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Ozploitation compared to what? A challenge to contemporary Australian film studies

ABSTRACT

Australian exploitation cinema of the 1970s and 1980s has swiftly become a fashionable topic for analysis, rehabilitation and celebration, especially in the wake of the popular documentary Not Quite Hollywood featuring Quentin Tarantino. Is this Australian cinema's 'return of the repressed', at last, in the form of tough, vulgar, anarchic genre pictures – and does this show the way forward for our national cinema? This essay questions many aspects of the 'Ozploitation' craze, including its exclusion of art, intellectual or experimental cinema, and its peculiar streamlining of an extremely variegated and still obfuscated national film history. In particular, I argue for a comparative approach to national film cultures – which, in this case, would compel us to ask other, more stringent questions about the ultimate value of the currently baptized Ozploitation 'classics'.

KEYWORDS

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The flavour of the month around many film culture events, publications and websites of the world is ... the Australian exploitation cinema of the 1970s and 1980s? This is hard for an Australian like me to believe. But it is true: in France,

Korea, the United States and Austria (where the prestigious *Ray* magazine devoted a special dossier to the subject), critics and cinephiles have spontaneously shared with me their newfound enthusiasm – perhaps rekindled from TV or VHS viewings in their long-ago childhood or adolescence – for George Miller’s original *Mad Max* (1979), Colin Eggleston’s *Long Weekend* (1978), Peter Weir’s *The Last Wave* (1977) or even Russell Mulcahy’s *Razorback* (1984).

Suddenly a new image has emerged in the writing of global film history: Australia as the long unrecognized home of fantasy, horror, supernatural thrillers (like Richard Franklin’s *Patrick*, 1978) and sex comedies (such as Tim Burstall’s *Alvin Purple*, 1973). A proudly popular cinema of genre, entertainment and get-rich-quick marketing schemes. Cinema for the drive-in theatres that are now nostalgic emblems of a lost era. Film-makers with a vigorous taste for trash, but also with a touch of class.

This trend of re-evaluation is pouring into Australia from outside its borders, but it was initiated inside them. In the academic context, for instance, Currency Press’ ‘Australian Film Classics’ series has showcased detailed tributes to the Barry McKenzie films (1972, 1974) by Tony Moore (2005), *Alvin Purple* by Cathy Lumby (2008) and the *Mad Max* movies by myself (Martin 2003). Several DVD companies have been packaging (and, in some cases, restoring and extensively bolstering) the ‘lost’ Australian movies of that period. But the biggest and most determining event has been a documentary. The fast-paced *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!* (2008) by Mark Hartley has travelled to many film festivals; in it, not only the Australians involved in making those films of the 1970s and 1980s, but also *schlockmeister* Quentin Tarantino himself, sing the praises of this (apparently) uniquely Aussie cinema.

That doco ends with a nod to a new generation: Greg Mclean, director of the horror films *Wolf Creek* (2005) and *Rogue* (2007); Jamie Blanks, who has been to America and back in his career, and has recently remade *Long Weekend* (2008) in association with veteran screenwriter Everett De Roche; James Wan and Leigh Whannell, who were still film students in Melbourne when they sold to Hollywood the idea for the hit franchise *Saw* (2004–2009); and the German-born Spierig brothers (Michael and Peter), whose artisanal, inventive zombie feature *Undead* (2003), in the style of early Peter Jackson, has led to their US debut with the vampire film *Daybreakers* (2010). So suddenly, in this loop, there is not only a tradition, but its rebirth – and perhaps also the revelation of what our national cinema should *really* have been doing all along. Hence, *Not Quite Hollywood*’s campaign is designed to mark the return of a repressed cinematic or cinephilic truth.

Back in the period from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, by and large, the major film critics, funding bureaucrats and cinema institutions in Australia were not hailing films like those mentioned above as national classics. Quite the contrary: the films were often derided and despised, little screened beyond their initial theatrical release (with notable exceptions like *Mad Max*), and usually overlooked when they dribbled out onto the mass market in cheaply produced VHS copies. In that era, those who stood up in public to champion the films of Burstall, Eggleston or Brian Trenchard-Smith (*Jenny Kissed Me*, 1986) were decidedly in a minority. And this situation continued virtually all through the 1990s: look up almost any ‘official’ history of Australian cinema published between the years 1975 and 2000 – such as the maddeningly middlebrow *Oxford Companion to Australian Film* (see Martin 2000) or the leftist-oriented *The Screening of Australia* volumes – and you will find only a few, grudging lines on most of the Australian films and film-makers currently being

celebrated around the world. *Not Quite Hollywood* reflects, albeit elliptically and in shorthand, a similar analysis of the cultural neglect of a body of work.

