Perhaps because the new Australian cinema—unlike the American cinema in its heyday—has failed to produce a studio system, its films do not easily fit into genre patterns. [Genre films] . . . were essentially the products of, and sustained by, the great Hollywood studios and their tapping of mass audiences.¹

When I wrote that in 1985, it wouldn’t have been productive to organise a book about new Australian cinema in terms of genres. One could acknowledge that its two biggest commercial successes to that time—Mad Max (1979) and The Man from Snowy River (1982)—reworked American genres in antipodean physical and social settings, without seriously impairing the generalisation. And it still held in another book in 1992 when, to the two exceptions already named, could be added Crocodile Dundee (1986), and its authors could assert: ‘The American [film] industry has always known better than any other what constituted a popular cinema.’² This grasp of popular cinema essentially implied a commitment to reproducing films in genres such as the road movie, the western and the populist comedy, into which the three local successes could be roughly slotted. Genre is not a matter of rules, but of a loose set of recurring elements relating to plots and attitudes and the look of the films. Quite early in the revived Australian cinema of the 1970s there were traces of genres we could recognise, but apart from the string of ‘ocker’ comedies (e.g. Stork, the ‘Alvin Purple’ and ‘Barry McKenzie’ films) there was hardly evidence of local investment in making film variations on proven formulas.

It was reasonable in those years when, for the first time in most people’s memories, there seemed to be a steady stream of Australian films, that these should be concerned with ‘projecting the nation’. Critics then were understandably more concerned with how these films represented aspects of the national life, its realities and mythologies. The more sustained writing about the period focused on matters of coming of age, on the new cinema’s literary connections and on such oppositions as city and bush, Australia and Britain, authority and rebellion. Such issues were important in our films then. Though there was a thin trickle of films that could be accommodated to genres we knew, these were not in general what we flocked to or what critics claimed our attention for.

These ‘big issues’ have been much canvassed. Now, it might be more profitable to turn attention to the genre affiliations that in recent years have loomed larger—in number and significance—in the Australian strand of our film-going experience. This doesn’t mean that we have lost continuity with


the earlier period: as I’ve said, there were always generic traces at work in our films; and, further, genre doesn’t account for everything exciting in recent Australian cinema. There are still notable auteurs whose work resists categorisation, such as those inventive risk-takers Rolf De Heer and Ana Kokkinos, and there are chameleons like Peter Duncan, who seems unrecognisable from film to film. And there are still patently ‘one-off’, unclassifiable jobs such as Kris Stenders’ *The Illustrated Family Doctor* (2005).

What has interested me most, apart from these last-named individualities, is how, lately, so many locally made films either call up existing genres (‘existing’ usually means that Hollywood got there first), or give a distinctively Australian spin to such older genres, or even perhaps create new ones. The gradually increasing emphasis on a sort of genre placement hasn’t effaced other endemic elements of Australian cinema. It is still essentially a realist affair: there is not much sense of the experimental in terms of mode. It still, like other national cinemas, preys on literary sources as it famously did in the 1970s, but now it is adapting a different sort of novel. You wouldn’t, I think, have expected the likes of *Head On*, *Hating Alison Ashley* or *Candy* in the days when our filmmakers were Getting Careers at Hanging Rock, with a little help from Richardson, Franklin and Lindsay.

There is a sense of a different sort of Australian cinema evolving, and it would be a poor lookout for the industry if it remained stuck in the same proven ruts. I think most of the Australian films of the last few years are much more likely to set genre bells ringing than did most of the films of the revival’s early years. Think of John Hillcoat’s *The Proposition* (2006, a western in the outback), Matthew Saville’s *Noise* (2007, police procedural), Greg McLean’s *Wolf Creek* (2006, horror, and very alarming, too), *One Fine Day* (2004, pop musical), Richard Roxburgh’s *Romulus My Father* (2007, biopic), Alister Grierson’s *Kokoda* (2006, combat drama) or Cherie Nowlan’s *Clubland* (2007) and Sandra Sciberras’s *The Caterpillar Wish* (2006) (maternal melodramas). In all those cases, the generic descriptor seems to fit the product snugly enough. And though ‘literary adaptation’ is more a tendency than, strictly, a genre, Geoffrey Wright’s fearless *Macbeth* (2006) set new parameters for dealing with the classics.

