

July 2005

Feature: In Search of A Healthy Diet

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Feature: In search of a healthy diet: Balancing Local and International Content at Australian Film Festivals

By Boris Trbic

Curators and programmers at Australian film festivals face the constant challenge of balancing local content with a steady flow of foreign films from the international festival circuit. The number of high profile festivals in Australia, the increased volume of films, screenings, attractive international guests and audience demands,¹ as well as distributors' policies and regulations, makes the screening of Australian films in relative proportion to the array of high-quality international programs, an increasingly difficult task.

The precarious situation in Australian feature film, and the (un)deserved barrage of criticism in recent years, has caused comparisons with the situation in other national cinematographies. Some claim that the prolific and successful regional cinemas of New Zealand and South Korea offer a recipe for the Australian industry. The turn of the century emergence of the South Korean cinema as the 'new Hong Kong' and the series of impressive New Zealand features, short films and documentaries as well as the financial bonanza from *The Lord of the Rings* that flooded its shores with a tide of location scouts, are ostensibly good reasons to follow these paths. However, some forecasts of the financial decline of Korean film and voices of dissent that question and challenge the moment of the New Zealand cinema, paint a more accurate picture of the situation in the region.



Melbourne International Film Festival team
(Bret Woodward, Juliana Chin,
Nick Felk, Phillipa Campey, James Hewison)

It is also interesting to look at European film as an example. Strong national cinematographies, like those in France and Germany, first spring to mind. Seen by 8.5 million people, *Les Choristes* was the most popular film in France in 2004. It also managed to draw considerable box office numbers across the world. German film contributed a fantastic 23% to the domestic box office intake in 2004. In 1998, this figure was 10%. In comparison, Australian figures are much more modest (under five per cent) and our highest grossing domestic films (*Pizza* in 2003) score far less points internationally.

When I presented these figures to Paul Harris, the Director of St. Kilda Film Festival and host of Melbourne's 3RRR's Film Buffs Forecast, he pointed out that Australia is in a unique position for a number of reasons. Firstly, Australian film competes with other English speaking cinemas; secondly, in some European countries, cinemagoers contribute to the domestic film industry even when they buy tickets for a Hollywood blockbuster; and last, but not least, there have never been so many films for audiences to choose from.

Harris acknowledges the comments on the dire situation in Australian (feature) film with a healthy scepticism. In his opening speech at the 22nd St Kilda Film festival, he pointed out that his policy is to invite local films that initiate rather than follow trends. He likes to remind film buffs that unique and inspiring Australian stories, like *Cracker Bag* for instance, never fail to perform well at the international circuit, and that high profile Australian film festivals are often the best springboard for success.

This year's SKIFF, Harris's seventh as Director, continued the trend in the gradual reduction of Australian films, from two hundred to a hundred. Harris, who saw six hundred Australian films during the selection process, says this was done in order to pitch the festival as the top selection of Australian short film. Keen to promote the best Australian shorts, Harris is wary of the digital revolution that might empower the emerging filmmakers, but, inevitably, brings a tide of bad films.

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He did not hesitate to include four international sections in this year's SKIFF. Thus, he created an interesting and stimulating program, balancing between the best of the Australian annual crop and the selection of the most inspiring films from Interfilm Berlin, Aspen and USC and CalArts schools, and the early shorts from famous Hollywood directors. Broadening the international component of the festival only complemented the increased interest of the audience in the showcase of Australian short film.

Australian directors often see local film festivals as an opportunity to launch their films into the international orbit. In an interview with *Inside Film*, Sydney Film Festival's new artistic director Lynden Barber referred to the three independent, self-funded Australian films to premiere at the festival – *The Magician* (Scot Ryan), a mockumentary about a professional killer; *Mosaic* (Aaron Catling), about child sexual abuse; and *Blacktown*, which Kriv Stenders made while waiting for finance for *The Illustrated Family Doctor*. Barber said: "This has become one of the most interesting and exciting areas of filmmaking in Australia. And a selection at the SFF is a major status for those pictures - it becomes a platform."²

The Artistic Director of the Brisbane International Film Festival, Anne Demy-Geroe, points out that in selecting films for BIFF, she places special emphasis on the exhibition of Australian content: "I work on a kind of grid that I've balanced out before - I'm usually looking for six to ten films a year - includes features and docos. Australian films are very well attended at the festival, I suspect partly because the directors are always in attendance and it is a rare opportunity for the audience to meet them." Demy-Geroe also stresses a good working relationship with Australian distributors: "Sometimes they release a film I desperately want to screen before the festival or are unwilling to screen a particular film, but that is of course their prerogative."



