaide Advertiser, 30/7/94
Sandra Hall	The Bulletin, 2/8/94
Jeremy Vincent	TV Week, 25/2/95 (Video)
Lynden Barber	The Australian 23/2/95 (Video)
Pat Gillespie	The Age, Melbourne, 16/2/95 (Video)
Jan Epstein	The Melburnian, August 94
	The Australian Magazine, 10/8/96
Des Partridge	The Courier Mail, Brisb., in Who Weekly Cinema Verite,
5/9/94	
Michael Hutak	Sydney Morning Herald, in Who Weekly Cinema Verite,
5/9/94	
Keith Connolly	The Sunday Age, Melb., Who Weekly Cinema Verite,
5/9/94	



**Mixed:**

Mark Naglazas West Australian, 3/8/94  
 Ivan Hutchinson Herald Sun, Melbourne, 28/7/94  
 Thomas Quinn Boxoffice, April 97

**Con**

Sunday Mail Adelaide, 24/7/94

**Summary:**

**Pro:** 23  
**Mixed:** 3  
**Con:** 1

*Foreign Reviews***Pro:**

David Stratton Variety, 13/9/93  
 Angus Finney Screen International, 24/9/93  
 Premiere, UK, October 94  
 The Big Issue, UK, 3/10/94  
 Video Home Entertainment, UK, 8/10/94  
 Geoff Andrew Time Out, UK, 12/10/94  
 Thom Dibdin The List, UK, 21/10/94  
 Ryan Gilbey The Independent, UK, 13/10/94  
 Derek Malcolm The Guardian, UK, 29/9/94  
 The Times, UK, 29/9/94  
 The Star, UK, 1/10/94  
 Heidi Rice Empire, UK, October 94  
 Mike Howard Evening Argus, UK, 27/10/94  
 James What's On & Where to Go, UK, 28/9/94  
 Daily Mail, UK, 30/9/94  
 Andrews Financial Times, UK, in Variety 3/10/94  
 Brown The Times, UK, in Variety 3/10/94  
 Frank Daily Star, UK, in Variety 3/10/94  
 Hutchinson Mail on Sunday/Radio 2, UK, in Variety 3/10/94  
 Kevin Thomas Los Angeles Times, 27/11/97

**Mixed:**

Nigel Robinson Film Review, UK, November 94  
 Philip Kemp Sight & Sound, UK, November 94  
 Nick Brownlee Evening Chronicle, UK, 26/10/94  
 Sunday Times, UK, 2/10/94  
 Johnston Time Out, UK, in Variety 3/10/94

**Con:**

The London Evening Standard, 29/9/94  
 French Observer, UK, in Variety 3/10/94  
 Morley Sunday Express, UK, in Variety 3/10/94



Norman  
Walker

Film '94, UK, in Variety 3/10/94  
Evening Standard, UK, in Variety 3/10/94

**Summary:**

<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>20</b>
<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>5</b>
<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>5</b>



# The Castle

**Released in Australia:** 1997

**Director:** Rob Sitch

**Producer:** Debra Choate

**Scriptwriters:** Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner, Jane Kennedy, Rob Sitch

**Director of Photography:** Miriana Marusic

**Music:** Craig Harnath

**Length:** 82 mins

**Cast:** Michael Caton (Daryl Kerrigan), Anne Tenney (Sal Kerrigan), Sophie Lee (Tracey Kerrigan), Stephen Curry (Dale Kerrigan), Charles 'Bud' Tingwell (Laurence Hammill), Tiriel Mora (Dennis Denuto), Eric Bana (Con), Bryan Dawe (Ron Graham), Wayne Hope (Wayne)

## Funding

**Budget:** \$700,000 (Privately financed in association with Roadshow. No government investment.)

## Earnings

**Gross Australian Box Office:** \$11 million

Reportedly sold to Miramax for in excess of US \$6 million

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** Roadshow

**International Releases:** Norway, New Zealand, Netherlands, Brazil, South Africa, Benelux, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Hungary, Spain, Malaysia, Singapore

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, TCN9, Sun, November 14, 1999

Australia, TCN9, Sun, September 3, 2000

**Pay TV:** Australia, Showtime (Foxtel), Sun, April 25, 1999

## Principal Awards

Australian Film Institute Awards (November 1997)

Cinesure Award for Best Original Screenplay - Santo Cilauro, Tom Gleisner, Jane Kennedy & Rob Sitch

Floating Film Festival, 1998

Audience Award: Most Popular Film

## Festival Screenings

*Sundance Film Festival, 1998*



## Critical Response to *The Castle*

### *Australian Reviews*

#### ***Pro:***

Gerard Whateley	Herald Sun, Melbourne, 20/2/97
Margaret Pomeranz	The Movie Show, SBS, 9/4/97
Bill Collins	Radio 2UE, 22/9/97
Doug Aiton	The Age, Melbourne, 23/4/97
Peter Crayford	Financial Review, 11/4/97
	The Age, Melbourne, 11/4/97
Robert Drewe	Sydney Morning Herald, 10/4/97
Leigh Paatsch	Herald Sun, Melbourne, 10/4/97
Pat Conlan	Movie Trader, April '97
Clive Stark	3LO, 20/4/97
Miranda Devine	Daily Telegraph 15/4/97
Terry Lane	Sunday Age, 27/4/97
Scott Murray	Cinema Papers, in Cinema Papers May 1997
Stan James	Adelaide Advertiser, in Who Weekly Hit List, 12/5/97
Paul le Petit	Sunday Telegraph, Sydney, in Who Weekly Hit List, 12/5/97
Andrew L. Urban	Urban Cinefile, 1997
Louise Keller	Urban Cinefile, 1997
Paul Fischer	Urban Cinefile, 1997