Genre film-making thrives on exploiting tensions between familiarity and novelty: too few familiar elements and we may not recognise the genre connection; too few unfamiliar ones and we may well be bored. It is a matter of some expectations gratified, others subverted. In the second category referred to above—films that fit genre contours we recognise from long exposure but offering a peculiarly Australian slant on the conventions—we may consider such ‘road movies’ as *Thunderstruck* (2004) and *Lucky Miles* (2008). The road movie, cultishly dating back at least forty years to *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), was sporadically present before those hits caused their episodic narrative habits to seep into our consciousness as genre-shaping. In the Australian revival, George Miller’s visceral *Mad Max* (1979) and Richard Franklin’s playful *Road Games* (1981) fed on and into the generic expectations raised by such Hollywood predecessors. Not that the road movie doesn’t have ancient lineage in picaresque narratives from *The Odyssey* to *Don Quixote* to *Tom Jones*, but the Australian productions bring their own peculiarities to bear
on films that take to the highways, meet up with idiosyncrats along the way and arrive at their destination in some ways changed from how they started out. Darren Ashton’s *Thunderstruck* (2004) ran out of steam before its protagonists arrived in Fremantle, where they planned to bury the ashes of one of their number next to former AC/DC member Bon Scott, following a vow they’d made twelve years earlier. Its best sequences were those set in east-coast suburbia rather than the encounters (some admittedly showing moments of indigenous comic invention) that punctuate the cross-country journey, which ends with an affirmation of mateship, that oldest Oz bromide.

One of the hazards of the road movie is that it will seem shapeless, and *Lucky Miles* (2007) avoids this by virtue of having more on its mind than just a series of variably entertaining episodes. Its director Michael James Rowland said in an interview:

> It’s like the story of Burke and Wills updated to reflect immigration patterns of recent years. It’s a road movie without a road, it’s uniquely Australian. When you come to Australia, you walk inland, thinking, Surely there’ll be something there, but there’s nothing but the desert. We’ve shamelessly reworked a national myth to sell it to the world.  

*Lucky Miles* doesn’t set out to be an exhilarating journey, or a chase thriller: its handling of a plot involving boat people set down in the north of Western Australia, and told that the bus to Perth will be along shortly, gets coherence from an overarching political point of view. Chiefly set in 1990, its attitudes to the guys on the non-roads of the far north have relevance for some later unattractive policies relating to the fates of people hoping to find haven here from oppressive regimes. (And, instead, finding a different sort of oppression.) There is an implied criticism of the West, which, in its comparative plenty, becomes an object of aspiration and envy to those less well placed. The drama along the way, as our sympathies transfer from one character to another, is underpinned by structural parallelism: though the idea of ‘chase’ is not at the film’s heart, there are shifting relations among the three refugees on the run (an educated Iraqi, a Cambodian and an Indonesian), trying to make sense of an alien landscape, and among the three army guys trying to follow and decipher tracks that don’t make sense to them. *Lucky Miles* is also framed by shots in two cities whose significant connection to each other remains opaque until the film’s last sequence.

*Lucky Miles* is a road movie in the way that British director Michael Winterbottom’s film *In this World* is one: each articulates a political vision through tracing a journey over unforgiving terrain. Considering it in relation to other recent locally made films, it seems possible to discern another, perhaps peculiarly Australian, genre emerging: the refugee drama. In *Lucky Miles*, this is crossed with the more familiar road-movie breed; in Khoa Do’s all-but-budgetless *The Finished People* (2004), the refugee element is subsumed in the wider spectrum of urban indigence, treated in almost documentary style; in Dee McLachlan’s *The Jammed* (2007), it moves to the film’s centre, with more than a whiff of maternal melodrama, which might also be said of Tony Ayres’ *The Home Song Stories* (2007), in which the protagonist, if not technically a refugee, is displaced from her native Hong Kong; and in Peter Duncan’s
The Unfinished Sky (2008), the drama of a refugee's plight is crossed with an affecting love story. All of these films are characterised by humane concern for their protagonists; they are, whatever their respective individual merits, films of clear social conscience; and they make palpable their political agendas about refugees/boat people without recourse to polemical shrillness. They constitute something like the beginning of a genre—or at very least a series of generic hybrids—that does not merely entertain, but tests our tolerances and prejudices in uncomfortable ways.