"Look both Ways" (Sarah Watt, 2004) - a feature co-funded by the Adelaide Film Festival.

The recent international success of Australian films (*Wolf Creek*, *Clara*, *Yellow Fella*), the encouraging signs in local cinemas (*The Illustrated Family Doctor*, *Peaches*) and the array of independent, low-budget features have prompted the directors/programmers to place particular emphasis on the exhibition of local content. Opening the media launch of this year's MIFF, James Hewison, the Executive Director, strongly suggested that the screening of all Australian entries from this year's Cannes festival testifies to the strength of both the independent and mainstream arm of the local industry. Asked about maintaining the delicate balance between screening Australian films, international trends and demands of the audience, Hewison responded: "Any substantial film festival must be engaged with its local culture, but I don't think we should become imprisoned by it. We consider Australian films, be they short, documentary, features, experimental, in much the same manner as the rest of the program. That said, we do have a receptacle for Australian films, being the Australian Showcase. If there was, in our view, not a particularly strong year for Australian film, at least within the programming constraints of the festival, then we'd have a very lean year." MIFF Programmer Nick Feik points out that it is not good making concessions for films only because they are locally made: "Local film industry should be supported, but applying different standards makes for a weak critical culture".

Nevertheless, Hewison notes that, "[A]s it happens, whilst the bells are tolling for Australian cinema, it appears this year we have some revelatory work by Australian filmmakers. I would include in that world sweep *Wolf Creek*, which of its genre is particularly striking, and also more experimental work such as the Ben Spetz film, *Satellite* and darker work, such as the short film *Blue Tongue*, through to animation, such as *Clara*."

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In the same vein, MIFF patron, Geoffrey Rush, pointed out that actors and filmmakers in Hollywood tell him that they would like to have their films screened in Melbourne. Melbourne director, Rowan Woods (*The Boys*) whose recently completed film, *Little Fish*, starring Cate Blanchet, Hugo Weaving and Sam Neill, was selected to open this year's MIFF, struggled to find the words to express his excitement and gratitude to the Festival. He noted that, as a Melbournian from the Western suburbs, whose films are located in familiar settings, he was proud to open the selection of top international and local films at the biggest Australian film festival. Interestingly, Woods also noted that, after the MIFF premiere, *Little Fish* (Icon Film Distribution) will wait for a while before its premiere in the Australian cinemas coincides with a number of this year's Hollywood blockbusters (*Cinderella Man* and others).

Apart from facing serious challenges in programming Australian content, local film festivals make a continual effort to exhibit Australian films that are not given theatrical distribution. Michelle Carey is a Program Co-ordinator of the Adelaide Film Festival and previews feature films for MIFF: "It is important to program Australian cinema at the local film festivals. We are looking for cutting edge, innovative, confronting international films, and we must do that with Australian films, too, particularly those that don't have distribution. We don't have the Lincoln Centre or the ICA in Australia, and for experimental, independent films, there is not much of an avenue for theatrical exhibition in this country."

Recalling preparation for this year's Adelaide Film festival, Carey points out: "Adelaide is quite specific because it is isolated. Whilst we featured the Australian premieres of major international directors, Hou Hsiao Hsien, Wong Kar-Wai and Arnaud Desplechin, we also made a considerable attempt to program the Festival especially for Adelaide. Adelaide is the only Australian film festival that has a funding component, an example of festivals investing into local content. The preparation for the festival was generally a good time for the Australian cinema and one particular film, *Look Both Ways* (Sarah Watt, 2004), co-funded by the festival, revived my faith in local film. One cannot encapsulate it in two sentences. It's a film about death, but it's life affirming and has a warm glow about it. This film was filmed in Adelaide and we had an inkling about it. It resonated with the audience and set the tone for the whole Festival."