So, in a very real sense, the attention paid to Ozploitation (as it has quickly become known, thanks largely to Hartley's effort) is long overdue. All the same, there are some curious and questionable facets to this current movement of reclamation. The acclaim that this body of film work is now receiving is an almost completely retrospective phenomenon, a bold rewriting of history – a salutary, necessary, invigorating exercise, but one that also carries an element of wish-fulfilment fantasy, even hallucination. In a way, this historical rewriting gives Australia the raw, vibrant, popular cinema it has never actually had.

Naturally, this carnivalesque gesture involves a severe inversion of established values: in the public manifesto of the 2009 Melbourne Underground Film Festival (MUFF), for instance, the clarion call is once again made for the government to get behind what the manifesto labels 'genre films' (in 'body genres' including horror, thriller and soft porn) – and abandon the commitment to what it paints, with an even broader brush, as 'art films' (Wolstencroft 2009). O tremble, ye grant recipients of the baby boomer generation; death to the ethos of Philip Adams, Gough Whitlam and Paul Cox!

Much has already been said for and against Tarantino's role in *Not Quite Hollywood* (see Thomas, D. 2009). I believe his function was crucial not only to the production and distribution viability of the project, but also, and perhaps more importantly, at the level of providing (in psychoanalytic terms) a type of powerful, imaginary *cohesion* to its constructed object of Ozploitation: if Quentin says he spent the days of his youth waiting for Aussie B-graders to appear at his local fleapits and drive-ins, then – somewhere, somehow – this national cinema really existed, and now exists again, after all. Although (and I will return to this point) genre or exploitation cinema has often shunned questions of national identity – and specifically its own identification as belonging to one nation or another – we are now witnessing an unlikely return, in the midst of Ozploitation's triumph, of national cinematic pride.

In order to understand how we reached this intriguing moment of Ozploitation mania, we must once again revisit – but from a new historical perspective – the context and culture of Australian cinema in the 1970s.

THE AFC GENRE (REVISITED)

During the 1970s, exploitation cinema (in all its forms) became a lost path in Australian cinema production – briefly toyed with, then discarded. As Deborah Thomas (2009) (following on from the work of O'Regan) makes clear, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* was fully financed by the Australian Film Development Corporation, prompted in part by a policy recommendation (in a 1969 Arts Council Report) to support 'frankly commercial films' (Thomas, D. 2009: 92). However, the path that eventually emerged as dominant was, overwhelmingly, a more conventional, middle-of-the-road cinema – unchallenging but assured, at least, of the support of a massively middlebrow critical and journalistic fraternity.

Nonetheless, for a few moments, in the late days of the 1960s and early days of the 1970s, many possible forms of cinema were tried out – and it is this multiplicity of options, once available and 'in play' in the public inception and reception of these films, that we need to recapture in order to, once again, re-complicate our view of the present conjuncture.

Let us consider the curious case of Peter Weir. To many of his fans beyond Australia, he is now – and has long been – a connoisseur of the popular *fantastique* genres of cinema: supernatural disappearance in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), mythic apocalypse in *The Last Wave*, mad delusions of ego-grandeur in *Fearless* (1993) and a Ballardian media-created ‘alternative world’ in *The Truman Show* (1998). But Weir’s career goes back well before *Picnic*, and reveals the many diverse paths that Australian film-makers were eagerly exploring in those pre-revival years. Weir had worked in television, making documentaries and telemovies (such as *The Plumber*, 1979). In the early 1970s, he (like Phillip Noyce) was affiliated with the independent cinema scene, brushing up against left-wing and experimental artists in the progressive Filmmakers Co-Operatives of Melbourne and Sydney of the period, and his short films (like *Homesdale*, 1971) show this influence. His first feature, the remarkable *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), was ostensibly an exploitation film (in sci-fi mode) that so impressed Roger Corman in the United States that he allegedly bought the distribution rights, almost hid it entirely from public view, and extravagantly remade it as *Death Race 2000* (Paul Bartel, 1975)! But *Picnic at Hanging Rock* changed everything for Weir in Australia – it was the film that made him culturally respectable. In Weir’s career – after what was considered at the time the slightly vulgar backward step of *The Last Wave* – his becoming-respectable was completed when he made the ultimate testament to heroic Australian nationalism: *Gallipoli* (1981). And that is the film that launched his commercial highbrow career in America with *The Mosquito Coast* (1986), *Dead Poets Society* (1989) and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003).

