A Companion to Australian Cinema

Edited by Felicity Collins, Jane Landman, and Susan Bye
A Companion to Australian Cinema
Wiley Blackwell Companions to National Cinemas

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About the Editors

Felicity Collins has a PhD and is a Reader/Associate Professor in the Department of Creative Arts and English, La Trobe University. In the 1980s she was commissioned by Filmnews to research articles on the origin, history and impact of the Australian Film Institute and the Australian Film and Television School. Her doctoral research in the 1990s drew on the archives of the Women’s Film Fund at the Australian Film Commission, and oral history interviews with members of the Sydney Women’s Film Group and Feminist Film Workers. This early work gave rise to an abiding interest in how screen cultures mediate identity, memory and history. She has written on women, cinema and modernity in The Films of Gillian Armstrong (ATOM/AFI, 1999), and on settler-colonial memory and historical backtracking in Australian Cinema After Mabo (Cambridge University Press, 2004). She has co-edited themed journal issues, including ‘Decolonizing Screens’, Studies in Australasian Cinema 7(2–3), and ‘Rethinking Witnessing Across History, Culture and Time’, Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies 31(5). She has published a series of articles and chapters on the films of the Blak Wave and the politics of reconciliation, most recently in Critical Arts 31(5), The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics (Tzoumakis and Molloy, eds, 2016) and Contemporary Publics (Marshall, et al, eds, 2016). She was Chief Investigator on the ARC Discovery Project ‘Screen Comedy and the National’ with Sue Turnbull and Susan Bye. Current collaborations include a recognition app, Where Do You Think You Are? and Looking Again, with Hester Joyce and La Trobe’s Centre for the Study of the Inland.

Jane Landman has a PhD and was a Senior Lecturer at Victoria University, Melbourne, teaching and coordinating programs in media and communication. She took retirement during the early stages of preparation of this book and now focuses on her garden in Victoria’s goldfields district. She is the author of The Tread of a White Man’s Foot: Australian Pacific Colonialism and the Cinema 1925–1962 (Pandanus Books, ANU, 2006), an historical reception and textual study of ‘resource adventures’ set in Australian colonial territories. She has published in various
About the Editors

journals and edited books including *Studies in Australasian Cinema* (also guest editor), *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, and the *Journal of Pacific History* (also guest editor). She served on the Editorial Board of *The Moving Image*. The principal thread in Landman’s research is Australian film history, and the role of the cinema in the process and cultures of colonialism and decolonisation, with focus on intersections between political change and historical practices of public relations. This includes the filmic reporting and promotion of late colonial policy on Papua and New Guinea in productions made by the Commonwealth Film Unit. Landman’s other research thread concerns contemporary television formats, such as daytime chat shows, feminist comedy, serial SF television, and quality TV series set in the Torres Strait.

**Susan Bye** has a PhD and is an Education Programmer at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne. She is involved in building education programs for schools and teachers that foster creative and critical engagement with the moving image. In her role as programmer she has sustained a focus on extending student knowledge of Australian films and animation as well as supporting senior students studying English and Media. In consultation with ACMI curators, she has offered Education and Public Programs in relation to a wide range of exhibitions including *Hollywood Costume*, *David Bowie is* and *Scorsese*. At ACMI she has participated in the Melbourne Writers Festival (2012–2017), Screen Futures (2016) and the Arts Learning Festival (2017). An associate of La Trobe University, she completed a PhD (2004) focusing on the introduction of television into Australia and received a post-doctoral fellowship (2006–2009) to work with Felicity Collins and Sue Turnbull on an Australian Research Council Discovery Project on Australian Screen Comedy. As part of this project she convened an international conference and symposium, and published a number of articles focusing on Australian television comedy. She was the Reviews Editor for *Media International Australia* (2008–2014) and is now an editorial adviser. She has published widely in the field of film, television, media history and screen education and has co-edited special theme issues of *Media International Australia* (on Light Entertainment) and *Continuum* (on Television and the National). She has co-convened international conferences in the area of Screen Studies and was a keynote speaker at the Australian Association for Teaching English Conference in 2017.
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**Felicity Collins** is Reader/Associate Professor in Screen Studies in the Department of Creative Arts at La Trobe University. She is the author of *Australian Cinema after Mabo* with Therese Davis, and *The Films of Gillian Armstrong*. She has published widely on Australian screen culture, its institutions, feminist interventions, and popular genres. Her research on the Blak Wave of film and television production is informed by memory and trauma studies, and contributes to debates on decolonising ethics and aesthetics, as well as agonistic and transitional modes of reconciliation.