These examples demonstrate a plethora of challenges facing programmers at Australian film festivals. Discovering and exhibiting local content that represents the high end of Australian production against the best of international films is extremely difficult. Providing an opportunity for the local cinemagoer to see the courageous, independent Australian films that were denied theatrical release, emerges as an even more important task – one that contributes to the eminent role of film festivals in developing national film culture. Let's hope this year has already given the programmers plenty to choose from.

¹ Melbourne International Film Festival, one of the three largest in the Asia-Pacific region and one of the world's top-ten, last year recorded nearly eighty sold-out sessions, its audiences reaching a record breaking 178,000. According to Program Advisor, Brett Woodward, MIFF 2004 was only eighteen films short of reaching the number of films screened at Toronto, the world's largest film festival.

² Peter Galvin, 'New Era for the Sydney Film Festival', *Inside Film* 77 June 2005, pp.20-21.

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Excellent results for 1999 royalty distributions

Screenrights Member Services team has closed the books on its distribution of 1999 Australian and New Zealand royalties after achieving impressive results in distributing nearly all the money to members.

With only 1.27% of the Australian educational pool and 1.03% of the New Zealand pool left undistributed, the team's effort in tracking down members for payment has once again ensured an excellent distribution record.

Under its Articles of Association, Screenrights has six years in which to distribute the money it collects. Once this period expires, all undistributed royalties are rolled over into the next distribution pool.

"Our aim is to get this money out the door and into our members' hands," Distribution Executive Cameron Patience said. "As the deadline approaches, and we are trying to track down the last few small companies across the globe, this can involve numerous late night calls and emails urging potential payees to complete documentation so that we can pay them."

Patience said these members were always exceptionally grateful. "When we get their documentation back and the cheques out, its very rewarding. We get emails from members on the other side of the world thanking us for pursuing them relentlessly to ensure that they get the money they have earned from their work."

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Fair use submission

Screenrights has made a submission in response to the Attorney-General's Fair Use and Other Copyright Exceptions Issues Paper.

The Issues Paper is part of the Government's inquiry into whether changes should be made to the provisions in the Copyright Act allowing for the free use of copyright material. The issues that are being considered include the possibility of establishing a levy to be paid on blank recordable media to compensate copyright owners for the private or home copying of their work.

Screenrights and other key film and music industry bodies have argued for the establishment of such a levy in previous submissions to the Government.

Our submission in response to the Issues Paper can be found on our website: www.screen.org

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Directors' copyright

On 8 July 2005, the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee held a public inquiry into the proposal to include directors in the Part VC retransmission scheme as being eligible copyright owners.

The retransmission provisions provide that pay television operators pay copyright owners for the retransmission of free to air broadcasts of their work. Screenrights has been appointed by the government to administer these provisions. The amount of payment is currently being determined by the Copyright Tribunal.

Screenrights had put a submission before the committee saying that we would not comment on who should or should not be eligible. Screenrights said that as the bill was currently drafted Screenrights would be able to administer the scheme.

Further information on the proposal can be found on the Senate's website:

http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon_ctte/film/

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Farewell to International Relations Executive

After 13 years with Screenrights, International Relations Executive Cate Hemmings is leaving to take up a new position in copyright collections. Screenrights Chief Executive Simon Lake said Cate originally joined Screenrights as Corporate Counsel and Licensing Executive. "She then spent some years as Member Services Executive, before being appointed to start up Screenrights International division four years ago."

"She has worked tirelessly in collecting royalties held by overseas societies on behalf of our members," Lake said. "She has also been very involved in setting up Screenrights' new retransmission service. Her in depth knowledge of how similar schemes operate overseas has been of great benefit to us."

Lake said Cate's experience and dedication would be missed.

"We wish her all the best in her new role," he said.