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A silver bullet for Australian cinema? Genre movies and the audience debate

Mark David Ryan, Queensland University of Technology

Film, TV, New Media and Animation
Creative Industries Faculty
Queensland University of Technology
Z6, the hub level 5, Musk Avenue
Kelvin Grove QLD 4059
Email: m3.ryan@qut.edu.au

Abstract:

There has been a renaissance in Australian genre cinema in recent years. Indeed, not since the 1980s have Australian genre movies across action, adventure, horror, and science-fiction among others, experienced such prominence within production, policy discourse, and industry debate. Genre movies, typically associated with commercial filmmaking and entertainment, have been identified as a strategy to improve the box-office performance of Australian feature films and to attract larger audiences. Much of this conversation has revolved around the question of whether or not genre can deliver on these high expectations and transform the unpredictable local film industry into a popular and profitable commercial production sector. However, this debate for the most part has been disconnected from analysis of Australia's genre movie heritage in terms of their position within Australian cinema and their reception with domestic audiences, and how this correlates to contemporary trends. As this chapter argues, genre production is not a silver bullet which will single handedly improve the Australian feature film industry's commercial performance. Genre movies have occupied, and continue to occupy, a difficult position within Australian cinema and face numerous challenges in terms of reception with national audiences, limited production scale and enterprise structures, and ongoing tensions between culture and commerce.

Key words: genre movies, Australian cinema, national identity, internationalization, Australian content

Introduction

There has been a renaissance in Australian genre cinema in recent years. Indeed, not since the 1980s have Australian genre movies across action, adventure, horror, and science-fiction among others, experienced such prominence within production, policy discourse, and industry debate. Since 2005, and gathering momentum by the decade's end, the action-adventures *Tomorrow When the War Began* (2010), *Killer Elite* (2011), and *Sanctum* (2011), horror movies *Daybreakers* (2010) and *Wolf Creek* (2005), crime movie *Animal Kingdom* (2010), animated children's features *Happy Feet* (2006), *Happy Feet 2* (2011), and *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole* (2010) among others, have led a new wave of Australian genre movies released worldwide. The resurgence of genre movies, drawing upon well established genre conventions and often in the vein of Hollywood filmmaking, marks a distinct new juncture in Australian screen history far removed from projecting Australia, or the national identity agenda which has shaped Australian cinema since the 1970s.

Shifting from the periphery to the centre of debate, genre cinema has emerged as a prominent issue in current discussion about the Australian feature film industry. In response to the poor commercial performance of Australian movies since the early to mid-2000s, this debate has arisen from the broader question of audiences and Australian cinema. Genre movies, typically associated with commercial filmmaking and entertainment, have been identified as a strategy to improve the box-office performance of Australian feature films and to attract larger audiences. Much of this conversation has revolved around the question of whether or not genre can deliver on these high expectations and transform the unpredictable local film industry into a popular and profitable commercial production sector.

Such thinking has been influenced by public policy and has tended to emanate from within screen funding agencies and industry-based training organizations, particularly the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS). As a consequence, the debate has typically had a craft based focus (see Pearlman 2010). There has, however, been little analysis of Australia's genre movie heritage, their reception with domestic audiences, and the correlations with contemporary trends. As this chapter argues, genre movies have occupied a difficult position within Australian cinema and have faced numerous challenges in terms of reception with national audiences. Australian genre flicks have been more successful overseas than given credit for, but they face major hurdles in establishing an ongoing presence within the local marketplace beyond an infrequent stream of titles.

This chapter begins by examining the history and cultural status of genre movies within Australian cinema since the 1970s. This is followed by primary analysis of locally-produced genre films released between 2005 and 2011 in terms of local filmmaking sensibilities, industry dynamics and enterprise structures, and reception. In so doing I examine the recent renaissance of genre movie production, particularly since the inception of the Producer Offset, and consider problems these films face in the local marketplace.