**Corinn Columpar** is Director of the Cinema Studies Institute and Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at University of Toronto. She is author of *Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film* (2010), a monograph about the construction
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Stuart Cunningham AM is Distinguished Professor of Media and Communications, Queensland University of Technology. Publications include Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves Online (with Dina Iordanova, 2012), Key Concepts in Creative Industries (with John Hartley, Jason Potts, Terry Flew, John Banks and Michael Keane, 2013), Hidden Innovation: Policy, Industry and the Creative Sector (2013), Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World (with Jon Silver, 2013), The Media and Communications in Australia (with Sue Turnbull, 2014) and Media Economics (with Terry Flew and Adam Swift, 2015).

Felicity Ford is a PhD candidate in Screen and Cultural Studies in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne where she tutors in gender, media and film studies. Her research is primarily concerned with disruptions to cinematic form in relation to sound, movement, vision and time. She is interested in how contemporary film intersects with narratives of guilt, consent, trauma, criminality and sexuality. Her work has been published in Film Philosophy, Screen Education, Metro and Senses of Cinema. She is the Secretary for the Melbourne Cinematheque and a Project Co-ordinator for the Graduate Researcher Network at the Graduate Student Association.

Lisa French is Dean, Media and Communication and Professor in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. She is the co-author of Shining a Light: 50 Years of the Australian Film Institute (2009), and editor of the anthology Womenvision: Women and the Moving Image in Australia (2003). Her professional history includes directing the St Kilda Film Festival, and nine years as a non-executive director of the Australian Film Institute. Recently, she has worked with six industry partners on the status and representation of women in Victoria’s film and television industries, including digital media and games.

Stephen Gaunson is Head of Cinema Studies in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. His research explores the subject of adaptation on the screen. He is the author of The Ned Kelly Films: A Cultural History of Kelly History (Intellect, 2013) and is working on his next book, which will examine the distribution and exhibition of adaptation films in the global market.

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**Odette Kelada** teaches in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. She publishes in the area of race, whiteness and gender studies. Key interests include the constructions of nation, body and identity in creative representations and the teaching of racial literacy. Publications include *Drawing Sybylla: The Real and Imagined Lives of Australia’s Women Writers*, ‘The Stolen River: Possession and Race Representation in Grenville’s Colonial Narrative’ (*JASAL*), ‘Is the Personal Still Political?’ (*Australian Cultural History Journal*) and ‘White Blindness: A National Emergency?’ (*ACRAWSA Journal*).

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P. David Marshall holds a research professorship and personal chair in new media, communication and cultural studies at Deakin University. He has published many books that have studied the public personality and celebrity including Celebrity and Power (2nd edition 2014), Companion to Celebrity (2015), Celebrity Culture Reader (2006), Fame Games (2000) and New Media Cultures (2004). His current work explores the area of Persona Studies and investigates the online construction and presentation of identity as well the proliferation of public personas throughout contemporary culture.

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Neumark co-edited *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media* (2010) and *At a Distance: Precursors to Internet Art and Activism* (2005). She is Honorary Professorial Fellow at VCA, Melbourne University and Emeritus Professor, La Trobe University. She is founding editor, *unlikely: Journal for Creative Arts* http://unlikely.net.au.

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Foreword

A Companion to Australian Cinema

Australian cinema has always provided a vantage point for making sense of the cinema more generally and its evolving character. In their own particular way national cinemas refract global trends in film production processes, screen practice, and cinema movements. Included in this are elements of genre and style, film funding, distribution, and the circumstances of film screening and relations with adjacent screen media – first theatre, then television and video, and then online. Australian cinema ceaselessly adjusts itself to this larger, insistent cinematic world, selectively taking up and adapting itself as a component, and inevitably subsidiary part. So, too, audiences, reviewers, commentators and scholars similarly refract global trends in their localised uptake of cinema in general and Australian cinema in particular.