Picnic at Hanging Rock thus inaugurated what many commentators have since called (wisely or not) the ‘AFC genre’: in other words, the kind of film favoured by the federal government-funding body the Australian Film Commission (now Screen Australia) and the various state bodies – lushly photographed (often in nostalgic rural settings), derived from local literary or theatre classics, frequently about coming of age or family themes, costume dramas usually devoted to defining (in low-key heroic or mythic terms) the national character and its destiny. Despite repeated warnings as to the accuracy or validity of the term AFC genre – not least because far from all films classed as such were actually funded by the AFC! – it has indelibly stuck in the public record as a shorthand designation of a type of cinema.

The true question for current scholars of Australian film becomes: why do we keep on treating the category of the AFC genre as, exactly, the dominant mode – either to rehabilitate it or revolt against it – when there are so many other, parallel histories of cinema (its origins and destinations, not to mention what O’Regan (1996) calls its critical ‘uptakes’) going on in and around it? What would a study of Weir (who is just one example of this process) look like today if it freed him from the onerous *Picnic at Hanging Rock* lineage and related his evolution instead to the traces of genre, independence, the *fantastique* or political cinema? There is a close comparison in the long tradition of scholarship surrounding the classical Hollywood cinema: when commentators such as Noël Burch returned to the moment when the NRI (narrative-representational-industrial) mode took hold of cinema at large, the point became to unfold the multiplicity of options that were repressed or elbowed to the margins in that supposed inception of a widespread, regulated filmic language – options that subsequently re-emerged with fuller force elsewhere, for instance in the avant-garde, the underground or in artworld practices. And, at that point of history-writing, it also becomes possible to see anew a set of interweaving practices and

influences making their way into every interesting hybrid film. This is when national cinema studies again begin to become interesting and inspiring, generating possibilities for the future of both film-making and film criticism.

FILM, DEATH AND TAXES

After the five years of local success and international acclaim enjoyed between 1975 and 1980, many Australians experienced the 1980s as a particularly depressing decade for their national cinema. Weir, Fred Schepisi, John Duigan (*The Year My Voice Broke*, 1987), Bruce Beresford (*Puberty Blues*, 1981) and Russell Mulcahy all went overseas, and mostly stayed there; after the enormous success of *Mad Max 2* (aka *The Road Warrior*, 1982), George Miller also began making big films in America, or with American money. The government faced a big problem: how to kick-start the industry again, and attract non-government investment from business interests?

Thus began the age of 10BA – a tax dodge or ‘rort’ (as it was called in Australia) that allowed investors to largely write off their investments in film production. Today, in *Not Quite Hollywood*, on Internet fan sites or in DVD restorations, 10BA is mistily regarded as a kind of lost paradise for ‘anything goes’ film-making – and, certainly, figures including Trenchard-Smith flourished in it, with gross but lively exploitation movies like *Turkey Shoot* (1982) and *Dead-End Drive In* (1986). But many other talented film-makers who had emerged during the 1970s became stranded or derailed throughout the 1980s, such as Stephen Wallace (*Stir*, 1980).