Major movie genres include action-adventure, science-fiction, comedy, crime, romance, suspense-thriller, musicals, and horror movies. (Animated children's features are also analyzed in this chapter). Genre functions as a blueprint for industry production, a marketplace label for advertising and distribution, and a viewing contract informing audience consumption (Altman 1999, 14). Genre is thus a complex term for 'systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text, and subject' (Neale 1981, 6). A movie genre is often referred to as a universal pool of plotlines, tropes, motifs, character types, and iconography *inter alia* that share a family resemblance.

As noted above, genre filmmaking is generally associated with commercial filmmaking and popular entertainment, and in Australia can be contrasted with so-called 'prestige', 'art-house', 'specialty' or 'quality' cinema which often challenges classical generic form, is didactic or culturally/socially concerned, and sometimes produced on the basis of art-for-arts sake. 'Australian genre movies', are therefore films intended as popular entertainment and ostensibly produced, distributed, and marketed as genre movies. This chapter does not discuss movies which may contain generic elements (i.e. a romance, or humour), but are otherwise non-generic experimental, art-house cinema, or specialty films.

Genre and Australian cinema: cycles of boom and bust

In 2010, the AFTRS published an edition of the industry journal *Lumina* titled 'Genre is not a dirty word' which attempted to foreground genre as a critical issue for industry debate (see Pearlman 2010). While insight into Australia's genre movie heritage was largely absent from the issue, the title makes reference to the marginalization of genre within film culture since the 1970s.

On the one hand, prominent Australian critic and film scholar Brian McFarlane has dismissed claims that genre has been neglected within Australian cinema. For McFarlane (2009), 'there were always generic traces at work in our films; and, further, genre doesn't account for everything exciting in recent Australian cinema'. For McFarlane (2010: 42), the presence of genre is demonstrated by the diversity of contemporary Australian film: mystery thrillers such as *The Tender Hook* (2008) and *Death Defying Acts* (2007), bio-epic *Mao's Last Dancer* (2009), and the epic/romance *Australia* (2008) among many other examples. In a sense he is right. There has undoubtedly been a surge in genre movies in the past few years (see Ryan 2009; 2010a; 2010b), and although rarely acknowledged, many of Australia's most successful movies of all time have been genre movies from the fish-out-of-water comedies *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and *Crocodile Dundee II* (1988); the kangaroo western *The Man from Snowy River* (1982); and the post-apocalyptic road movie trilogy *Mad Max* (1979), II (1981), and III (1985) among other examples.

An important point to make, however, is that for much of the last four decades, the dominant paradigm for understanding Australian film has been 'national identity'; a framework which has shaped film output, film culture, policy and criticism. Since the 1970s, Australian cinema has been developed and sustained by cultural policies and public subsidy to foster 'Australian stories', or, as Maher (1999, 13) puts it, the 'representation and preservation of Australian culture, character and identity'. Consequently, Australian film has tended to emphasise 'Australianness' and valued for the most part 'quality' and 'cultural content' over 'entertainment' and 'commercialism'. As such, much of Australian cinema has been cultural/art-house/specialty film *vis-à-vis* genre movies. As writer-director Bill Bennett (Bennett, quoted in George 1998) argued in the late 1990s, 'Australians rarely make pure genre films such as thrillers, horror flicks or action films. Genre is such a Hollywood thing, and goes hand-in-hand with commerce ... Australia has never had to make genre-films' because of the public funding environment 'and rarely bothers to try'.

According to Rayner (2000: 3), 'the history of filmmaking in Australia ... epitomises the difficult relationships smaller film industries enjoy with Hollywood, which inspires and competes with them'. Australian cinema's refusal to 'recognise ... generic status' has been an attempt to differentiate 'itself from Hollywood, which has always been interested in refining and developing specific film genres' (Mayer 1999, 178). For Stuart Cunningham (1985: 235), since the establishment of a national film industry, discussion and aspirations for how a national cinema should function have revolved around the opposition of *culture* and *industry*. This discussion has resulted in two 'either/or' oppositional arguments: that the Australian film industry should produce 'either culturally specific films, dealing in recognisable Australian realisms, which authenticate and affirm Australian concerns, and succeed or fail in overseas

markets ... or else internationalised films, geared to a culturally undifferentiated market' (1985: 235).