So, in being profoundly and continuously shaped by an insistent internationalism and cinema’s preternatural interconnectedness, Australian cinema is a place to observe the evolving encounter between these wider story-telling institutions and traditions and those of Australia. Australian filmmakers and film writers alike use these larger trends, norms, and insistent global political economies of production, funding, and circulation to mediate, connect with, comment upon, represent, select, and intervene in a story-telling from Australia. Their resulting story-telling is thus influenced by both the larger cinema conversation and the practical circumstances of their encounter with more specific nationally-based and centred institutions, traditions, and movements.

The cinematic world-making that is Australian cinema joins together broader trends in cinema with more nativist cinematic traditions. Not created in isolation these nativist traditions have also been shaped by previous conjunctions of the global, by local histories and traditions of story-telling, by available visual repertoires rendering landscape, the built environment, and peoples, and by collections of both new stories and the familiar told and retold on screen. Australian cinema
is here a vantage point for taking the “temperature” – aesthetic, cultural, social, political – of a national film culture that is both internationally connected and nationally-based. This glocal – global and local – condition of the Australian cinema is also, of course, the condition of Australian film writing, whether on the cinema in general or Australian cinema. Cinema’s uptake in Australian discussion and review, public commentary, and scholarly criticism talks to these same encounters, global trends, made over through nation-based – sometimes national, sometimes international – lenses.

In these ways Australian cinema is simultaneously a national cinema, a transnational cinema, a contributor to an international cinema and a cinema in conversation with Australia and the world. The cinema – and Australian cinema in particular – is always re-inventing itself rather like the Mad Max cycle of films, in the light of its new circumstances. This combination of the global and the local is, arguably, what makes the cinema so important as a cultural form. It powerfully informs filmmakers’ practices, just as it shapes the very terms of audience and critic appreciation or opprobrium. Both sets of actors make sense of, variously domesticate, and pick and choose; and in doing so they inevitably extend the Australian national and transnational cinematic world in relations of contingency, dependency, and partial autonomy. In this double fashion Australian cinema becomes a vantage point from which to see both the general and particular in operation through cultural, social, political, and aesthetic lenses that are simultaneously international and local.

As a collection charting, grappling, and contending with Australian cinema in the 2000s A Companion to Australian Cinema provides a window on our contemporary cinema. It shows a cinema that is adjusting and mutating cinema’s cultural forms in the wake of changing intermedial relations with television, photography and online media. It shows the developing multiplatform ecologies in an era of screen media being anywhere, anytime and on any device. New sorts of international association, and new turns in globally dispersed international production are in evidence, whether through the bodies of actors, post-production services, or international branding. It is a national cinema that has become a central participant through its Blak Wave in a now global movement for a Fourth Indigenous Cinema so passionately advocated by Aotearoa New Zealand Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay (2003, 1990) and provided with its Australian critical vocabulary by Aboriginal intellectual Marcia Langton’s (1993) careful parsing of filmmaking as an intercultural encounter. Australian cinema is also a cinema contributing its own minor internationalisms as a foreign-language, non-Anglophone cinema (here Laotian cinema) contributing, as essays in this collection claim, to a minor transnational imaginary straddling Australian and Asian cinemas.

Australian cinema of the 2000s also emerges in this collection as a cinema which variously contributes to, comments upon and negotiates ways of making and being Australian, being Indigenous, and being a foreign-body in Australia. It discloses itself as a cinema responding and contributing in equal measure to Australia’s fractious social and political divisions. In taking up the rise of an Indigenous Fourth Cinema the Companion explores that cinema’s bracing challenge to Australia, its
politics, its cultural formations and foundations, and its peoples. It is a cinema that simultaneously celebrates the imperial legacies of its national story in ANZAC while facing and not facing, the challenges that its increasingly multicultural character presents to it and that of its natural environment marked by an ever more insistent, though at times vigorously denied, logic of the Anthropocene. It is a cinema that is marked by unease, contention and anxiety. In this collection Helen Grace usefully calls it an ‘unsettled’ cinematic imaginary. It is a cinema less about staging unity as about staging the terms of division, disconnection and disagreement. It is a cinema produced, just as this Companion to that cinema is written, in the shadow of a national story with its own contemporary dynamics and versions of longstanding logics – part political, part cultural, part social and economic – of contention, of contrasting national imaginaries, of competing and uncertain national futures and national settlements.