The worst problem with the 10BA period – rather glossed over in *Not Quite Hollywood* – is that the link between film production on the one hand, and film exhibition/distribution on the other, became totally divorced. Many films were made (some being discovered only today) that received a mere couple of screenings, perhaps on late-night television – or perhaps no screening at all! (Several histories of contemporary Australian cinema, necessarily partial, were usually composed from notes taken at screenings held in the lead-up to voting in the Australian Film Institute Awards, in the days when everything entered would be guaranteed of receiving at least this limited exposure.) This happened because the tax incentive did not depend on anybody actually seeing these films – only the bottom-line proof that they were made, and that money was spent on them. (Hence the fantasy-need, in *Not Quite Hollywood*, for Tarantino to stand in as the eager audience following these 10BA films as they emerged.) And so began, also, the sometimes notorious period of the ‘producer as auteur’ in Australian cinema, headed up by the controversial figure of Antony I. Ginnane, mocked in several books about Australian cinema and featured prominently in *Not Quite Hollywood*, today a major public participant in industry debates about the future of Australian cinema on the international stage. Indeed, since 2009, the producer-as-auteur has fast become, in an intriguing and somewhat disturbing twist, the official policy of government film funding.

NOT QUITE AN ARGUMENT

There is a lot of Australian cinema you will not glimpse during even the most frenetic montage sequence in *Not Quite Hollywood*. It is neither the aim nor the obligation of the film to cover the entire span of contemporary Australian cinema. The question to critically pose to Hartley’s film is: does it fairly or comprehensively cover what *should* be in its remit?

A documentary film is not an essay in the way an article or book is; it can leave its premises largely unstated, and it does not need to provide traditional forms of methodological elaboration, or a bibliography. We must thus tease out the premises of *Not Quite Hollywood's* 'argument' from the evidence it selects and presents. I would describe these premises along the lines I have already suggested above: Ozploitation is the marriage of a generic, populist, entertainment-based approach to film-making with a certain subversive, transgressive – perhaps Ozploitation fans would say 'kickass' or 'sticking it to the Man' – attitude.

There has so far been little to no critical probing of Hartley himself as the brains behind *Not Quite Hollywood* – not as an individual with a particular career (in music video, for instance), but as the representative of a specific film-cultural sensibility. In Melbourne at least, Hartley has been, for many years, a familiar figure on the legendary 3RRR radio show *Film Buffs Forecast*, led by the well-known journalist-cinephile Paul Harris. Hartley entered the show as part of a jovial 'gang' (including critic Michael Helms, editor-publisher of *Fatal Visions* magazine in the 1980s and 1990s, and film-maker Mark Savage, auteur of *Sensitive New-Age Killer* [2000] and *The Masturbating Gunman* [1997]) that was 'into' exploitation cinema in all its forms – often, like Harris himself, exhibiting an encyclopaedic knowledge of the historical facts and figures of the ur-genre – and decidedly snarky when it came to any kind of 'wanky' intellectualism.

Indeed, it is not unfair to observe that the ascension of this particular sensibility on *Film Buffs Forecast* coincided with the eclipse of a more rigorously analytical and open-minded approach to cinema associated with the programme's illustrious founder, the critic, historian and scholar John Flaus. Although Harris has always given generous airtime to every kind of event within Melbourne (from the many small 'niche' festivals to the Australian Cinematheque calendar, via film magazines from *Cinema Papers* to *Senses of Cinema*), the unmistakable drift of the programme in recent years has been towards the sorts of views espoused by the Melbourne Underground Film Festival, rather than any more progressive Australian film subculture. And the cap-off to this drift occurred with the production and public life of *Not Quite Hollywood* – and Harris' (2008) own tie-in coffee-table book of the same title accompanying its release.

Why should this very local piece of internecine film culture history matter? Because it goes to the heart of the many curious omissions in the picture sketched so breathlessly by *Not Quite Hollywood*. To watch this film and take it on face value, one could well imagine that the general realm or cause of exploitation cinema found no champions in Australia between roughly 1985 and 2005 – that the middlebrow cultural view was everywhere triumphant. Even Deborah Thomas' (2009) authoritative academic account of the current Ozploitation phenomenon – which is far from uncritical – uncovers only one lone voice in that period of apparently bland wilderness: Carol Laseur's 1992 *Continuum* essay 'Australian Exploitation: The Politics of Bad Taste', derived from her Ph.D. research.