While there have undeniably been generic traces within Australia film – and genre production has at times been an undercurrent to mainstream filmmaking – genre movies have rarely been central to discussion about the nature of Australian cinema and the strategic direction of industry. As McFarlane concedes (2009):

The more sustained writing about the period [the first two decades of Australian cinema] focused on matters of coming of age, on the new cinema's literary connections and on such oppositions as city and bush, Australia and Britain ... such issues were important in our films then. Though there was a thin trickle of films that could be accommodated to genres we knew, these were not in general what we flocked to or critics claimed our attention for.

As I have argued elsewhere (2010a), until recently genre movies have been largely written out of official film history, marginalised within film culture, and some genres such as horror have at times been shut out from public subvention.

Three-phases in the boom and bust of Australian genre filmmaking

Since the 1970s, there have been three periods in Australian cinema – notwithstanding the above discussion – where genre movies have experienced support from policymakers and public funding, a resultant surge in production activity, and a degree of visibility in the marketplace. These three phases of genre production can be characterised as:

- The early years of the New Wave of Australian cinema between 1970 to 1975;
- The shift towards commercial and genre filmmaking during the peak of the 10BA tax incentive (with a 150 % tax rebate) from 1981 to 1988; and
- The return to Aussie blockbusters and genre movies following the implementation of the Producer Offset in 2007 and the inception of Screen Australia in 2008.

As this suggests, Australian genre filmmaking has experienced periods of boom and bust. Moreover, local genre filmmaking has been either positively or negatively influenced by the oscillation of policy priorities between culture and industry; benefiting when the pendulum swings away from culture towards industry and by implication commercial filmmaking. However, in a national cinema where production is predominantly funded by public monies, critical and policy attitudes have soured towards periods of commercial filmmaking at the expense of culture, and such strategies have eventually been wound back, or dismantled – often led by the lobby of cultural critics. In between each of these phases, a trickle of genre movies were still produced, but very much on the periphery of mainstream Australian cinema.

The first period of Australian cinema characterized by a surge in local genre movies was the early years of the New Wave of Australian cinema from 1970 to 1975. As Tom O'Regan (1989: 75) has argued, this period 'saw the production of films across a wide variety of genres', including horror/fantasy, period, comedy, art-house, pornography and 'ocker' comedy. The

period produced several highly popular ocker/sex comedies including *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), *Alvin Purple* (1973), and *Stork* (1971), and early horror fare *Night of Fear* (1971) and *Inn of the Damned* (1975) among others. While many of these titles were viewed as culturally debased and heavily criticized upon release, they have been celebrated in recent years as the largely forgotten heritage of Australian genre cinema following the release of the documentary *Not Quite Hollywood* (2008). ('Ozploitation' has since become a term commonly used to label Australian genre movies from the 1970s and 1980s). Many of these movies arose from recommendations in the 1969 Arts Council Report endorsed by Prime Minister Gorton to foster the 'the production of low-budget, 'frankly commercial' films as part of its strategy for Australian film to gain initial success with the Australian public' (O'Regan 1989: 89). However, as Adrian Martin (2010: 11) observes, 'during the 1970s, exploitation cinema (in all its forms) became a lost path in Australian cinema production – briefly toyed with, then discarded'. Viewed as an affront to cultural identity, such movies were gradually phased out by the newly formed Australian Film Commission (AFC) in 1975 in favour of movies projecting a positive sense of national identity to the world – the AFC genre.

While a trickle of genre movies continued to be produced (including *Mad Max* (1979), *Patrick* (1978) and *Thirst* (1979)), the second major period of genre movie production did not emerge until the introduction of the 10BA tax incentive in 1981. A policy incentive designed to shift the burden of film financing from government to private investment, 10BA resulted in a major surge in genre movies targeting commercial returns and international markets. Over 40 horror movies were produced alone during the 1980s (Ryan 2010b). The period saw production across action/adventure, kung-fu, thrillers, and science-fiction among others, and produced several Ozploitation classics including *Mad Max II* (1981), *Mad Max III* (1985), *Turkey Shoot* (1982), *The Chain Reaction* (1980), *Road Games* (1981), and *Dead-End Drive In* (1986). Nonetheless, the 10BA had endemic problems: production and distribution 'became totally divorced' and numerous titles failed to receive release (Martin 2010: 13). Films were produced for tax relief with little regard for quality; and for cultural identity advocates '10BA film concessions did not necessarily give an outcome that was desirable in cultural or aesthetic terms' (Dermody and Jacka 1988: 13).