While such a mixed condition of filmmaking and critical writing has been with us since the re-emergence of a multi-faceted cinema from the diverse strands of filmmaking and film aspiration that governed cultural and political contention in the late 1960s, Australian cinema’s messy assemblage has taken its own distinctive shape in the 2000s and 2010s. This Companion locates this as a cinema shaped by the various slipstreams of the cinema of the period. It is one also marked by the changing political economies of screen media production, circulation and exhibition as longstanding settlements associated with traditional media of the cinema, commercial television and pay-TV, and public service broadcasters are being reconfigured and partially replaced by online alternatives such as YouTube and Netflix.

Like the filmmaking to which it refers A Companion to Australian Cinema is being written at a time when the architectonic plates of the world are shifting and with them, Australia’s place in that world. By 2007 China had overtaken Japan as Australia’s largest trading partner (DFAT, 2007). Chinese investment from a low base has now become significant across the economy including in the cinema, where leading cinema chain, Hoyts was acquired by the Chinese leisure and real estate conglomerate Wanda in 2015. Coupled with the renewed role played by American corporations in Australia’s media, including screen media courtesy of the CBS take-over of the Ten Network and the formidable power of the FAANGs (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google) these new circumstances are generating new screen partnerships and patterns of infrastructure ownership, creating in the process new priorities and anxieties for the place of Australia not only in the world but how Australian contributions to film worlds are organized and the kinds of control Australian actors can exercise.

If, as I contended in Australian National Cinema (O’Regan 1996), Australian cinema as a national cinema is best seen as a messy assemblage of filmmaking projects, institutional and policy configurations, critical moves, and a container of diverse energies, then to do justice to Australian cinema of the last twenty years would require a multifaceted and generous approach capable of recognising this diversity and accommodating its several characteristics. A Companion to Australian
Cinema is well suited to this task. The diverse angles of incidence of its different sections and the varied concerns of its authors promote recognition of Australian cinema’s mosaic form. A Companion provides a vehicle in which participation through post-production and visual effects in The Lego Movie can sit alongside the work of auteur producer Robert Connolly, Aboriginal filmmaker Ivan Sen’s cinematic imaginary of place and landscape can abut the business models for Matchbox Pictures, YouTube’s Australian contributors can intersect with the strategies of Screen Australia, the ABC and SBS, the heroine journeys on the Australian screen can join Gothic tropes in Australian cinema, and Jane Campion’s feminist sensibilities as an international auteur can connect to television serial, Serangoon Road’s, minor transnationalism, and the multi-media spectacles generated in response to Australians arrested on drug-related offences in Asia can jostle with digital transmedia documentary forms. The sheer detail and the extent of the coverage undertaken here serves to remind us of the many pathways Australian cinema takes and what these pathways require in terms of an engaged exploration.

Australian cinema, courtesy of its size, is also manageable enough to be able to allow us to see in the one place how these very diverse projects and entrepreneurial energies, live together, knock against each other, contend, and simply slide by each other. As a medium-sized cinema, Australian cinema is neither small as is New Zealand’s, or large as is that of the UK, Korea or France, or very large as is that of the USA, Japan and China. As an English language cinema, Australian cinema is simultaneously an insider producing in the dominant screen language of English and marginal as a minor English language cinema. This structural character might mean that it can do more than can a smaller cinema, and its films can travel at times unimpeded through cinema networks courtesy of being produced in the English language. But, at the same time, there are definite limits to what it can do. Such cinemas do more of some things than others at different times. Sometimes they have to choose what they do, and sometimes they have what they do chosen for them by dominant international players. While it only can do and only choose to do some things at different times, its smaller size has its advantages. In Australia various strands of screen production that are more distant from each other in a larger filmmaking milieu are more contiguous. Filmmakers have scope to contribute across a variety of film and television production, working over their careers across genres and forging intermedial screen careers. This makes Australian cinema valuable for thinking in the one place about various faultlines of film and television production.

Australian cinema also provides a useful viewpoint from which to gauge the consequences for filmmaking of screen media transformations. With less firmly established and more precarious screen production industries compared to their larger media counterparts, Australia’s medium-sized cinema is affected in different ways than are its counterparts in larger countries. From the mid-2000s, technological change has been altering both producer operating conditions and the circumstances under which viewers access films. Cinema began the 2000s with the settled
screening combination of cinema, DVD/video, pay-TV and free-to-air broadcast TV; but by the late 2010s it was as much a cinema on laptops, tablets, and smart TVs accessing asynchronous, on-demand content online (in its various varieties of advertiser-supported, pay-per-view, and subscription video-on-demand), eclipsing the more traditional venues for screen media. Australian cinema provides a related but distinct position from which to view these changes as they impact upon the ecologies of film production in a medium-sized English language market.