However, as Jodi Brooks pointed out during a panel discussion at Monash University's *B for Bad Cinema* conference in April 2009 – an event at which Ozploitation arose as a major focus of scholarly attention – the 1980s are characterized (if you are looking in the right places) by the rise of writers such as Brophy (1987a, 1987b) (whose 'That's Exploitation!' series appeared in *Filmviews*) and William D. Routt (whose anthology project on 'Australian

trash cinema', nurtured over many years, sadly never came to fruition). And many other key critic-scholars working in and since that period, including Meaghan Morris, Helen Grace and Brooks herself, have always displayed keen interest in the mutating forms and modes of popular genre cinema (horror, thriller, action, comedy). In the interests of full disclosure: I, too, formed part of the growing chorus arguing in favour of exploitation cinema in that decade (see Martin 1995).

The exclusion of Philip Brophy as a front-line commentator from *Not Quite Hollywood* – and of his 1994 horror film *Body Melt*, even though that, too, is a fave of Tarantino's – is entirely symptomatic of what is missing from it, and wrong with it. By making that fast jump-cut from the 1970s/1980s to now, much is elided: not only *Body Melt*, but James Clayden's punk-culture crime/art film hybrid *With Time to Kill* (1987); the films of Frank Shields (such as the spirited *Hostage: The Christine Maresch Story*, 1983); and one-offs like John Laurie's *Stroker* (1987), which was hailed as part of a 'company of eccentrics' by Susan Dermody in *Filmnews* magazine and *The Imaginary Industry* (Dermody and Jacka 1988). And what about the entire counter-culture tradition of sex, drugs, rock'n'roll and leftist politics in Australia, expressed in enduring, adventurous films like Bert Deling's *Pure Shit* (1975) and Haydn Keenan's *Going Down* (1983), all the way through to Ian Pringle's *The Prisoner of St Petersburg* (1989), co-produced by Wim Wenders? What about the aggressively populist but carefully stylized films of David Caesar (*Dirty Deeds*, 2002)? Where are the films alighted upon by Laseur in 1992, like *Zombie Brigade* (Barrie Pattison, 1986), *Sons of Steel* (Gary Keady, 1989) or later in the same vein *Trojan Warrior* (Salik Silverstein, 2002)? What of a truly inspired (and seemingly completely unknown, beyond its twilight life on cable TV) Ginnane international co-production such as *The Hit* (2001), directed by noted Australian cinematographer Vincent Monton? Come to think of it, where did Rolf De Heer's *Bad Boy Bubby* (1994) go – surely as pristine an example of confrontational aesthetics and transgressive content within a straightforward narrative as one could wish for? And has Aleks Vellis' wonderful *Nirvana Street Murder* (1989) – playing, like *Body Melt*, in the interstices of independent film and Australia's history of popular television – already been entirely lost between the cracks of what is fast becoming the official account of Ozploitation?

All these examples mark out, very precisely, an area of cinematic experimentation and cinephilic taste *between* 'genre cinema' strictly speaking and the many forms of independent and/or avant-garde cinema in Australia (including the many kinds of critical writing and theoretical speculation that went along with those pursuits). And the most active period for that sort of in-between work in Australia was precisely 1985–2005. *Not Quite Hollywood* avoids this corpus because it does not fit the argument of a 'hidden' national cinema's death and rebirth – and also because it does not match the agenda of the cultural sensibility from which the project springs. Ultimately, *Not Quite Hollywood* itself plays a policing, repressive role in film-cultural matters: through its unspoken and unargued principles of selection, it tacitly presumes to divide (as any polemic would, and does) *authentic* 'maverick genre entertainments for the masses' from every other kind of experiment with generic styles and modes of address. Our view of Australian film history is immediately both richer and poorer for it.

Indeed, it is a salutary exercise to flick through a few years worth of *Filmnews* issues spanning the 1980s and 1990s to receive a 'hit' of the many mutations of Filmmakers Co-operative political culture post the 1970s, none of