By the end of the 1980s, Australian genre movie production withered after the 10BA was progressively wound back from a tax write-off of 150 to 100 per cent between 1988/89 and 2001/02. This reform slowed private investment and stymied the diversity of Australian cinema. In the words of Stephen Rowley (1998), 'the demise of 10BA eliminated a whole sub-class of mediocre thrillers, for a start'. As Australian producer Andrew Mason – known for science-fiction films *Dark City* (1998) and *The Matrix* (1999) – observed in the 1990s, 'Australian films ... have been increasingly squeezed away from anything to do with fantasy or science-fiction because of budget limitations imposed by the financing structures' that were possible in Australia (Andrew Mason quoted in Helms 1998: 20). In other words, a finance ceiling emerged as government funding agencies once more became the principal financiers of Australian movies. This prohibited the production of higher-budget genre movies such as action, fantasy, science-fiction and so on (genres which flourished during the 10BA). While movies with generic traces remained a feature of Australian cinema throughout the 1990s, there was a key difference when compared to their 1980s' predecessors, as Rowley (1998) explains:

The tendency to chase after Hollywood success declined ... The trend, in the last five years, has been to more 'local' films, that aim at the Australian market and feature recognisable, everyday settings. The engagement of Hollywood genres often remains, but is no longer done in an attempt to emulate Hollywood slavishly. *Strictly Ballroom*, for example, takes the musical genre ... but makes no attempt to sell it internationally. The setting is clearly Australia, neither hidden or used [as] a selling point. This is very much a feature made for an Australian audience.

While traces of genre production continued to be found in titles into the 2000s, most movies produced during this period targeted specialty or art-house circuits. Pure genre production was relegated to the margins.

The contemporary genre turn

By the mid-2000s, the Australian feature film industry had reached a crisis point. In 2004, the local share of the box-office dropped to a dismal 1.3 per cent, its lowest level in recorded history. This was followed by 2.8 per cent in 2005, a far cry from the 7.9 per cent captured in 2000 (Screen Australia 2011a). Following the release of these figures, the Australian film industry and government funding agencies were heavily criticized. Industry was accused of producing, and government agencies of supporting, dark, depressing, and self-indulgent movies with little regard for audience and entertainment (see Nowra 2009; Bodey 2009; Schembri 2008).

For Verhoeven (2006), at the core of the issue was a growing divide between the national policy agenda and audience consumption practices. While the funding of Australian movies had been largely driven by the aforementioned policy objectives, Australian audiences 'are inclined to watch films in a way that has almost no relationship to the national agenda or the general quest for a national cultural identity in the cinema' (Verhoeven 2006: 158). In 2005 the FFC introduced a new 'market evaluation' funding system designed to shift subvention away from a deal-driven model (funding based upon whether or not a film secured national and international presales) to a model that would assess a project's market viability by evaluating script quality, audience potential, the attachment of star-names/filmmaking talent and so on (Verhoeven 2006: 161–62; Zion 2005). While these early reforms brought commercial filmmaking and audiences into greater focus, in the years that followed funding structures would undergo deeper, more fundamental reform – reform which would mark a new era for Australia feature film.

In 2007, as part of the 2007-08 federal budget, the then Howard Government announced a suite of new incentives to develop a more commercially sustainable screen industry. The centre-piece for the local production sector was the Producer Offset, which provided Australian producers with a 40 per cent rebate on eligible film expenditure (assessed on whether a film meets criteria defining Australian content and provisions regarding domestic production/post-production expenditure). The reforms also included the creation of the superagency Screen Australia in 2008 – an amalgamation of the Australian Film Commission, Film Finance Corporation, and Film Australia. Collectively these changes constitute the most significant overhaul of public finance structures for the screen industry in three decades. Following the announcement (by Howard Government Minister, Senator the Hon. George Brandis (2007)), the subsequent Minister for the Arts, the Hon. Peter Garrett, MP (under the newly elected Rudd Government), and Ruth Harley (2009), the chief executive of Screen Australia, began championing a new era for Australian

screen industries. Harley in particular, outlined an era where Australian screen would be driven by the overarching aim of attracting larger audiences and achieving greater commercial viability [see Harley (2009) for insight into Garrett's arguments].

