

# Picking Up the Pieces: Contemporary Australian Cinema and the Representation of Australian Film History

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## INTRODUCTION

Australian cinema has a history dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. Whilst there have been many popular and scholarly written accounts of Australian cinema, a comparatively small number of feature films and documentaries have explored the contours of its history over the last 50 years. For example, between the 1960s and the 1990s, a handful of works, including *Forgotten Cinema: The Golden Age of Australian Motion Pictures* (Anthony Buckley, 1967), *The Passionate Industry* (Joan Long, 1973), *Newsfront* (Phillip Noyce, 1978) and *The Celluloid Heroes: 1896–1996—Celebrating 100 Years of Australian Cinema* (Donald Crombie and Robert Francis, 1995), were released that recognised an often overlooked, if broadly conceptualised, history of Australian cinema, and made claims for the need, resurgence and continuity of its ‘revival’. Nevertheless, a small but significant number of

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documentaries and fiction features were made between 2000 and 2015 that concern themselves with specific histories of Australian cinema. These films represent a shift in the ways Australian film history has been broadly conceptualised over this period and parallel a concerted attempt by scholars to expand, question and complicate the notion of national cinema and the dominant narrative histories constructed to support it. These movies reflect a subtle but significant change in terms of how Australian cinema thinks about its own history.

An ongoing problem of the popular and scholarly study of Australian film, as well as the communication of this history to general audiences, has been the continued absence of comprehensive retrospective cinema programming, a lack of visibility of older Australian films on free-to-air television and other delivery platforms, a seeming resistance by audiences to Australian cinema's back catalogue and a reluctance by Australian cinema itself to deal with and represent its own history. This is an issue only partly redressed by the rise of DVD as a widely popular format in the early 2000s, the appearance of a DVD distributor such as Umbrella Entertainment committed to making a large number of post-1960s Australian films publically available or recent attempts to set up, publicise and launch an exclusively Australian content streaming service called Ozflix.

This chapter examines how some Australian filmmakers in the 2000s seek to address the general lack of visibility of Australian film history. The analysis considers five feature-length documentaries released in the 2000s—Nigel Buesst's *Carlton + Godard = Cinema* (2003), Alec Morgan's *Hunt Angels* (2006), Mark Hartley's *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of Ozploitation!* (2008) and John Hughes' *The Archive Project* (2006) and *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia* (2009)—to develop a better understanding of how these contemporary works deal with specific elements of film history as well as its broader fragmentation. This chapter also provides a brief and necessary consideration of examples of contemporary fiction films, including Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008) and Jocelyn Moorhouse's *The Dressmaker* (2015), that use different means to also reference and question Australian cinema histories; a 'minor' intertextual practice that provides further evidence of the cinema's concern with the critical legacy and history of Australian film over the last 15 years.

This carefully selected sample of contemporary feature films and documentaries aims to question, revise and thicken the representation

of Australian film history through the documentation of marginalised filmmakers and areas of film practice; the examination of specific case studies; and the direct or indirect citation of canonical examples of television, documentary and feature filmmaking. These films are a response to the monolithic accounts of Australian film history that coalesce around the narrative of the feature film ‘revival’ or ‘renaissance’, as well as the centenary of cinema celebrated in the mid-1990s. Other than *Not Quite Hollywood*, these documentaries do not set out to discount or significantly undermine these broader histories, but to provide a historical narrative that incorporates marginalised or minoritarian practices underappreciated in these broader accounts.<sup>1</sup> In other words, they look elsewhere. These films also adopt a variety of approaches and examine Australian film history in relation to broader trends in Australian and international filmmaking; experiment with the forms of historiography; respond to the mythic and heroic narratives of the 1970s feature film ‘revival’ or ‘renaissance’; favour marginalised cultural, social, aesthetic and political practices and production models; and blend factual and fictional accounts of such sidelined figures as Rupert Kathner and Alma Brooks.

In so doing, this chapter addresses a gap in the literature on Australian film historiography. Although some individual works such as *Not Quite Hollywood* have been extensively written about and deployed in the classroom, most of the films discussed here have received limited critical attention and public exposure. This is surprising considering the important contribution they can make to our understanding of Australian film history in the classroom, as well as the manner in which these films’ often self-reflexive, selective and dialogical approach to the subject can open up debates about how history is constructed and communicated. Furthermore, there has been no sustained attempt to look more broadly at how Australian cinema represents its own history, the choices it makes and the ways in which these histories reflect and question popular tastes and the dominant accounts found in the scholarly literature.

This concern with history and its representational legacies is made most explicit in the various aesthetic, dialogical and political gestures deployed in the five films chosen for close analysis. These texts represent the most sustained attempts by Australian filmmakers in this era to look critically and questioningly at Australian film history in the post-war period (though *Hunt Angels* does also incorporate the immediate pre-war era). This analysis is ultimately designed to lead the way for further

critical accounts of the broader corpus of films that represent and reference Australian film history. Even though most of the key works in this field are mentioned here, the discussion is restricted to these sustained attempts to document marginalised aspects of Australian film history and the broader fragmentation of this discourse.

‘LOVE IS IN THE AIR’: AUSTRALIAN AUDIOVISUAL HISTORIES  
IN THE 1990s AND THE CENTENARY OF CINEMA

In the mid-1990s, a range of audiovisual texts were produced that attempted to encapsulate and distil the specific achievements and dominant images or motifs of Australian cinema, dating from the Lumière films of late 1896, shot by Marius Sestier, to the brief moment between 1992 and 1996 in which a range of antipodean films—including *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994), *Muriel’s Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994) and *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996)—gained significant international recognition. These largely ‘celebratory’ works were produced under the auspices of both the international celebration of the centenary of cinema in 1995 and the centenary of Australian cinema the following year (aptly commemorating the first offshore film production in Australia in 1896).<sup>2</sup> This grab bag of responses ranges from the *Australian Centenary of Cinema* (1995) trailers, an assemblage of key moments in Australian cinema history that were directed by Scott Murray, and the half-time entertainment at the 1995 Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final, to the more substantive long-form documentaries such as *The Celluloid Heroes* (a four-part documentary series), made by Film Australia as part of the National Interest Program and supported by the National Film and Sound Archive and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and *White Fellas Dreaming: A Century of Australian Cinema* (or *40,000 Years of Dreaming: A Century of Australian Cinema*) (George Miller, 1997),<sup>3</sup> produced by the British Film Institute as part of its expansive *Century of Cinema* series. These final two documentaries received prime-time screenings on the ABC in the 1990s.