which fit the dreaded profile of the now accursed 'Australian middlebrow art cinema' (i.e. the AFC genre), and all of which are ruthlessly excluded from *Not Quite Hollywood*. Although they might have conceivably found a place there: everything from feisty feminist cinema (Margot Nash and Robin Laurie's *We Aim to Please* [1976]) and Godardian anarchism (the prolific oeuvre of Tim Burns) to Martha Ansara's rough-and-ready meshings of documentary and fiction (*The Pursuit of Happiness*, 1988) and Susan Lambert's genre piece *On Guard* (1984) ... not to mention Tom Cowan's mytho-poetic adventure *Journey Among Women* (1977), or the singular film-theory/sex-comedy *Yackety Yack* (Dave Jones, 1974). It need hardly be said that the proliferation of female names in any such listing of the Australian independent scene's history stands in stark contrast to what Anthony Carew in Melbourne's *Inpress* street tabloid vividly but rightly described as the 'boy's club circle jerk' of *Not Quite Hollywood*. And a further glimpse at a more truly underground publication, *Cantrills Filmmotes*, the Bible of the local experimental scene – even though it, too (in the merrily unstable logic of government patronage) received federal funding for a time – would turn up other prime candidates for truly transgressive cinema working with accessible forms or templates, like Michael Lee's militantly blasphemous experimental animation *The Mystical Rose* (1976), a film that, in sticking it to the Man, targets the good Lord himself.

'Not quite Hollywood': the double-meaning or ambivalence in that title phrase tells us something significant. On the one hand it can mean, cheekily, 'nothing at all like Hollywood', i.e., a radical alternative to the mainstream. But, on the other hand, it means 'almost like Hollywood', i.e., almost getting to the mainstream and the success to be won there, if only it could receive the recognition, acclaim and financial hand-up it needs. The exact same ambivalence rages through the manifestos of the Melbourne Underground Film Festival: this is an underground that wants to be subversive and transgressive, but also wants to be the next *Saw*, conquering Hollywood from a local talent-base of crafty young genre-fiends. Wilson (2009), in his *Age* review of MUFF '09, put this contradiction well:

MUFF has never mounted anything like a serious challenge to the assumptions of the Australian film industry, however often terms like 'Ozploitation' are used to invoke a have-your-cake-and-eat-it dream of outraging moral standards while retaining mass appeal. The open letter in the catalogue is a muddled but revealing document, not least in its demand that funding bodies reward 'success' as conventionally defined by box-office takings and critical acclaim. There's nothing remotely radical about this, and the rebel posturing is hard to reconcile with the whining about a lack of government support.

A similar critique can be addressed to the cultural mindset underlying *Not Quite Hollywood*.

COMPARED TO WHAT?

But let us narrow our focus squarely on the films celebrated by *Not Quite Hollywood*; let us return to the admittedly rather slim 1970s/1980s canon comprising *Long Weekend*, *Turkey Shoot*, *Mad Dog Morgan* (Philippe Mora, 1976) and *Razorback*. Who are we fooling when we decide, all of a sudden, to venerate these films so highly? Ourselves, it would seem, and also quite a few of

our significant film-cultural 'others' around the world, on the circuits of film festivals, cinemathèques and magazines.

Do not misunderstand me here. I am not rejecting these films outright as low trash (not even yesterday's fiercest middlebrows, who today haunt the pages of Australia's dwindling literary journals, are so vocal in their denunciations anymore), or claiming they are utterly devoid of interest. I happen to have written positively, and within a theoretical framework, about a number of them myself over a 30-year period (especially the first *Mad Max*, which I hereby exclude from this critique – see Martin 2003), and by and large I would uphold those opinions and analyses. But if we are to truly gauge the achievement (aesthetic, cultural, political) of Australian films, and engage them in a productive critical uptake, we need to ask harder, sometimes harsher questions of their value or their success in terms other than those defined by box office or DVD-market returns – or even the powerful aura of a 'cult film' halo retrospectively attached.

One of the greatest problems that has hampered the historiography of Australian cinema is the general reluctance to embark on international or cross-national comparisons, whether on the level of auteur, genre, politics, subcultures or aesthetic style. One of the few books to explicitly attempt this – McFarlane's and Mayer's (1992) oddly structured and ill-argued *New Australian Cinema: Sources and Parallels in American and British Film* – makes (in my opinion) a hash of it, because it so relentlessly and unfairly brings both Australian and British cinema to the bar of an American classical narrative style elevated to the status of a lofty universal norm (see Martin 1992). There have certainly been signposts towards such work in O'Regan (1996), Morris (1988) and, from abroad, in the programmatic essay of Willemen (2005) on a theory of comparative film analysis that many Australian scholars have cited, but, by and large, work on this national cinema goes on largely in a self-referring bubble – exactly the same kind of bubble that is regularly critiqued, within such work, as the myopia of an obsession with defining national identity!