While Australian cinema had long been funded by public subsidy to support the telling of 'Australian stories' with little regard for commercial returns, policy frameworks have shifted towards what Harley (2009) describes as a new phase of policy where 'better business and bigger audiences have taken centre stage' (6). The transition in policy rationales has marked a shift from cultural to industry policy, and by implication a greater emphasis on growth, sustainability, and commercial returns (see Screen Australia 2011b).

The new direction for the Australian screen industry has given rise to a great deal of debate within the industry around genre production. For the most part, this has revolved around the need to embrace genre and better connect with audiences. Since 2008, the AFTRS – the national film school long associated with 'quality cinema' – has revamped its curriculum to include genre filmmaking. In 2010, the state-based screen agency, Film Victoria, published statistical briefing documents for producers titled 'Australian Films and Genre' (2010a) and 'Genre and International box-office' (2010b) in an effort to educate producers in genre and audience fundamentals. Further, in September 2010, the agency hosted the industry summit Arresting Audiences in Melbourne to explore questions around audience and commercial returns.

Of key importance here is the strong renaissance in genre movie production that has been brought about in the past few years. The 2010 feature film production slate was arguably among the most diverse since the 1980s (moving beyond a national slate dominated principally by drama, comedy and art-house fare typical throughout much of the 2000s), and resulted in movies such as the musical *Bran Nue Dae*, comedies *I Love You Too* and *The Kings of Mykonos: Wog Boy 2*, horror movies *Daybreakers* and *The Loved Ones*, action/adventure movie *Tomorrow When the War Began*, war movie *Beneath Hill 60*, crime drama *Animal Kingdom*, and the modern-day western *Red Hill*. There has also been a marked shift towards fostering large scale Australian movies intended for wide release. Since 2006, Aussie blockbusters achieving release worldwide include, *Australia* (2008), *Knowing* (2009), *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole* (2010), *Tomorrow When the War Began* (2010), and the animated children's movie sequel *Happy Feet 2 3D* (2011).

With only four years since the Producer Offset's inception, it is too soon to offer an authoritative assessment of how successful recent policy reforms have been in improving the industry's commercial performance. However, in terms of trends between 2007 and 2011, the Australian share of the domestic box-office has climbed back to between just below four to five per cent. There have been a number of success stories, but also failures. *The Knowing*, *Sanctum*, and *Dyabreakers* have achieved varying levels of commercial success. However, independent titles such as *Blame* (2010), *Red Hill* (2010), and *Caught Inside* (2010) are among a long list of lower-budget commercial disappointments. In terms of higher budget films, *Tomorrow When the War Began* (2010) was popular in Australia and New Zealand but was ultimately a commercial failure overseas. Hollywood-backed titles such *Killer Elite* and *Happy Feet 2* have also underperformed. Two key observable trends thus far are that:

- While the industry is making higher-budget movies with strong backing from Hollywood (*Knowing*, *Happy Feet*, *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole*), this has not dramatically improved the Australian share of the domestic box-office; and
- Independent genre movies without backing from major distributors struggle to gain market access, and often receive limited domestic release.

Contemporary genre movies and the challenges they face

Is genre the magic bullet for Australian screen returns? ... Here is the pitch. Australian filmmakers have become increasingly hostile to genre and slid into a gloomy trough of art and self expression. Audiences want to be entertained. Marketing depends on clear messages and imagery. Genre compensates for the lack of stars because form is the star. Genre works for fan audiences ... so what's not to like? (Tiley 2010).