This moment represents the last time that such a sustained, focused and consolidated overview of the ‘whole’ of Australian cinema has been attempted in film or television. These four texts share particular

preoccupations with the difficulty of making and identifying distinctive Australian cinema whilst attempting to provide some kind of fulsome historical context for the brief flowering of the local commercial industry at this time. For example, the AFL half-time event signposts a small number of films—including *Muriel's Wedding*, *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986) and *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992)—dating back fewer than 15 years that are effortlessly evoked by the use of an iconic pop song like John Paul Young's 'Love is in the Air' from *Strictly Ballroom*, an identifiable actor (*The Man From Snowy River*'s [George Miller, 1982] Sigrid Thornton provided the on-ground commentary) or a graphically sketchable promotional image. These elements were essential within the ham-fisted economy of trying to visualise the popular history of Australian cinema for an amnesiac audience through the on-field organisation of hundreds of under-rehearsed children with rudimentary props and placards scored by an inadequate public address system.

The other three works represent more sustained attempts to provide a recognisably comprehensive and incorporative vision of Australian cinema to this point in time. The *Australian Centenary of Cinema* trailers (there were two of varying lengths and temporal organisation, but of largely similar content, that screened during previews in cinemas and appeared on specific video releases) are particularly pertinent in this regard. The trailer, overseen and conceived by one of Australian cinema's leading scholars, Scott Murray, and commissioned by the Australian Film Commission (AFC) and the Melbourne Film Office to mark the 1995 centenary, is a very careful but sweeping attempt at providing a potted historical lineage of images from significant Australian films that reinforce particular motifs and chronologies, whilst also recognising patterns of correspondence and even influence over time rarely noted elsewhere in Australian cinema or its historical documentation. For example, it joins together analogous and arguably connected images from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) and *Priscilla* and concludes with a series of shots of figures climbing various rocky outcrops in the Australian landscape from the silent period to the 1990s. As Deb Verhoeven has argued, the trailer presents a 'narrative of ascension' that suggests a deep continuity and pattern of intertextuality between Australian feature films produced over a significant period of time, as well as inevitable growth within a largely promotional account of the 'greatest hits' of Australian cinema.<sup>4</sup> It also suggests that a 'national film culture'

is a ‘matter of creative assembly’,<sup>5</sup> an idea reinforced and challenged by the more recent works discussed in this chapter.

*The Celluloid Heroes* and Miller’s personally idiosyncratic *White Fellas Dreaming* present a more orthodox and ‘complete’ view of Australian cinema that resonates relatively closely with the views offered in earlier ‘broad canvas’ and gently activist documentaries like *The Passionate Industry* and *Don’t Call Me Girlic* (Andree Wright and Stewart Young, 1985).<sup>6</sup> These documentaries also largely correspond with the narratives and canonical tastes provided by such large-scale, scholarly histories as Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper’s highly influential *Australian Film 1900–1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*.<sup>7</sup> Yet Miller’s somewhat clumsy efforts to graft the 100-year history of predominantly white Australian cinema onto both Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey monomyth and 40,000-year-old traditions of Indigenous storytelling (appropriating the broad concepts of the ‘dreaming’ and ‘songlines’, in particular) do provide a degree of novelty and ‘brave’ cultural appropriation whilst arguing for the continuity of Australian cinema over unreasonably vast passages of time. *The Celluloid Heroes* sees an equivalent tradition or pattern in the difficult and shared graft of Australian filmmakers (the parched ‘celluloid heroes’ of the title) to eke out a distinctive and individualist cinema from the often hostile and arid terrain of local film production, exhibition and distribution.

These audio-visual texts can be productively compared to the various book-length studies by scholars and critics such as Tom O’Regan,<sup>8</sup> Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, Ina Bertrand,<sup>9</sup> John Tulloch,<sup>10</sup> John Baxter,<sup>11</sup> Graham Shirley and Brian Adams,<sup>12</sup> and Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka<sup>13</sup> that were published between the early 1970s and mid-1990s and also provide a ‘thickening’ of the broad and specific contours of Australian film history. O’Regan’s *Australian National Cinema*, published in 1996 during the centenary celebrations, is an important watershed in these debates, as it provides a detailed overview of Australian cinema that also recognises the difficulty of historicising, compartmentalising, temporally organising and defining such a heterogeneous, quixotic and problematic entity. In many respects, it led the way towards the important scholarly work by Felicity Collins and Therese Davis<sup>14</sup> devoted to post-Mabo cinema in the 1990s and early 2000s, and Olivia Khoo, Belinda Smaill and Audrey Yue’s<sup>15</sup> study of diasporic Asian-Australian transnational film production.

## OUT OF THE SHADOWS: EMERGING HISTORIES OF AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

Although there have been a few attempts to provide large-scale accounts of Australian cinema after this mid-1990s moment, including an episode devoted to cinema in the 25-part ‘millennial’ documentary series *Our Century* (1999), Jonathan Rayner’s *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction*,<sup>16</sup> an overview of cinema since the early 1970s, and the much-maligned *Oxford Companion to Australian Film*,<sup>17</sup> these works are marked by and, in some cases, criticised for, their absences, and the growing sense that comprehensive overviews reinforce hegemonic accounts of history that fail to embrace diversity, experimentation, transnational flows and the unjustly forgotten episodes and cultural practices of the past. Much of the critical literature published since 2000 has widely recognised the need to fragment Australian cinema and provide more nuanced accounts of particular moments in time, specific modes of film practice and screen culture and particular genres, filmmakers and ethnicities. This shift is also reflected in the range of films made during this period that opt for a more nuanced, specific and non-canonical view of Australian film history and the various filmmakers, other practitioners, modes of practice and approaches to history that constitute it.