Have the challenges and possibilities of such a comparative approach gone mostly uncanvassed because the likely results would be highly unpalatable? This seems, at least from an evaluative point of view, the sort of approach that (implicitly or explicitly) seeks standards of 'world quality' – however, as we shall see, that is not the only possible or necessary framework for cinematic and cultural analysis. But let us linger for a moment with the repressed 'taste test' of Australian cinema, to see what it can dislodge. It can be a bitter pill to swallow – but one worth popping, nonetheless. Would the champions of Paul Cox be able to sustain their praise of this arty auteur in a lengthy comparison with Andrei Tarkovsky, Béla Tarr, Hou Hsiao-hsien or the Dardenne brothers? Can Beresford's *Money Movers* (1978) really keep company with the best work within the thriller-mystery-action genres by the Coen brothers or Claude Chabrol? Is *To Have and to Hold* (John Hillcoat, 1996) in a class with Todd Haynes or Pedro Almodóvar? Are *Romulus, My Father* (Richard Roxburgh, 2007) and *The Home Song Stories* (Tony Ayres, 2007), as highbrow, multicultural family melodramas, on par with Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) or Jinglei Xu's remake of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (2004)? Can Ray Lawrence's films stand up to the models they aspire to, such as the work of Robert Altman or Jean Renoir? Can even *Bad Boy Bobby* mix it with the confronting work of Michael Haneke, Bruno Dumont or the recent Mexican film *Los Bastardos* (Amat Escalante, 2008)?

A likely response to the way I have couched this comparative project so far would rightly be that – by always cross-referencing features with other features (mainly narrative) of roughly similar genres, but over countries of often vastly different sizes (Australia/United States) and with vastly different cultural traditions (Australia/France) – we are going about the task incorrectly. Again, one needs to widen the frame of production reference in order to find the fertile connections that *can* exist, conceptually – and *do* sometimes exist, materially, in the circuits of international programming and criticism – between figures, works and trends in different countries. The vast field of short film-making in Australia has never received its proper due, for instance: there is a prefiguring of Dumont's strategies and sensibilities in the films of Graeme Wood (*Teenage Babylon* [1989], *Miss Taurus* [1994]); a connection across generations and cultures between the minimalism of Philippe Garrel in Paris and Bill Mousoulis in Melbourne (not, for a long time, a matter of any direct influence of the former on the latter); a baroque-grotesque underground sensibility shared by Mara Mattuschka in Austria and Melanie El Mir in Australia; and many unconscious echoes between the disquieting animations of Paul Fletcher (first on Super 8, now in digital) and those of Jan Svankmajer or the Brothers Quay. The multimedia work of Philippe Grandrieux (*Sombre*, 1998) has a close affinity with that of James Clayden, while the criminally under-discussed Brian McKenzie, working across documentary (*Kelvin and His Friends*, 1987) and fiction (*Stan and George's New Life*, 1992), cinema and television, has been recognized and feted by the likes of Abbas Kiarostami, Chantal Akerman and even (briefly) Hollywood – tapped as a film-maker with the right style and sensibility to handle an adaptation of Richard Ford's novel *The Sportswriter*. Likewise Craig Monahan, after *The Interview* (1998), was tempted by Terrence Malick to direct one of a slate of projects developed (across several countries) with producer Ed Pressman.

Even when such projects have not eventuated, it is instructive to use them as a spur to lateral, creative thinking about the sorts of transnational cinematic networks Australian cinema can, does or might plug into. Only one, enormous example: what would a true history of women's cinema, in all its forms and extension, be if it included not only the token Great Auteur of Jane Campion from the Australia/New Zealand axis, but also all those who have toiled for decades in the fields of the avant-garde, political documentary, artworld projects and creative television? And what if this history were to be written or undertaken precisely from an Australian base, making all the necessary connections with the work of Akerman, Agnès Varda, Carolee Schneeman, Ulrike Ottinger and so many others? Certainly, such a project would finally make up for the regular exclusion of key film-makers including Margot Nash, Solrun Hoaas, Jackie Farkas and Monique Schwartz from most official Australian film histories.