As the above quote illustrates, within the current commercial turn of the Australian film industry, genre has been heralded as a potential silver bullet. However, while genre movies are not without potential, local genre productions face numerous challenges in attempting to make inroads into Australian cinema. It is not simply a case of producing genre movies and the audiences will come.

A key problem facing the development of a sustained tradition of Australian genre cinema across a variety of genres is that attitudes towards this mode of production within policy and industry discourse have typically been reactive. Genre movies have tended to be dismissed as debased commercial films within screen culture until there is a shift in policy support towards commercial production. Throughout history, genre has, and continues to be, unfairly regarded as a silver bullet which will improve Australian cinema's commercial performance; typically after the waning commercial fortunes of cultural films. Indeed, the first genre phase emerged after feature film production collapsed in the 1960s; the second phase after the waning commercial performance and influence of the AFC genre in the late 1970s; and the third phase following the commercial collapse of the feature film industry in the mid-2000s. Moving towards greater levels of genre films may be a step in the direction of more commercial production, but until genre cinema becomes a naturalised component of production, policy, and film culture, a sudden wave of local genre movies is unlikely to entrench commercial filmmaking practices within the industry in its own right.

In the first instance, the Australian screen industry has limited infrastructure to support sustained ongoing genre production, particularly high-budget genres such as action, adventure, science-fiction, fantasy and so on. Low to mid-budget genres such as comedy, crime, thriller and horror tend to have a regular – albeit often cyclical – presence within Australian cinema, while high-budget genres are produced rarely, and are heavily dependent upon government incentives and subvention, or international/Hollywood finance¹.

Hollywood, the quintessential genre cinema, has spent decades refining specific movie genres, and in the process has developed studios and large-scale production companies specializing in various movie genres. In contrast, Australian genre production is produced typically by a multitude of small-scale independents with limited access to finance, many of whom are largely

dependent upon public subsidy. The result is an industry without sufficient enterprise structures, without a star-system, without an on-going tradition of genre movie production, and without a pool of skilled genre filmmaking talent. With the exception of Animal Logic (*Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole*), Omnilab Media (*Killer Elite*), Kennedy Miller Productions (*Happy Feet*), and smaller production companies like Pictures in Paradise (*Daybreakers*), there are few enterprises producing a range of genre titles for mainstream or blockbuster release.

Nor is there a culture of marketing local genre movies to national audiences, which is also a problem for independent Australian film more generally. For example, the Bergent Report (2008) commissioned by the now defunct FFC to investigate the Australian public's attitudes towards local films, found that with few exceptions Australian movies are insufficiently advertised, and have low public awareness (80). Nevertheless, genre filmmakers and some critics have long argued that Australian distributors inadequately market local genre films. As one critic has noted:

Australian films are marketed poorly. So badly, that often the marketing unfairly damages the film, as ... was the case with *The Square* [2008] ... It's ... a solid noir-ish thriller with stolen money, an illicit affair and murder. It could've been a crowd pleaser. But how's it marketed? Like another dull art house film. The poster sells something unlike the film – a man's back, looking into the sunset/sunrise. The general public ... would have to research the film to know that it was a thriller, otherwise you might think it was just about a building foreman and his struggle to lay the foundation before morning (Miller 2009).

Another key example is the AU\$25 million vampire movie *Daybreakers*. In 2010, following the movie's release writer-directors Michael and Peter Spierig were highly critical of Hoyts Australian release strategy. For the Spierigs, 'the Australian release was terrible – Hoyts did a terrible job' ... referring to the lack of general promotion and lack of an outdoor poster campaign' (Swift 2010). Despite earning over US\$30 million at the US box-office (before its local release), and having a relatively strong domestic marketing campaign, the movie earned just AU\$2.5 million in Australia. As screen journalist Brendan Swift points out, while *Daybreakers* was ranked as the 'twelfth highest grossing Australian film of all time' in terms of US box-office earnings (at the time of writing), 'only one other Australian film to gross more than US\$10 million', *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), 'has performed worse at the Australian box-office' (Swift 2010). The Australian market for horror movies is, however, miniscule; a point Hoyts made in their defense. Nonetheless, there is a strong view among genre filmmakers that domestic distributors, who have long specialized in promoting imported [particularly Hollywood] movies or specialty/art-house pictures, do not have a viable or differentiated approach suitable for marketing local genre flicks.