The last 15 years are marked by films that attempt to compartmentalise the history of Australian cinema or provide micro-studies of the fate and careers of particular actors (e.g. Errol Flynn, Tom E. Lewis, David Gulpilil, Norman Kaye, Jack Charles), directors (Paul Cox, Rupert Kathner, Charles Chauvel, Joris Ivens), cinematographers (Don McAlpine, Dean Semler) and cultural formations like the Realist Film Unit/Association.<sup>18</sup> This is mirrored by various critical writings on transnational and multicultural cinema, Indigenous filmmaking, leftist documentary, a series of monographs on individual (if sometimes arguably canonical) films commissioned by Currency Press and books on figures such as J.P. McGowan<sup>19</sup> and Giorgio Mangiamele.<sup>20</sup> The rise of DVD in the 2000s has also led to the production of hundreds of largely short-form, low-cost documentaries—many made for Umbrella Entertainment, often with the involvement of Mark Hartley—dedicated to individual films as extras and featurettes. Within this context, feature-length works such as Hartley’s *A Dream Within a Dream: The Making of Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2004) and Lawrence Johnston’s *Fallout* (2013),

dedicated to Nevil Shute's novel and the film adaptation *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959), stand out for their more nuanced and developed surveys of specific production histories and their broader implications.

This questioning of the appropriateness and purpose of overarching accounts of Australian cinema is obviously highlighted at earlier moments in time,<sup>21</sup> and specific filmmakers like John Hughes have made connected works across these eras, but the project of 'national cinema' and its importance to conceptualisations of the history of Australian film have been called into question by audiovisual works that emphasise the transnational histories of film production, exhibition and reception, highlight the heightened localism of production in places like Carlton in Melbourne and examine important but marginalised filmmakers, including Rupert Kathner, Alma Brooks, Ken Coldicutt, Bob Mathews and, more problematically, as I'll discuss, the directors associated with what is now commonly called 'Ozploitation' cinema.

### RISING TO THE SURFACE: REPRESENTING AUSTRALIAN FILM HISTORY IN THE 2000S

The various narrative histories of Australian cinema, including those written by scholars such as Shirley and Adams, boilerplated onto such shorthand précis as the centenary trailers, smuggled into the seemingly iconoclastic *Not Quite Hollywood* or imbibed in such longer form documentary series as *The Celluloid Heroes*, are also referenced in other ways. For example, the last 15 years have seen the production of several, often surprising remakes of earlier Australian films. These remakes also reflect some of the key shifts brought about by this rethinking as well as the increased compartmentalisation of Australian film history. In the wake of *Not Quite Hollywood*, and the increased circulation of many of the films it referenced at retrospective screenings and through DVD releases, various largely unsuccessful remakes of 'classic' Ozploitation films have been attempted by highly reverential genre auteurs: *Long Weekend* (Jamie Blanks, 2008), *Patrick* (Mark Hartley, 2013) and *Turkey Shoot* (released overseas as *Elimination Game*, Jon Hewitt, 2014). These films revealingly reflect a broader trend in international genre filmmaking that looks fondly back to the 1970s and 1980s for inspiration. In the Australian context, an increased respect is granted to these generic films and their international reputations as well as the place they are

beginning to occupy in popular and scholarly accounts of Australian film history. For example, much has been made of the reference to Richard Franklin's *Patrick* (1978) in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003), Tarantino's dedication of the latter film to Ozploitation director Brian Trenchard-Smith on the occasion of its Sydney premiere and the appearance of John Jarratt and Tarantino himself as Australian characters in *Django Unchained* (2012), amongst other developments.<sup>22</sup>

It is rare to find overly explicit and direct intertextual references to Australian film history in feature films or telemovies at any point in time, beyond those that deal explicitly with this history, such as *Newsfront*, *Tudawali* (Steve Jodrell, 1988) and *Parer's War* (Alister Grierson, 2014). Several contemporary movies do, however, draw inexact connections to this legacy through the use of specific actors, iconography, locations and dramatic tropes. For example, *The Dressmaker* references the broad ocker comedies of the 1970s—alongside a more limited set of international intertextual references, including *High Plains Drifter* (Clint Eastwood, 1973)—whilst deploying various iconic Australian and international actors in roles that resonate closely with the previous Australian characters they are widely associated with: Hugo Weaving's role as Anthony 'Tick' Belrose in *Priscilla*; Kate Winslet as Ruth Barron in *Holy Smoke* (Jane Campion, 1999); and Judy Davis as Sybylla Melvyn in *My Brilliant Career* (Gillian Armstrong, 1979), amongst other examples. These contemporary films provide an important correlative to the more explicit documentaries and historical fictions that directly reference and prioritise our historical understanding of Australian cinema and ask us to identify its particular tropes.

*Australia* is a useful case that helps summarise this minor mode of expression in Australian cinema. Luhrmann's film makes explicit reference to a range of Australian, US and international texts. Its key intertext, aside from Xavier Herbert's novel *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975), is *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), one of the most highly referenced of all film texts. *The Wizard of Oz* (and the song 'Over the Rainbow') is used as a figure of appropriation that helps situate and dramatiser correspondences between Western popular culture and Indigenous narratives and forms of belonging and cultural understanding. It also uses this movie to highlight the transnational nature of the act of film going. In this regard, the film's use of *The Wizard of Oz* is not unlike George Miller's appropriation of Indigenous belief systems and

mythology to draw a pantheistic (song) line between his *Mad Max* films (1979, *Mad Max 2* [1981], *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* [1985]) and ‘40,000 years of dreaming’. Both films are also concerned with notions of reconciliation and historical redirection, a central theme and concern of many of the documentaries I will go on to discuss in more detail.