A Companion to Australian Cinema starts with the basic question that confronts filmmakers and critics alike: how are we to make sense of Australian Cinema in the twenty-first century? The answer they give here is partly synoptic. After all, this collection does comprehensively cover diverse strands of Australian film making and film writing of the new millennium. But its underlying priority is not to be summative or to condense a by now large volume of writing on Australian cinema and its history into more bite-sized bits. It aim is rather to contribute fresh perspectives and to serve as a new point of departure for thinking about contemporary Australian cinema. A Companion to Australian Cinema’s is mostly concerned with adding to the literature on Australian cinema by variously challenging, redirecting, rechannelling, and retuning our attention to it. While it certainly conveys a strong sense of a continuity with previous writing, outlining as its authors do an improvising cinema and screen culture simultaneously connected with its past and negotiating its future, it does so by extending and opening up the conversation on Australian cinema and screen culture in new ways. Here, past filmmaking and critical work alike is not simply acknowledged but used in the best sense – entering as an active dialogue partner – to enable these contributions to be variously remade, repurposed, extended, and criticised through the critical encounter with contemporary cinema and television. With purposes of intervening in, as much as representing, Australian cinema A Companion’s authors seek to reinvent Australian cinema and Australian cinema writing for this time and this place.

To aid this task of reinvention A Companion to Australian Cinema is thematically, not chronologically, organised. This allows Australian cinema to be grasped as a cinema of a number of tendencies – its editors call these tendencies a set of ‘positions’ about Australian cinema. These are that: Australian cinema has an indigenous screen culture; it is an international cinema; a minor transnational cinema; an auteur, genre, and landscape cinema; a televisual cinema; and a cinema shaped by new media platforms. Recognising and filling out these several tendencies allow Australian cinema’s messy assemblages to not only be established but negotiated and recognised in their positivity. What is especially good about this orientation is that while it calls for a new beginning this is not a shallow new beginning borne of ignorance of Australian films and filming and Australian film writing. Rather it is one borne of a sense of possession of and passion for a rich, diverse, sometimes distinct and occasionally distinguished filmmaking and film writing history. This gives depth to its authors’ investigation of diverse strands of contemporary filmmaking, their interrogation of intermedial and transnational dimensions, their
understanding of strategies for viability concurrently pursued by filmmakers and film businesses, their charting of the changing policy and political environments of film support, and their interrogation of Australian cinema’s relation to broader national cultural formations and histories.

A Companion to Australian Cinema conveys then the protean character of Australian cinema. It discloses a cinema of the new millenium engaged in perpetually forming and reforming its filmmaking practices, its screen economy, and cultural and critical apparatuses. It also opens up a new chapter in our understanding of and writing about Australian cinema, serving to both set an agenda for future scholarship and show to an Australian and international readership why contemporary configurations of Australian cinema matter to any understanding of national cinemas in these the first two decades of the new millennium. In doing so A Companion to Australian Cinema also makes a contribution to film writing and scholarship generally. Like their filmmaking counterpart, the writer on cinema operating from an Australian base has long connected with global conversations about the cinema, critically engaging with the cinema of the day, negotiating aesthetic movements within film making and screen culture, contributing to contemporary screen theory, film maker projections and critical understandings alike (see King, Verevis and Williams 2013). For those writing on Australian cinema in this collection this cinema is always refracted through the lens of their experience of and writing on the cinema more generally. To be interested in the cinema in Australia is to be interested in this larger international cinematic world of which Australian cinema is but a part. This means that the writers in this collection not only write on Australian cinema but have also contributed to the exploration of a cinema that extends well beyond it. A Companion to Australian Cinema operates in a critical screen culture that mimes in a different register the very work of Australian cinema itself over this same period: its writers are also in the business of glocal refraction, adaptation and negotiation. If this brings those who write on Australian cinema closer to their filmmaking counterparts it also ensures that those writing for this collection are writers on and contributors to the dialogue on the cinema more generally. In this they are well suited to the task before them.