Another locally inflected genre of the last few years is the drama of urban anomic. There was a handful of city-set films in the first decade of the revival, cutting across genres such as youth-problem dramas, such as Michael Thornhill's The FJ Holden (1977) and John Duigan's Mouth to Mouth (1978); or thrillers, such as Bruce Beresford's Money Movers (1978); or even the musical, such as Gillian Armstrong's Star Struck (1982). But, even when this trickle swelled to an ampler stream in the later 1980s and 1990s, it was more a matter of commonality of setting than of genre coherence. In the last few years I've been aware of a batch of films in which the lives of people are intricately bound up with their urban environments, lives that seem to find little to sustain them in that world, and which are, in some cases, threatened by it. I think of titles including Alkinos Tsilimidos's Tom White (2004), and three from 2005: Robert Connolly's Three Dollars, Sarah Watt’s Look Both Ways and Rowan Woods' Little Fish. This is not to make claims for generic purity but to suggest that these are films—like the police procedural, Noise (2007)—in which the facts of urban life go beyond mere setting. These films have in common protagonists for whom it creates pressures that, in varying degrees, they seek to come to terms with, most explicitly in the case of Three Dollars. In this undervalued film, Eddie (David Wenham) specifically confronts the difficulty of maintaining integrity and a job with a corporation none too fussy about its dealings with the environment, and of balancing the claims of wife and child against broader ethical challenges, and ends by dealing with educated near-penury in the bleakness of city streets. In Tom White, Colin Friels plays the eponymous draughtsman who abandons his comfortable middle-class lifestyle and becomes a homeless derro, ultimately finding something rewarding, as it relates to himself and others, in doing so. William McInnes, as cancer-challenged photo-journalist Nick in Look Both Ways, has a lifestyle that only a city can support, but it doesn’t support him, and the film is honest enough to avoid a clichéd closure; and Cate Blanchett, as recovering junkie Tracy Heart in Little Fish, joins battle with the sorts of problems, including drug traffic, more likely to thrive in an urban milieu.

But the antipodean genre mutations that have most beguiled me are those that play with mockumentary. The international name most associated with this form is Christopher Guest, who co-wrote This Is Spinal Tap (Rob Reiner, 1984), a leading title in this genre, and whose work as director was most recently seen here in the very funny For Your Consideration (2007), spoofing independent film-making and the egos concerned. The essence of the mockumentary is a deadpan chronicling of events as if placed before us unadorned by narrative structuring and character manipulation, and with frequent direct address to the camera. The camera in its turn often creates the impression
of following the characters aware of its presence, as distinct from the normal practice of film-making, which seeks to suppress the signs of its apparatus. Mockumentary can be used to serious effect, but, more often, its aim seems to be sly fun at the expense of our characteristic credulity when faced with lives on the screen, of our urge to take seriously what is patently false in all sorts of ways. (John Grierson, high-minded Scots founder of British cinema’s documentary movement, would be ashamed of us: he wanted films to inform, entertainment purely an optional extra.)

Whether there is something in the Australian psyche (whatever that may be) inclining us to enjoy this kind of mockery of what we normally accept at face value I cannot say. What is true is that in the last few years, some of the most sharply knowing movies made here have led us up this garden path, with our willing collusion. Four titles that come to mind are: Scott Ryan’s *The Magician* (2005), Clayton Jacobson’s *Kenny* (2006), Darren Ashton’s *Razzle Dazzle* (2007) and, with some reservations, Tony Rogers’ *Rats and Cats* (2008). There have been Australian films with loftier ambitions than these, but very few offered more sophisticated fun—sophisticated in their playing with conventions and in how they invite us to feel pleased with ourselves for locating the wit at work behind the po-faced foreground. The only local precursor to these recent successes that I recall is the partial assumption of the mode in Baz Luhrmann’s *Strictly Ballroom*, in which the reactions to the hero’s dance-floor act of rebellion are canvassed in ‘interviews’ with his family and professional associates, enjoining on us a different order of suspension of disbelief.