But *Australia*’s overt painterly artifice and its fusing together of partly ‘assimilationist’ cultural references is also reminiscent of Tracey Moffatt’s historically astute and pointed ‘cultural autobiography’,<sup>23</sup> *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989). This connection between Moffatt’s extraordinary and pointedly intertextual art movie and Luhrmann’s tricked-up melodrama also highlights *Australia*’s strong correspondences to earlier films, including Harry Watt’s *The Overlanders* (1946), Charles Chauvel’s *Jedda* (1955) and the gloriously impure oeuvre of Ken G. Hall. Like *Night Cries*, *Australia* is arguably in dialogue with the assimilationist themes and overheated theatrics of *Jedda*, but it also retraces the narrative form and historical context of the more documentary-based *The Overlanders*, as well as Hall’s composite mode of production that forged together studio and location, local and international modes of filmmaking. Narrative and characterological elements such as the ‘new chum’, played by Nicole Kidman, follow closely the common colonialist types deployed by Hall in films such as *Lovers and Luggers* (1937)—even the long pier in Darwin harbour is reminiscent of the one rear-projected in Hall’s film. Finally, *Australia* can also be placed alongside other contemporary non-Indigenous Australian films, including *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002) and *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005), that reference the troubled history of race relations, genocide and assimilation partly through how these phenomena have been previously represented and documented (e.g. the historical records and figures cited in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*; the photographs at the start of *The Proposition*; the paintings of *The Tracker*; the intertextual references to a large range of other Australian movies in *Australia*; as well as the figure of the Aboriginal tracker played by David Gulpilil in the first three).

*Australia* references a range of key works in Australian film history, including Moffatt’s more explicitly critical, intertextual and historiographical *Night Cries*. Yet it operates more as a soupy palimpsest than a full-blown account of a particular filmic legacy. Although many of the fiction films I have discussed so far do engage with particular representational histories, and *Australia* is remarkable for the critical density of its intertextuality, there is also a range of documentaries produced in the

last 15 years that deal more fulsomely with episodes in, and aspects of, Australian film history.

### MAKING CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN FILM HISTORY

The five documentaries under discussion here depart from many equivalent earlier works such as *The Celluloid Heroes* in the specificity of their advocacy or activism as well as their attempts to rewrite dominant institutional histories of Australian film. Nevertheless, these films are often studies in contrast in terms of the way they present this film history. For example, *Hunt Angels* relies upon a mix of found footage, excerpted film material from the work of Rupert Kathner and Alma Brooks, and full-scale restagings of episodes in the lives of its protagonists that are largely imagined or partly taken from Kathner's extraordinary and often-apocryphal book, *Let's Make a Movie*.<sup>24</sup> Despite featuring contemporary production values and highly stylised staging, combining all of these materials into a fantastical whole, Morgan's wilfully composite film aims to mirror the combination of documentary and fiction, fact and fabrication, grittiness and showmanship characteristic of Kathner and Brooks' wildly uneven, surprising, intermittently striking and often slipshod work. Hughes' two documentaries present a more detailed and extended account of the films of the Realist Film Association and Joris Ivens in Australia, but they are also marked by a density of representation that often attenuates the soundtracks of the original films and develops a mode of digital screen design that attempts to both annotate the image and thicken the representational history of leftist filmmaking in post-war Australia. *Not Quite Hollywood* is, understandably considering its subject, the most mainstream and outwardly commercial of the five films under discussion and is itself a mirror of the popular genre filmmaking it aims to reposition at the centre of the 'revival' of the 1970s and 1980s.

But unlike the other films discussed here, *Not Quite Hollywood* seems less concerned with maintaining the tone and pacing of the films it is citing—it is mercilessly edited in a fashion that significantly transforms the source material—and moves breathlessly and heedlessly through a range of genres, filmmakers, films, anecdotes and arguments. It utilises a hyperactive style full of pop graphics, fast-paced and dialectically organised interview grabs, and heavily montaged archive footage. As Jake Wilson has argued, *Not Quite Hollywood* is the least reflective film of those analysed here, a 'feature-length advertisement for its subject ... [that] moves far too rapidly to permit sustained analysis'.<sup>25</sup> As should be clear from even these brief

descriptions, these five films also reflect important developments in documentary practice over the last 20 years and the increasingly varied manner in which films are funded, distributed and put together. Though *Not Quite Hollywood* eventually received financial backing from a range of sources, including Film Victoria and its distributor, Madman Entertainment, Buesst's *Carlton + Godard = Cinema* was largely self-funded, draws on copious clips sourced from videos and DVDs often without rights clearance, and has only ever received stand-alone screenings at the Melbourne Cinémathèque and events such as the St Kilda Film Festival.

Four of these documentaries are focused on the period between the end of the Second World War and the early 1970s, an era variously and commonly defined as an 'interval' or 'void' in local feature film production in Australia, but plainly central to these re-directive histories.<sup>26</sup> These documentaries look to other forms of filmmaking, specific practices of film culture and localities of production to help 'fill' this gap in the peripatetic history of Australian cinema. In terms of their subject matter, all of these documentaries look beyond mainstream filmmaking within both the commercial industry and institutionalised forms of government and corporate-sponsored production. Each takes a step to the side of offshore production in Australia and examines the influence of both international developments in film aesthetics, including the *nouvelle vague* and leftist documentary, and particular cultural, social and political formations. These films directly counter or question many of the written accounts of Australian cinema in the post-war period by focusing on filmmakers and production entities such as the Realist Film Association that do not fit neatly into more conventional historical attempts to trace and map important antecedents of the feature film revival of the 1970s or the explicitly nationalistic concerns of a celebrated director like Charles Chauvel. They sit alongside more contemporary accounts of the complex interplay of politics, international influence and cultural nationalism found in a book like Deane Williams' *Australian Post-War Documentary Film: An Arc of Mirrors*.<sup>27</sup> These concerns also partly reflect the shared difficulties of making independent documentaries in the contemporary neo-liberal production environment.