In terms of reception, 1970s and 1980s Ozploitation movies were largely regarded by both critics and the Australian public as B-movies in contrast to mainstream Australian cultural films (Mark Hartley in Ryan, T. 2008). While this is less the case for contemporary movies – though cultural cringe remains an issue – genre flicks still face major challenges in attracting Australian audiences. The most successful Australian movies of all time at the local box-office have traded upon Australianness in the marketplace: distinctively Australian characters, cultural themes,

cinematic tropes, mise-en-scene and so on (for example *Crocodile Dundee*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Muriel's Wedding*)ⁱⁱ. The most successful Australian film and television programmes at both home and abroad, have achieved a fine balancing act between retaining a distinctively Australian cultural identity and appealing to domestic audiences, while achieving universal appeal for international audiences (Ward and O'Regan 2011). As Ward and O'Regan (2011: 34) have argued in relation to the television series *McLeod's Daughters* (2001-2009), *Sea Patrol* (2007-2011), and *H2O: Just Add Water* (2006-):

All three series emulate production values and standards led by United States (US programming (and viewed on local Australian screens) and adopt familiar universal modes of storytelling ...The major point of difference for international buyers is a certain stylistic inflection that includes the aesthetisation of iconic Australian landscapes and lifestyle – national images that function as image and story enhancement.

A similar argument can be made for the most successful Australian feature films of all-time including *Crocodile Dundee*, *The Man From Snowy River*, and even the *Mad Max* trilogy.

While *Wolf Creek* and Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008) are contemporary examples which have managed to successfully achieve the aforementioned balance, very few titles do. On the one hand, as Australia is a small domestic market, and production budgets rely heavily upon international presales and finance, international markets (particularly the US) are a major lure for producers. However, the paradox is that while a strong sense of Australianness has characterized many of Australia's most successful movies of all-time, many independent and low budget titles (typically without Hollywood backing) which are *too Australian*, or parochial, struggle to secure overseas release.

The problem often cited by filmmakers is cultural discount – the Australian accent is too difficult for international audiences to understand, cultural quirks and ocker humour fail to translate well overseas, and so on. The ocker comedy *Kenny* (2006), for example, was the highest grossing Australian movie at the local box-office in 2006. Yet the film failed to sell widely into international territories and was ironically released in the United States with English-language subtitles (though an English language film), and was a dismal failure. For some genre movie producers, the threat of cultural discount dissuades the production of distinctively Australian titles (instances of this are evident in every decade of Australian cinema since the renaissance). In the 1970s and 1980s for example, Ozploitation producers such as Antony I. Ginnane were heavily criticised for their attempts to produce 'transnational' movies with non-cultural specific or contrived American identities; effaced of any Australianness (for example *Harlequin* (1980) and *Turkey Shoot* (1982)). Some contemporary filmmakers continue to produce non-cultural specific movies in an attempt to attract larger international audiences. *Daybreakers* is an example which successfully achieved this objective. The film is set in the future, in a culturally nondescript vampire cityscape, and contained a mix of 'universal' accents and Australian/American actors; a combination which is diegetically feasible and believable for audiences. On the other hand, the crime/psychological horror *Feed* (2005), trying to pass off clearly Australian locations as American, and action fantasy *Gabriel* (2007) revolving around Australian actors playing gun-toting angels who sometimes slip between US, UK and Australian accents in a single sentence, offered audiences confused and culturally compromised movies.

Local genre movies tend to achieve far greater levels of commercial success overseas than in the domestic market. The vampire movie *Daybreakers* (2010) produced for AU\$25 million, and the cave-diving action adventure movie *Sanctum* (2011) made for AU\$30 million, earned just AU\$2.5 million and AU\$3.8 million respectively at the local box-office. Both movies were criticized by industry magazines for their failure to attract local audiences despite their budget size (almost triple the average budget for an independent title). But in terms of gross international box-office receipts, *Daybreakers* earned over US\$51 million and was ranked among the top 50 worldwide highest-grossing independent films of 2010 (Dallas 2011). Though receiving poor critical reviews, *Sanctum* went on to earn almost US\$110 million at the box-office, and became one of the few Australian titles to go into profit during 2011. Conversely, *Tomorrow When the War Began*, based on the highly popular book series, earned over AU\$13 million at the local box-office, but returned less than US\$6 million from overseas box-office takings.

