

Introduction

Anxiety and flight

Last year, 2004, was an awful year for the Australian film industry. The number of films we made plummeted from a recent average of about 27 a year to just 15¹—too few for us to claim we have an industry, or to provide a decent living for most filmmakers. This suggests a structural problem.

At the same time, Australian cinema-goers pretty well gave up on Australian films. We've rarely been an avid audience for our own films—the highest share for Australian films at the box office occurred in 1986, when, adjusted for today's dollar value, it was 9.5%—but last year it dropped to 1.6%, a record low.² It is still declining. Australians, it seems, do not like their own movies. This suggests problems of content, style and quality.

Critics and industry people say, with disarming candour, that we've been making too many crook films lately, and the word has got around. All the while, Australian actors and filmmakers are going abroad to live and work. They have been shooting through for a long time, but in recent years they have been doing it in increasing numbers. And the industry's recent woes

have highlighted concern about their exodus. It is one thing to go away in order to test your mettle. It is another to go away because there is either too little work or no imaginative challenge to keep you at home. That's the rub. It suggests that Australian film may be in double jeopardy—of losing creative souls abroad for opportunity, and of losing those at home for lack of it. Could it also mean the direst brain drain is within? That we are allowing the native imagination and intellect of our film industry to drain away at home?

Behind this dilemma is our conditioned fear, wrought from years of battle, that if we let down our guard against the beguiling might of the United States film distribution and exhibition industry which has always dominated our screens, we will lose our film culture, and cease to see our own stories on the screen.

What is the future of Australian film against this backdrop of anxiety and flight? The film industry is not well, but the ailment is a temporary one. It is generally anticipated that 2005 will see some improvement. Henry Lawson, who played an interesting but little-known role in the pioneering days of our cinema, wrote that 'you can often see stars from the bottom of shafts in broad daylight'.³ Taking its cue from Lawson and from people in the film industry itself, this essay looks upward through the gloom, to see how the industry is using tough times to make changes for a brighter future.

In Part I, and throughout the essay, this path towards a brighter future is examined in the light of new studies of the brain drain, and of the recently

Shooting Through

identified phenomenon of the global circular migration of talent. It asks whether today's expatriation is a sign of chronic illness in the film industry, or whether it is something which, if mobilised, could be used to enrich the Australian cinema. To this end, Parts 2 and 3 discuss the kind of structural and conceptual changes which might so re-enliven our filmmaking culture, that Australian filmmakers might be more reluctant to leave, and when they do, yearn to return, at least from time to time. Part 4 considers the way in which the creation of an expatriate-return program might encourage the circulation of our international film talent through their homeland as a career imperative.

1

Brain Drain

Gone for good

For generations Australians have found 'overseas' to be a powerful lure. It is part of our national character, a function of our place in the world. It is endemic, this thrill for professional opportunity which drives you out against the fear that if you stay, your creative vigour will slowly die for want of exotic nutrients; against the conviction that if you stay at home you will be half-skilled, half-finished, half-realised. It