### *Carlton + Godard = Cinema*

The first of these documentaries to be produced, *Carlton + Godard = Cinema*, muses on the small concentration of filmmaking that emerged around

Carlton in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Although this is revealed as a highly localised response to particular overseas developments such as Italian neorealism, and specifically its influence on post-war migrant Giorgio Mangiamiele, as well as the operations of the Melbourne University Film Society, the La Mama Theatre and the emerging café culture of its titular suburb, Buesst's partly autobiographical film does make a deflated argument for the national significance of what Bruce Hodsdon has described as a 'ripple'.<sup>28</sup> It presents a model for both the roads subsequently taken (the film revival of the 1970s) and not taken (a mode of filmmaking closer to Godard's more stridently political works, as suggested by Dave Jones' *Yackety Yack* [1974], the final film analysed in detail). Buesst's is the only film analysed here that was made by someone directly involved with the filmmaking movement it documents and describes. Perhaps in sympathy with the very low-budget, subdued, substantively invisible and often-piecemeal nature of the films it resurrects, generally at length, Buesst's overly leisurely documentary relies upon low-resolution clips, relatively Spartan interviews and a circumspect commentary by the director that never overstates the significance of this marginalised, inner suburban oeuvre. In this regard, it sits in contrast to hyperbolic works such as *Not Quite Hollywood*.

*Carlton + Godard = Cinema's* approach to this particular moment in Melbourne filmmaking is closely aligned with Susan Dermody's discussion of late 1970s and 1980s Melbourne-based cinema. In a chapter revealingly entitled 'The Company of Eccentrics', she champions an essential and refreshing ugliness, in contrast to perfunctory and often nondescript signature shots, as endemic of an identifiable Melbourne representational style.<sup>29</sup> She focuses upon an eccentric, low-budget, slightly perverse and idiosyncratic narrative cinema that most forcefully emerges in 1980s Melbourne but that has its roots in films such as Brian Davies' *Pudding Thieves* (1967), David Minter's *Hey, Al Baby* (1969), Peter Carmody's *Nothing Like Experience* (1970) and Buesst's *Bonjour Balwyn* (1971), works essential to the low-key urban sensibility of *Carlton + Godard = Cinema*.<sup>30</sup>

### *Hunt Angels*

Morgan's *Hunt Angels* is a more expressive, modern and hybridised film than Buesst's somewhat jerry-built compendium. It aims to position the marginalised work of Kathner and Brooks closer to the mainstream of

Australian film production as well as explore and dramatised the fate of the couple's films at the hands of US and British exhibition and distribution interests. In this respect, their work is clearly aligned with the nationalist push of the late 1960s and 1970s 'revival'. As previously mentioned, *Hunt Angels* also draws heavily on the extant footage shot by Kathner and Brooks, interviews with experts and actors playing historical figures, as well as material from Kathner's book, *Let's Make a Movie*. The film places this material alongside a series of stylised reconstructions of activities and anecdotes involving Kathner and Brooks as well as period photographs that superimpose the faces of the actors playing these roles into the historical record. The film emerges as something of a hybrid between documentary and stylised fiction, rhyming its particular approach with the filmmakers' notorious fly-by-night activities, sensationalism and studio-based, artificial mode of film production. It has significant connections with specific works of phantasmagorical film history such as Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983) and Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* (1994), as well as several more stylistically and historiographically conventional Australian documentaries produced in the last 10 years that explore the current and historical difficulties of Australian film production, distribution and exhibition, including *Into the Shadows* (Andrew Scarano, 2009) and *Advance Australian Film* (Courtney Dawson, 2014). In this regard, Morgan's consciously playful meta-fiction is also a serious work of both film history and screen activism that draws on Australian and international influences. *Hunt Angels* positions Kathner and Brooks as 'larrikin' mavericks who should be celebrated for their brazen attempts to make films in a notoriously hostile environment for independent filmmaking, and as authors of works that have been undervalued by film history, like the true crime documentary *The Pyjama Girl Murder Case* (1939) and the newsreel series *Australia Today* (1938–1939), which provides a very different vision of Australian society than the contemporaneous *Cinesound Review* and *Fox Movietone News* newsreels. Kathner and Brooks are also repackaged as models for contemporary filmmakers working in a defunded and highly commercialised production environment. As in each of these films, lessons are also provided for contemporary Australian cinema and its (lack of) understanding of the lessons of film history.

Like other films considered in this chapter, *Hunt Angels* aims to question or redirect existing historical accounts of Australian cinema in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Nevertheless, though it highlights the 'visionary' significance of several of the films made by Kathner and Brooks, it

still recognises the relative ineptitude of much of the output they created. The film itself also takes a little less care in its presentation of these historical artefacts, stretching them to the pictorial demands of 16:9 and weaving them into a palimpsest that draws heavily on the photographic archives of Sydney in the 1930s and 1940s. But *Hunt Angels* also establishes Kathner and Brooks as important precursors to Ozploitation cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, and positions them as ‘exploitation’ filmmakers who harnessed sensationalist news stories and opportunities afforded by changes in film production and exhibition policy, and who aimed to work within existing commercial modes of film genre and style (even if they were largely substandard in this respect). In this regard, it resonates more closely with *Not Quite Hollywood* than the other films discussed here. Nevertheless, *Hunt Angels*’ fantastical approach to its subject sits in contrast to Hartley’s more gleeful championing of an ill-defined Australian genre cinema.