Let us face once again the unpalatable aspect of a comparative study of contemporary Australian cinema – specifically in relation to Ozploitation. What is the comparison to be made between the films of this loose genre and projects of similar scale, type or ambition in other countries abroad? On this terrain, I am indebted to the ongoing work of Monash University post-graduate Lauren Bliss (2009), who has asked the pointed questions, specifically of Australian horror films: have we made the work – from that same Ozploitation-anointed period of 1975 to 1985 – that can stand alongside *Videodrome* (David Cronenberg, 1983), *Dawn of the Dead* (George Romero, 1978), *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982), *God Told Me To* (Larry Cohen, 1976) or *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984)? Does it have the

metaphorical power and the multiple layers to sit (hypothetically) within a seminal essay of or about the period by Wood (2003), Williams (1996), Thoret (2006) or Britton (2008)? Can we do much more with these films than applaud their production bravura, their 'outcast' cultural status and their occasional moments of spectacular excess? A healthy film culture – whether renegade or conventional – must amount to more than that. Whether or not we are talking about 'great' films (masterpieces, in the final analysis, will be relatively rare occurrences), we need to be able to locate cinematic and cultural *gestures* (in the sense that philosopher Agamben (2007) uses this term) that stand out in their time and stay up over time.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Why all this feverish rewriting of Australian cinema history in the name of Ozploitation? The carnival goes on with a particular, perhaps partly unconscious purpose in mind: as *Not Quite Hollywood* makes perfectly clear, this reclaiming of the past offers a new way of projecting Australian cinema into the future, and into the global arena of film production. It is a way of breaking the insularity, the gridlock of an often inward-looking, scarcely exportable national (and nationalist) production, usually more tied to local television styles and themes than the *lingua franca* of international entertainment genres or transnational art cinema modes. George *Mad Max* Miller, for one, has understood this since at least the beginning of the 1980s. As a gesture it is valid, understandable, even laudable; it has certainly stirred things up productively (in the worlds of critical writing and DVD releasing, to name only two spheres), as is clear when Philippe Mora responds to an interviewer's question as to whether he finds Ozploitation 'a useful label' – enthusiastically betraying, in the process, the new strain of nationalism that underlies this movement to reclaim a movement once championed as so inimical or frankly indifferent to nationalist questions:

I think it's useful as long as it's 'oz-' and not 'ex-'. It's triggered people's brains to Australian movies. It's quite amazing, really, that *Not Quite Hollywood* has brought so much attention to so many other films.
(Pedler 2009: 96)

So, a penultimate question arises from the current Ozploitation craze: is the possible future that it salvages, flags and projects from out of a semi-imaginary past really the only one that we want? Then a closely related, more methodological or theoretical question: how do we write the history of our national cinema, and what is at stake in this project? Although many other fields of history writing (including life-writing) in Australia have benefitted from an extraordinary period of self-consciousness and self-interrogation over the past 40 years, Australian film history has undergone no such internal purging and rebirthing. O'Regan's (1996) magisterial *Australian National Cinema* is the sole reference book (I leave aside here the significant but scattered essay, article or book chapter contributions by many others) that lays out and opens up its history-writing premises in a rich and rhizomatic way. O'Regan's book – although it is not always seen or used in this way – is, in part, an intervention into histories written on the basis of *taste* or evaluation (and, when it comes to Australian film, that amounts to almost every other textbook history): it does not relativise taste judgements so much as it multiplies them, indicating the

multiple inputs and contexts that give rise to estimations of value (or lack of value) in particular cultural milieux and subcultural scenes – or, in the terms I am using, it gets us closer to the true gesture of a work. O'Regan's is a book that helps us to imagine not just one future for Australian cinema, but many – all of them intricately entangled.

Not Quite Hollywood is itself, of course, a history composed (in images and sounds, words and edits) on the basis of taste – and a peculiarly savage taste at that. In the end, the story it tells is too neat, too singular. It has certainly helped to shake things up within the frequently moribund scene of Australian film culture, and it has given some credit where it is due. But it also – in the face of the scattered riches of Australian film that remain to be gathered, curated and narrated – represents a closing-down of avenues, from a paradoxically philistine, anti-intellectual position. Oh for the day when, once again, a critic like John Flaus will be able to stand before a film like *Yackety Yack* and proclaim (as I once heard him do) to an eager, curious public of committed cinephiles, 'This movie bristles with more points than an essay by Meaghan Morris'.

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