#### **Mixed:**

Tim Hunter	Cinema Papers, May '97
Rob Lowing	Sun Herald, 12/4/97
Andiee Paviour	Who Weekly, 14/8/97
Gordan Lewis	3LO, 16/4/97

#### ***Con:***

David Stratton	The Movie Show, SBS, 9/4/97
Evan Williams	Weekend Australian, 12/4/97
Jim Schembri	The Age, Melbourne, 11/4/97
Ernie Sigley	3AW, 17/4/97
Paul Gray	Herald Sun, Melbourne, 16/4/97

#### **Summary:**

<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>18</b>
<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>4</b>
<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>5</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

Ray Greene	Box Office, Sundance Reviews
	Southern Cross Lifestyle, UK, 25/2/98



**Mixed:**

Screen International, 6/6/97

**Con:**

David Stratton

Variety, April 21-27/97

**Summary:**

**Pro:** 2

**Mixed:** 1

**Con:** 1



# Floating Life

**Released in Australia:** 1996

**Director:** Clara Law

**Producer:** Bridget Ikin

**Scriptwriter/s:** Eddie Ling-Ching Fong & Clara Law

**Director of Photography:** Dion Beebe

**Length:** 95 mins

**Production Company:** Hibiscus Films

**Cast:** Annie Yip (Bing), Anthony Wong (Kar Ming), Annette Shun Wah (Yen), Cecilia Li (Mum), Edwin Pang (Pa), Toby Wong (Yue), Toby Chan (Chau), Bruce Poon (Cheong), Julian Pulvermacher (Michael), Claudette Chua (Mui Mui), Darren Yap (Lone).

## Funding

**Budget:** \$2.7 million

**Government Agency Investment:** Development: Film Victoria, NSWFTO;  
Production: FFC, NSWFTO, SBS Independent

## Earnings

**Gross Australian Box Office:** \$144,191

**Foreign Distribution Sales:** Approximately \$760,000

## Distribution

**Australian Distributor:** Footprint Films

International Releases: Canada, Netherlands

## Television Screenings

**Free to Air:** Australia, SBS, Thu, September 25, 1997

Australia, SBS, Tue, November 2, 1998

Germany, ARD, Sun, October 17, 1999

**Pay TV:** Australia, Showtime, (Foxtel Galaxy), Tue, March 25, 1997

Australia, Showtime, (Foxtel), Mon, June 1, 1998

## Principal Awards

Asia Pacific Film Festival (October 1997)

Best Music, Davood A Tabrizi

Creteil Film Fest De Femmes (March 1997)

The Jury Prize

International Festival for Young People of Gijon (November 1996)

Best Feature

Best Director – Clara Law

Locarno International Film Festival (August 1996)

Silver Leopard Award – International des Cine Clubs Prize, Competition

Section

Youth Jury Prize, Best Film for Human and Spiritual Vision – Federation

Sydney Film Festival (June 1996)



4<sup>th</sup> Place, Best Film, Audience Vote Section  
Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival (November 1996)  
Best Original Music Score

## **Critical Response to *Floating Life***

### *Australian Reviews*

#### ***Pro:***

Sandra Hall	Sydney Morning Herald, 19/9/96
Tom Gliatto	Who Weekly, 23/9/96
Marianne Bilkey	Who Weekly TV Guide, 22/9/97
Kevin Courier	Box Office, July '97

#### **Mixed:**

<i>Adrian Martin</i>	<i>The Age, Melbourne, 19/9/96</i>
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#### ***Con:***

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>4</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>1</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>

### *Foreign Reviews*

#### **Pro:**

David Stratton	Variety, 1/7/96
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#### **Mixed:**

None

#### **Con:**

None

<b>Summary:</b>	<b><u>Pro:</u></b>	<b>1</b>
	<b><u>Mixed:</u></b>	<b>0</b>
	<b><u>Con:</u></b>	<b>0</b>



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## List of Publications

These publications were produced as a result of the project:

Siemienowicz, Rochelle. 'Interview with Clara Law', *The Big Issue Australia*. No. 124, 2–16 May, 2001.

Siemienowicz, Rochelle. 'Globalisation and Home Values in New Australian Cinema', Writing Australia: New Talents 21C, *Journal of Australian Studies*. Ed. Ffion Murphy, No. 63, UQP, 2000, pp. 49-55.

Siemienowicz, Rochelle. 'True Love', (Feature interview with John Curran), *The Big Issue Australia*. No. 72, 2-17 May 1999, pp. 27-28.

Siemienowicz, Rochelle. 'Moonstruck', (Feature interview with Rob Sitch), *The Big Issue Australia*. No. 111, 30 October–14 November, 2000, p. 31.