### *Not Quite Hollywood*

Of all the movies made about Australian film history in the last 15 years, *Not Quite Hollywood* has received by far the most critical commentary and popular success. It has also had the most significant impact in terms of the popular understanding and scholarly study of Australian film history. Revealingly, it is the one film analysed here that deals explicitly with the 1970s revival *and* popular cinema. It has also prompted special dossiers devoted to its subject in journals including *Senses of Cinema* and *Studies in Australasian Cinema*. *Not Quite Hollywood* is also the only one of these five documentaries to receive significant international exposure and to achieve demonstrable impact in terms of a broader screen culture (prompting retrospectives, scholarly writing, DVD releases and restorations).

However, as commentators such as Adrian Martin<sup>31</sup> and Deborah Thomas<sup>32</sup> have laboured to emphasise, *Not Quite Hollywood* is both a highly enjoyable and necessary survey of genre filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s and a conveniently simplistic and straightforward account of the supposedly clear boundaries between the films of the revival funded by government bodies (mercilessly caricatured as the ‘AFC genre’) and the wild, independent and brazenly commercial works of what is now termed ‘Ozploitation’ (a contested term itself covering a wide range of trends and modes of filmmaking). In fact, the debate between Hartley,

Tarantino and others about the genealogy of this term highlights the key role these films play in the contemporary recasting and redefining of Australian film history as well as discussions about who ‘owns’ the ‘revival’ of the 1970s. This debate also underlines the more orthodox and counter-logical intentions of *Not Quite Hollywood* and how it ‘resurrects’ notions of Australian national cinema through seemingly marginalised and critically underappreciated works of genre filmmaking. Although the general trend in these contemporary films about Australian cinema is to fragment and thicken this history, specific works like *Not Quite Hollywood* take a more orthodox and populist approach that largely functions to displace and ultimately replace the existing canons and histories.

As Thomas has argued, Hartley’s film relies on notions of marginality and minoritarianism in relation to the supposed ongoing critical distaste for Ozploitation and deploys a historical account that attempts to broaden the definition and contours of Australian national cinema:

while Hartley may be stretching the parameters of what normally is situated comfortably within the marginal, ‘trashy’ sensibilities of exploitation, the rebranding of Australian genre cinema under this one evocative catch-all neatly devises a marketing hook that effectively yokes ‘Australian film’ to the international cinematic style of ‘exploitation’.<sup>33</sup>

This argument underlines the more strident and even nationalistic implications of *Not Quite Hollywood*. One of the most discussed aspects of the documentary is the role played by Quentin Tarantino as a promoter of, and historical witness to, this particular mode of Australian filmmaking. Tarantino’s fanboy enthusiasm and intimate knowledge has plainly been enormously significant to the ongoing influence of *Not Quite Hollywood*, and the rethinking of Australian film history it seemingly entails. As Thomas (2009) claims, ‘Given Tarantino’s high esteem of these films and his pastiching of them, Australia, the original receiving culture, becomes a transmitting culture so that its cultural products invite overseas imitation’.<sup>34</sup> In this regard, Tarantino acts as an expert witness to a nascent but seemingly coherent and influential ‘national’ cinema that can be pieced together from the varied and widespread distribution of this Australian genre filmmaking abroad. The claimed superiority of this genre-based national cinema is reliant on the form’s populist concerns and ‘outsider’ status as well as its international success and positioning within global film practice.

In some respects, the underlying argument presented by *Not Quite Hollywood* is not far removed from arguments made by filmmakers such as Ken G. Hall in the 1960s, who were deeply suspicious of increased government support for filmmaking that was not aimed squarely at earning significant commercial returns and wide international release.<sup>35</sup> As Martin claims, in the process, this argument promotes a ‘new strain of nationalism’ that attempts ‘to reclaim a movement once championed as so inimical or frankly indifferent to nationalist questions’ for precisely these purposes.<sup>36</sup> It is in this regard that *Not Quite Hollywood*, despite its equal consideration of international connections suggested by the object of study, departs significantly from the smaller scale ‘termite’-like work undertaken by *Hunt Angels*, *Carlton + Godard = Cinema*, *The Archive Project* and *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia*.<sup>37</sup> Rather than identify a minor mode of filmmaking practice running counter to institutionalised forms of film production, exhibition and distribution, *Not Quite Hollywood* aims at making a much larger claim by taking a significant portion of Australian genre filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s—a large amount of it made on medium-sized budgets—and repositioning it as a more cosmetically attractive and successful subset of Australian national cinema. Of course, the past is much more complex than either of these strident, even jingoistic, narratives will allow. But this is still a somewhat surprising and even bold move to make within a contemporary discourse that has largely devalued or stretched the conception of national cinema. Martin rightly takes exception to *Not Quite Hollywood*’s stridently philistine failure to account for other important but curiously absent films, filmmakers (e.g. Philip Brophy) and critical positions (like those adopted by writers such as Martin and Meaghan Morris and embraced by magazines such as *Cinema Papers*) that would present a more circumspect, murky and impure vision of Australian cinema in this era. This view was also recognised at the time by some film critics, if perhaps not by the contrarians trotted out by the documentary itself: the still erudite Phillip Adams and the curmudgeonly Bob Ellis.

### *The Archive Project and Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia*

The films of John Hughes provide a significant contrast to the hyperbolic, largely apolitical and ultimately conventional approach to Australian cinema history taken by *Not Quite Hollywood*. Hughes draws directly upon specific formal and aesthetic traditions of experimental and radical filmmaking that are then expanded into the digital realm. Over

the space of almost 30 years, Hughes made a trilogy of documentary films exploring the largely forgotten legacy of independent leftist filmmaking in Australia in the post-war period. These three documentaries, complementary to Hughes' broader leftist and generally socially committed artistic practice, focus upon particular clusters of filmmaking both within and outside of the union movement. They examine the particularly difficult, even arid, production conditions that existed in the 1940s and 1950s, and explore how the films made by Joris Ivens and his collaborators, the Realist Film Association and the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit, documented particular events and conditions largely and, even actively, unrepresented in the films and newsreels made by commercial film companies, industrial sponsors like the Shell Film Unit and government filmmaking agencies such as the Commonwealth Film Unit (CFU). *Film-Work* (1981) sits outside of the time frame of this study and, alongside Hughes' earlier *Menace* (1976), more directly presents the testimony of specific figures integral to the operations of the filmmaking unit it documents whilst attempting to sympathetically rhyme with the form and intentions of the films it analyses. *Menace* even challenges and reappropriates the title of a notorious montage-driven anti-communist film produced in the early 1950s by the CFU with the assistance of Twentieth Century-Fox.