Reputedly made for $3000 (surely not right), *The Magician* draws attention again to the enormous wastefulness of so many films with nine-figure budgets. What can’t be easily bought are the intelligence, wit and cinematic know-how that *The Magician* had going for it. The pre-title sequence, in which hitman Ray Shoesmith briskly dispatches his first victim (somewhere up the top end of Bourke Street) and then goes on his way, sets the mood and tone for the documentary that follows. As Ray goes matter-of-factly about his work, it is all being recorded by his old friend and one-time neighbour, Max Totti, who is making a documentary about the daily life of a hitman. The dialogue between filmmaker and hitman persistently gets the right note: ‘What did you do before you became a hitman?’ as if it were just one of many professions he might have followed. Or later, equally casually on a back road somewhere out of Melbourne, the chap being pushed into the boot of the car says apologetically, ‘I don’t mean any disrespect but I suffer from claustrophobia’, and this is followed by an argument about who was in *Dirty Dozen*. You get the picture.

Jacobson’s *Kenny* adopts the mockumentary mode to investigate the life of a man who delivers and installs portaloos on festive occasions such as the Melbourne Cup. The film’s control of tone is masterly, affection for its protagonist rubbing up against satirical intention. *Razzle Dazzle* is a tougher proposition. From the start, it throws us into the world of competitive dancing with a sleek voice-over telling us that ‘everyone is so beautifully groomed’, then introduces Mr Jonathan (Ben Miller), the vain choreographer rabbiting on about ‘a journey into dance’ and later lying that ‘it’s not about winning’. The other key character is the obsessive stage mother, played by Kerry Armstrong with enough sense of reality for the fly-on-the-wall filming technique to work.
The film is full of maliciously observed moments with competitive adults and pretentious talk and, as in *The Magician* and *Kenny*, its grasp of tone is maintained to the very end—in this case, during the final credits.

This last point reminds me that those people who left the screening of *Rats and Cats* before the credits finished also missed its conceited ex-showbiz ‘hero’, Darren McWarren (Jason Gann), giving the Australian film industry a serve. Direct to camera, and us, he says: ‘A lot of people say they want to see Australian films. But they don’t. Not interested. The film ends up sinking cos the Australian public won’t get off their arses and support Australian films.’ Asked why this might be so by an off-screen voice, Darren says succinctly, ‘Cos they’re shit.’ Gormless journalist Ben (Adam Zwar, Gann’s co-star in TV’s *Wilfred*) is planning a ‘Where are they now?’ piece on the washed-up soapstar (pun not intended but probably inevitable) and tracks him to sleepy seaside Gladdington, where the awful Darren has willing groupies and a more-than-passing relationship with the local masseuse. As Ben ‘probes’, Darren coddles himself in clichés, such as how he’s ‘got the respect of Gladdington’s rougher element’, following an undistinguished performance in the boxing ring; or, explaining why his TV series ‘Father Roger’ (extracts of which we see) was axed, he adverts to the ‘rotten apples in the barrel’. Ben asks a local girl, ‘What’s it like working with a national treasure?’ and another of his interviewees who shares a gig with Darren at the local pub concedes that ‘it’s a double-edged sword having Darren in the band’.

At the end, a voice-over tells us solemnly: ‘Darren disappeared shortly after I published this story.’ This is a film as verbally acute as it is visually literate: by the latter, I mean it looks as if it is the product of a small journal sending its man off to come back with the goods, but without giving him a lot of back-up support. Not perhaps mockumentary in its purist form, it has strong tonal and strategic affiliations with the genre. Because I don’t see a lot of TV I’m unfamiliar with Gann’s and Zwar’s résumés; I plan to rectify this. I haven’t laughed out loud in a cinema with such unrestrained pleasure in an age.

If space permitted, I could remark how intelligently and touchingly *The Black Balloon* (2008) updated the teen movie and relocated it to the Australian burbs, or how *The Tender Hook* (2008) offered a local spin on the noir thrillers of the 1940s and 1950s (and is quite as confusingly convoluted as some of them), or how *Dying Breed* (2008) reworked horror’s generic shocks, albeit to minor effect. Most recently, *Australia* (2008), whatever its faults of romantic cliché or overloaded and underdeveloped screenplay, nevertheless stakes its claim to be considered an outback epic along the lines of such famous Hollywood westerns as *Red River* (1947) or *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964). Taking on established genre territory is no guarantee of either critical or commercial success, but I hope I’ve adequately suggested how far our filmmakers generally have moved from the days when retelling the old myths about the national culture was *de rigueur*—even if *Australia* might make you wonder.