References


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Introduction

Australian Cinema Now

Felicity Collins, Jane Landman, and Susan Bye

Since 1896, there has been a film production industry of some kind in Australia, from early street scenes captured by travelling showmen to George Miller’s Mad Max trilogy (1979–85) and its recent American–Australian reboot Mad Max: Fury Road (2015). There has also been a film distribution and exhibition industry in Australia, with a world-leading vertical integration of production, distribution, and exhibition by Australasian Films in the 1910s – until it was eclipsed by Hollywood’s vertical integration and international expansion in the 1920s. It is possible to point to certain films, documentaries and television drama series as ‘Australian productions’ on the basis of their funding sources, creative talent, location and content, but international cross-overs and market dominance (whether creative, financial, or technological) have been a given of Australian cinema for almost a century.

At the Royal Commission into the Moving Picture Industry in Australia (1927–1928), filmmaker–producers promoted the making and screening of Australian (and British) films in Australia as a cultural and industrial buffer against the imperialising and otherwise demoralising influence of Hollywood cinema (see Delamoir and Gaunson 2015, 225–229). The defence of local production as tactical and cultural work has proved enduring, not only in Australia but wherever small to medium-sized national cinemas seek to thrive. Calls for government financial support to underpin Australia’s capacity to ‘tell its own stories’ have recurred since the Royal Commission delivered its report in 1928. In 2018, the rapid growth of Netflix, with 3.5 million subscribers in Australia – together with a renewed campaign by conservatives to sell off the national public broadcaster – have presented an acute challenge to Australian cinema’s nexus with the nation.
In April 2018, the Make it Australian lobby launched a campaign to maintain Australian content quotas on television, and to expand those requirements to new media including Netflix, Amazon, telcos and internet service providers. Notably, the campaign to protect distinctively ‘Australian’ stories was strengthened by the support of mobile and expatriate ‘creatives’ working across borders, with Cate Blanchett and Chris Hemsworth taking the limelight. While the commercial television networks lobbied for: the Australian content quota to be replaced, the Make it Australian campaign lobbied for an end to cuts to Screen Australia and the public broadcasters (ABC, SBS, and NITV); ‘the raising of tax incentives for Australian TV and foreign productions’; and the imposition of Australian content quotas on Netflix and other streaming services. At the same time, the Queensland government argued for an increase in the ‘location offset’ to attract more offshore productions, particularly Hollywood blockbusters (Broinowski, 2018).

The idea of a ‘national Australian cinema’ occupies a peculiar place in campaigns such as Make it Australian. Such campaigns foreground Australian filmmakers and stars with international reputations. They acknowledge that filmmaking in Australia depends on television commissioning a wide range of productions across genres and formats. And they support subsidies for offshore Hollywood blockbusters to shore up local production facilities and crews. These slippages – between film and television, telling our own stories and subsidising Hollywood productions – are symptomatic of what Tom O’Regan (1996, 1–5) describes as the ‘messy’ assemblage of a medium-sized national cinema, differentiating itself from other English language cinemas and responding to the dominance of Hollywood with a variety of strategies and policies:

The aim of a national cinema is one of producing a local presence alongside the dominant imported presence in both the local and international markets. […] The aim of a national cinema in this market and cultural environment is not to replace Hollywood films with say Australian films so much as to provide a viable and healthy local supplement to Hollywood cinema. […] The local cinema needs to be worked for anew and presented to every new generation of critics, viewers, exhibitors, distributors and politicians. (O’Regan 1996, 48)

This Companion, then, presents a new generation with six propositions that seek to renew and extend the work of those who came before us and attuned us to Australian film as part of our social imaginary as well as a presence in world cinema. Before we turn to our six organising propositions, we want to offer our readers an introduction to key texts that seeded our interest in writing about Australian cinema. This Companion is a supplement to the substantial literature on Australian film and television. It is neither comprehensive nor encyclopedic. Rather, it draws attention to certain aspects of Australian cinema that have persisted, changed shape or emerged in the twenty-first century.
Introducing Australian Cinema Now