*The Archive Project* and *Indonesia Calling* (once again a title drawing direct correspondence with its key source) are presented as more self-conscious and interrogative acts of film history than the other films discussed here (though like Buesst's film, they each feature the consciously circumspect voice of the filmmaker on their soundtrack). Both films position themselves as essayistic investigations of generally forgotten chapters in Australian film history. They suggest other international connections, possibilities and paths largely abandoned due to difficult production, political and cultural conditions in Australia during this time. Both films rely upon a kind of Benjaminian form of archaeology that uncovers hidden strata and ruins of film history and self-consciously undertake detective work to discover lost films, subterranean connections and new ways of understanding and reading the works produced. *The Archive Project* begins by self-reflexively re-examining some of the footage gathered for *Film-Work* and explores the continuity and shared ground between these interconnected but Spartan clusters of documentary filmmaking. The films also dedicate themselves to telling the heroic stories of various figures involved in these ventures, including Keith Gow, Bob Mathews

and Catherine Duncan. In this regard, they largely follow the form of the other documentaries discussed in this chapter by singling out the work of ‘a small group of dedicated people’ (a phrase from the voice-over of *The Archive Project*) integral to the maintenance of film culture within an often hostile terrain. This provides a degree of continuity with the broader claims of many earlier Australian film history documentaries, and is an approach popularised by *The Celluloid Heroes* in the mid-1990s. It also fits snugly alongside the earlier critical work of David Stratton in his influential auteurist study of 1970s Australian cinema, *The Last New Wave*.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, Hughes’ films are more concerned with the concept of the collective and insist upon the explicitly materialist aspects of film-making and its history. They contain numerous shots of figures gathered around the Moviola or Steenbeck, contain the sound of projectors whirring and editing beds scrolling through footage, feature offcuts, out-takes and material from unfinished films, and are defined by layered digital images that betray the density of the historical research undertaken. As Hughes has claimed of this materialist aesthetic, ‘[o]ne of the affects of this strategy will be a frequent clash of textures, genres and styles, not only during the course of the film as it cites its various sources, but simultaneously in collage as the narrative unfolds’.<sup>39</sup>

*The Archive Project*, in particular, deploys a mode of collagist screen design that uses contemporary practices of montage, allowing the image to incorporate and layer archival footage, photographs and various historical documents. Although the film does have a strong argument, narrative and viewpoint, this layering suggests the density of the historical record and the various counter-narratives that could be spun out from this material. Hughes’ films also render explicit the activity of ‘making’ film history, and the ways in which this practice relies on a piecemeal or partial archive to construct and trigger stories, narratives and cultural memories. But Hughes’ films are never designed to conclude an argument, as they self-consciously suggest a range of possibilities, stories and connections available to the truly investigative film historian (they have more in common with the work of an exemplary and dedicated historian like Ina Bertrand than more generalist accounts of Australian film history). In this regard, *The Archive Project* and *Indonesia Calling* speak directly to the partiality of any film history as well as specific practices of filmmaking that suggest other local, national and international narratives and points of intersection. They sit in contrast to a work such as *Not*

*Quite Hollywood*, and even such exemplary critical surveys as Collins and Davis' *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, and their attempts to recalibrate the dominant narrative of Australian national cinema.

Hughes' subsequent film, *Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia*, argues for the importance of Ivens' composite 1946 essay film as a record of support for Indonesian independence by Sydney dockworkers and as a precursor to the Australian Government's early recognition of Indonesian sovereignty. Within the context of the White Australia Policy and Australia's initial support for the continuation of Dutch rule, Hughes' film argues for the remarkable solidarity of these actions as well as the alternative histories that could have been spun out of the events and the careers of the people involved for both Australia's relationship to the region and the collective filmmaking that briefly flowered in its wake. Hughes also sees parallels between the filmmaking environment Ivens worked within and the shrinking funding context for the production of his own film. In some ways, *Indonesia Calling* is a more straightforward history than *The Archive Project*, spending much of its duration filling in the biographies and difficult histories of its key protagonists. But this is largely determined by the narrative arc, urgency and contemporary relevance of the story it has to tell. It provides a useful summary of the competing tensions in many of the films discussed in this chapter as well as the broader canon of the Australian film history documentary.<sup>40</sup>

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The films discussed in this chapter illustrate the fragmentation of the concept of Australian national cinema since the mid-1990s. They equally demonstrate a continued interest in telling stories about often-marginalised 'celluloid heroes' who help frame a more complex and incorporative vision of history. They also communicate an understandable loss of certainty about the core narrative of Australian cinema, and look back wistfully at periods of production that would seem, at least on the surface, largely unfertile ground. The films of John Hughes, Alec Morgan, Mark Hartley and Nigel Buesst, alongside a range of other documentaries and fiction features engaging with aspects of and figures in Australian film history made in the 2000s, suggest that any such undertaking can only ever be partial and possibly out of step with the 'termite' histories and archaeological resurrections staged in films such as the aptly titled *The Archive Project*. These films also position

filmmaking within the broader context of the economics and practice of film culture that emphasises the important interconnection of production, exhibition and spectatorship. Hughes' films, in particular, highlight the nurturing groundwork of the film society movement and its refreshingly cosmopolitan view of cinema history and influence. Such an incorporative vision is also at the core of the equation investigated by Buesst. As they reveal and reflect more general trends in the contemporary historiography of Australian cinema, these documentaries also suggest that there are important lessons still to be gleaned from the peripatetic history of Australian film.