It is a curious omission that the international success of Australian genre movies is rarely celebrated within domestic film culture. While domestic box-office earnings by title are meticulously recorded and published weekly by industry magazines such as *If.com.au*, and Screen Australia promotes annual breakdowns, there are few comparative figures published that captures an Australian film's overseas performance (with the exception of irregular snapshots and Antony Ginnane's annual analysis for *Screenhub.com*). As this suggests, value within Australian cinema still resides with local box-office returns, with less regard for overseas reception and earnings. This is in part a legacy of the national identity/cinema agenda. Until recently, as alluded to above, 'Australian films that' secured 'domestic cinema release and national and international critical acclaim' had 'long been regarded as a measure of a film's success and prestige within Australian cinema' (Ryan 2009: 48). On the other hand, profits, international sales, and international box office returns had been secondary concerns.

As many Aussie genre flicks trade upon generic conventions more so than an Australian look and feel, few are marketed or consumed overseas as Australian movies. As such, genre movies have major trade-offs. They can potentially generate substantial commercial earnings, particularly in international markets. However, at the same time, they contribute little to a national cinema brand, or a sense of national identity in both national and international markets which generates problems for film funding agencies. *Daybreakers*, a futuristic vampire movie; *Sanctum* a cave-diving action-adventure set in Papua New Guinea; and *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole* an animated fantasy movie about warring owls (though the flora and fauna is subtly Australian) are primary examples. As history has demonstrated, it becomes increasingly difficult for government screen agencies to sustain public support for movies that contribute little to a sense of national identity (and fail to connect with local audiences), despite economic contributions such films make in terms of employment and international box-office returns.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the broad history of major genre movies in Australian cinema, and three key phases in Australian film history where genre movies have achieved a degree of prominence, visibility, and support within industry and screen policy. Most importantly,

discussion has foregrounded – albeit broadly – challenges that face the development of a sustained Australian genre movie tradition. As I have argued, genre production is not a silver bullet which will single handedly improve the commercial performance of the Australian feature film industry, and faces hurdles such as the cultural status of genre, limited scale and enterprise structures, tensions between culture and commerce, and problems around reception in domestic markets. Furthermore, while the current commercial turn may be no more than another phase of experimentation with genre before the policy pendulum swings back towards fostering culture identity, it is important to explore the dynamics of commercial filmmaking – if only to delineate the diversity of Australian film, and the competing aspirations and tensions that shape local filmmaking.

In conclusion, a major hurdle facing Australian genre cinema is the development of a generic identity, or distinct sub-genres which are uniquely Australian in the marketplace. Two exceptions are horror and crime. A staple for low-budget filmmakers since the 1970s, Australian horror movies have become renowned worldwide for a unique cultural style of brooding outback chillers revolving around a ‘monstrous’ landscape and the revenge of nature. Aussie crime movies, though largely consumed by domestic audiences, have developed a distinct style characterized by an unglamorous ocker sensibility, a gritty visual style, and a penchant for brutal social realism. There is, however, a limited sense of a distinctive generic or stylistic tradition for say the Australian thriller, science-fiction, action, or adventure movie, among others. The establishment of a generic identity for Australian genre cinema as a whole, or distinctively Australian sub-genres, may provide a basis for the development of a more sustainable tradition of genre filmmaking and the growth of domestic and international audience followings.

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Short bio:

Mark David Ryan is a Lecturer in Film and Television for the Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology. He is an expert on Australian horror movies, having written extensively on the subject, and writes on genre cinema more generally. Over the last five years, Ryan has published numerous essays on Australian film, creative industries, and cultural policy.

ⁱ See <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/mpfeaturesgenre.asp>

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/mrboxaust.asp>.