Writing on Australian Cinema


While Dermody and Jacka’s The Screening of Australia (1987; 1988a) and edited collection, The Imaginary Industry (1988b) were ground-breaking critiques that unpacked the contrary notions of a national industry and a national cinema, and challenged both commercial and cultural complacencies, The Australian Screen (Moran and O’Regan 1989) remains the exemplary introduction to production cycles and critical pre-occupations that have inspired teaching and writing on Australian film and television. The anthology begins with a chapter on the silent era from 1896–1929, by two of Australia’s finest film scholars, Ina Bertrand and William D. Routt. In the ‘The Big Bad Combine’, they champion three of Australia’s contributions to world cinema: the formation of a vertically integrated company, Australasian Films/Union Theatres by 1913, well before Hollywood managed the same feat; the production of a uniquely Australian (bushranger) genre and cinema’s first ‘feature-length’ film, The Story of the Kelly Gang (Charles Tait 1906); and the production of a world cinema classic, The Sentimental Bloke (Raymond Longford 1919), described as ‘among the very best films made anywhere before 1920’ (Bertrand and Routt 1989, 20) and praised for matching Swedish cinema’s command of cinema as ‘an art of atmosphere’ (Bardeche and Brasillach in Bertrand and Routt 1989, 20). In Chapter 2, Routt makes a persuasive case for a further distinctive element of Australian cinema: the prominence of the father–daughter bond in over 60% of films made in the 1920s–30s, a pattern that Routt interprets in terms of the ‘split identity’ of ‘dominion colonialism’ which effectively negates ‘the legitimate claims of the indigenous population’ and establishes racism as a feature of colonial cultures – figured through narratives of miscegenation (Routt 1989, 39–40).
The four decades that followed these early achievements have been widely considered a wasteland in Australian film history, however, Cunningham’s chapter (in Moran and O’Regan 1989, 53–74) goes against the grain, reframing 1930–70 as the ‘decades of survival’ characterised by three trends: productions that grappled with Australia’s British colonial heritage; innovative landscape films including two classics, John Heyer’s poetic, outback documentary, *The Back of Beyond* (1954) and Charles Chauvel’s Technicolor, assimilationist melodrama, *Jedda* (1955); and the emergence of international co-productions in the Pacific region, as well as ‘location’ films made by non-Australian production companies – notably, a number of British Ealing films including *The Overlanders* (Harry Watt 1946) and *Bitter Springs* (Ralph Smart 1950).

The Australian Screen’s chronological account then takes a new turn with chapters on the ‘ocker’ comedies, state-funded cultural nationalism in the period film, and the commercial turn to tax incentives and genre filmmaking in the 1980s. Graeme Turner (1989, 99–117) argues that Australian cinema gained an international profile in the 1970s with a ‘golden age’ of young directors who were celebrated for their art-directed period films, featuring Australian stories set in the recent past. Highlights of this costume–landscape genre include Peter Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), Ken Hannam’s *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), Fred Schepisi’s *The Devil’s Playground* (1976) and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978), Phillip Noyce’s *Newsfront* (1978), Gillian Armstrong’s *My Brilliant Career* (1979) and Bruce Beresford’s *Breaker Morant* (1980). These auteur–directors delivered a distinctive landscape cinema that promoted cultural nationalism at home and the antipodean period film abroad. The arthouse period film, as O’Regan argues in ‘Cinema Oz’ (1989a) eclipsed the popular, picaresque comedies, whose ‘ocker’ characters, Dame Edna Everage, Stork, Bazza McKenzie and Alvin Purple, were displaced by ethereal schoolgirls, laconic shearers, nascent writers, intrepid newsmen and headstrong soldiers. In the 1980s, as the period film waned and the national cinema project (and its audience) migrated to television and the historical mini-series, Paul Hogan’s *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) found a new playing field for the ocker comedy by breaking into the coveted US market (O’Regan 1989b). The introduction of tax incentives in the 1980s heralded the return of Australian audiences, by way of Australianised genre films, making Mel Gibson an international star and Paul Hogan the face of Australian ordinariness. The privatising of production through the 10BA tax scheme culminated in four breakthrough films that brought Australian audiences back to Australian cinema: *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir 1981), *The Man From Snowy River* (George T. Miller 1982), *Mad Max 2* (George Miller 1982) and *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman 1986). The 1980s also witnessed the phenomenon of successful television mini-series focused on Australian historical and political themes, from *Against the Wind* (Seven Network, 1978) and *Women of the Sun* (SBS-TV 1981) to *Vietnam* (Kennedy-Miller 1987).

The Australian Screen’s account of the major trends and successes that characterised Australian cinema ends in 1988, before the revival of the ocker sensibility that