## NOTES

1. It should be noted that the films of John Hughes are specifically concerned with documenting and uncovering leftist film history, and actively engage directly with existing historical accounts.
2. The centenary of Australian cinema celebration featured various events and productions sponsored by entities including the AFC, the National Film and Sound Archive and the Melbourne Film Office. These events were generally held in 1996 to commemorate the centenary of the first films screened and produced in Australia.
3. Both titles are used for the film. My assumption is that they vary depending on where the film was broadcast.
4. Deb Verhoeven, "Introduction: (Pre)Facing the Nation," in *Twin Peaks: Australian and New Zealand Feature Films*, ed. Deb Verhoeven (Melbourne: Damned Publishing, 1999), 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 1.
6. Nevertheless, a number of films were produced in the late 1970s and 1980s that did question and complicate these broader national histories. These include Hughes' *Film-Work* (1981), Megan McMurchy, Jeni Thornley, and Margot Nash's *For Love or Money* (1983), and Ross Gibson's *Camera Natura* (1986); more recent works by Nash (*The Silences*, 2015) and Gillian Leahy (*Baxter and Me*, 2016) frame feminist independent filmmaking practice of the 1970s and 1980s in relation to more autobiographical concerns.
7. See Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900–1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*, rev. ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998). Pike and Cooper's seminal survey was first published in 1980.
8. Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996).
9. Ina Bertrand, ed., *Cinema in Australia: A Documentary History* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1989).

10. John Tulloch, *Australian Cinema: Industry, Narrative and Meaning* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1982).
11. John Baxter, *The Australian Cinema* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970).
12. Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1983).
13. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, eds., *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a Film Industry*, Vol. 1 (Sydney: Currency Press, 1987).
14. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, *Australian Cinema after Mabo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
15. Olivia Khoo, Belinda Smail, and Audrey Yue, *Transnational Australian Cinema: Ethics in the Asian Diasporas* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013).
16. Jonathan Rayner, *Contemporary Australian Cinema: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).
17. Brian McFarlane, Geoff Mayer, and Ina Bertrand, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film* (Melbourne and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
18. Alongside the various works discussed in detail in this chapter, these films include Cathy Henkel's *Show Me the Magic* (2012), a career survey of Don McAlpine; Amiel Courtin-Wilson's *Bastardy* (2008), a more experiential documentary focusing on Indigenous actor Jack Charles; and Paul Cox's moving tribute to Norman Kaye, *The Remarkable Mr. Kaye* (2005).
19. See John J. McGowan, *J.P. McGowan: Biography of a Hollywood Pioneer* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2005).
20. See Gaetano Rando and Gino Moliterno, *Celluloid Immigrant: Italian Australian Filmmaker, Giorgio Mangiamele* (St Kilda: Australian Teachers of Media, 2011).
21. O'Regan, for example, acknowledges that "Australian cinema is a messy affair." See O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, 2.
22. Jarratt's appearance in this movie references his various roles in Australian films in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Dark Age* (Arch Nicholson, 1987), his role as Ned Kelly in *The Last Outlaw* (George T. Miller and Kevin Dobson, 1980), as well as his more self-conscious turn as the Mick Dundee-quoting serial killer in *Wolf Creek* (Greg McLean, 2005).
23. Meaghan Morris, "Beyond Assimilation: Aboriginality, Media History and Public Memory," *Rouge* 3 (2004). Accessed April 2, 2016. <http://www.rouge.com.au/3/beyond.html>.
24. "Rupe" W. Kathner, *Let's Make a Movie: A Story of Picture Production in Australia* (Sydney: Currawong Publishing Company, 1945).

25. Jake Wilson, "Gleeful Romp Through Golden Days of Gore," *Age*, August 28, 2008, A21.
26. See Bruce Molloy, *Before the Interval: Australian Mythology and Feature Films, 1930–1960* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990).
27. Deane Williams, *Australian Post-War Documentary Film: An Arc of Mirrors* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008).
28. For discussion of Carlton filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s and the concept of the "ripple," see Bruce Hodsdon, "The Carlton Ripple and the Australian Film Revival," *Screening the Past* 23 (2008). Accessed April 2, 2016. <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/humanities/screeningthepast/23/carlton-australian-revival.html>.
29. Susan Dermody, "The Company of Eccentrics," in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late '80s*, eds. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (North Ryde: Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 1988), 132–154.
30. Buesst's film is strongly influenced by various documentaries on silent cinema made by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill, as well as Martin Scorsese's "personal" journey through postwar Italian cinema, *My Voyage to Italy* (2001).
31. Adrian Martin, "Ozploitation Compared to What? A Challenge to Contemporary Australian Film Studies," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 4.1 (2010): 9–21.
32. Deborah Thomas, "Tarantino's Two Thumbs Up: Ozploitation and the Reframing of the Aussie Genre Film," *Metro Magazine* 161 (2009): 90–95.
33. *Ibid.*, 93.
34. *Ibid.*, 94.
35. See, for example, Ken G. Hall, "Strategies for an Industry—Television and Co-production," in *An Australian Film Reader*, eds. Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985), 158–165. Originally published in 1968.
36. Martin, "Ozploitation Compared to What?," 19.
37. I borrow the term "termite" from Manny Farber's discussion of the difference between "white elephant" and "termite art" in his influential 1962 essay. Its application here relates to the ways in which these documentaries work within accepted histories to undermine and question their foundations. See Manny Farber, *Farber on Film: The Complete Writings of Manny Farber*, ed. Robert Polito (New York: Library of America, 2009), 533–542.
38. David Stratton, *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980).

39. John Cumming, *The Films of John Hughes: A History of Independent Film Production in Australia* (St Kilda: Australian Teachers of Media, 2014), 195.
40. Hughes also produced a subsequent experimental documentary that further contextualised *Indonesia Calling* in relation to his own practice: *After Indonesia Calling* (2012). This was submitted in part fulfilment of his doctorate at RMIT University.

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