

Reviewing Australian Screen History

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Introduction to special issue of *Studies in Australasian Cinema* – pre-print draft

This special issue of *Studies in Australasian Cinema* features a selection of papers presented at the 17th Film and History Association of Australia and New Zealand (FHAANZ) conference, held at Queensland University of Technology between 1 and 3 July 2015. This was the first FHAANZ conference to be hosted in Queensland since 1998. Informed by historical and archival research, the articles examine overlooked or underdeveloped aspects of screen history, offer new historical perspectives, or consider key contemporary issues regarding the preservation of Australian screen history.

The previous – 16th – FHAANZ conference, *Screen, History, Memory*, was hosted by Victoria University, La Trobe University and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in 2012, while the 15th FHAANZ conference, *Cinema, Modernity and Modernism*, was hosted by the University of New South Wales in 2010. Historically a biennial conference, the most recent conference could not be held until 2015 as the guest editors were unavailable to convene at the time, and no other institutional support had yet been secured. Not since 1996, when the conference was hosted by the University of Waikato and held immediately after the 1995 event hosted by the Australian National University as FHAANZ switched from odd to even years, has a FHAANZ conference broken the biennial sequence. As such, the 17th FHAANZ Conference is somewhat of an anomaly, and as a result, ‘biennial’ was removed from the conference title.

The 2015 conference also varies from previous conferences in terms of its focus. The 2010 and 2012 conferences both featured themed programmes that attracted papers, panels and discussion around very specific aspects of Australian and New Zealand screen history, in step with many FHAANZ conferences before them. The 2015 event by contrast invited submissions on any aspect of screen studies and film history and topics included:

- Screen history
- Australian cinema
- Realism and documentary
- Digital media: online and mobile screen content, social media, digital distribution
- Television aesthetics, genres and ethics
- Sound and the screen
- Screen theory and philosophy
- Creative practice and production
- Aesthetic cycles, genres, key thematic and stylistic concerns
- Reimagining landscape
- Production, distribution, exhibition, audiences
- Screen education, industry frameworks and policy settings
- Animation

Over 130 delegates from Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Canada, the UK, Italy and China attended the 2015 conference. In addition to academics, scholars and postgraduate students, the conference also welcomed film critics and a small number of independent scholars contributing to the research field while formally employed in other areas of higher education (such as professional services), or in other sectors of the economy altogether (including health and politics).

The final programme consisted of four plenary sessions and five parallel sessions running over three days. The programme emerged organically from the submissions received and comprised four dominant themes: (1) Australian and New Zealand cinema, (2) film history, (3) screen theory and philosophy and (4) genre, horror and exploitation cinema. Without a mandated conference theme, the

first two themes clearly reflected FHAANZ's traditional research foci and constituency. These were complemented by diverse multi- and single sessions exploring a wealth of national and transnational debates, including screen sound (a surprisingly popular topic in terms of the number of papers submitted), Hollywood and North American cinema, film theory especially in relation to time and space, auteur theory and studies of international directors, Chinese cinema, television, distribution and exhibition and documentary film among others.

The keynote presentations covered a rich cross-section of issues from the frontier of screen production in an age of digital media and the physical cinema experience, to cultural memory and film history. Stuart Cunningham, Distinguished Professor at the Queensland University of Technology, delivered a keynote address entitled *The Emerging New Screen Ecology* that provided an insightful account of the emerging ecology of YouTube content production, distribution and consumption. The session also considered the future for national screen content in light of digital disruption and evolving distribution and consumption practices. Jane Stadler, Associate Professor in Screen Studies at the University of Queensland, delivered a thought-provoking presentation entitled *Visceral Cinema, Somatic Resonance, and Screen Technology*. The presentation explored the historical and technological evolution of cinema designed to evoke visceral responses through sound, and through specific impacts on the body. Associate Professor Geoff Lealand, University of Waikato, delivered a personal keynote, *In Love With Shirley Temple: Hollywood, New Zealand and Cultural Memory*. Professor Lealand presented findings from archival research and interviews into the life histories of three New Zealand girls (now elderly ladies in their mid-80s) who were prize-winners in a Shirley Temple 'double' competition in Christchurch in 1935. Professor Tom O'Regan, University of Queensland, presented the final keynote. *Kinds of Intermediality: Film and its Neighbours, the Australian Experience* offered a forensic incursion into the connections between Australian films, theatre and radio, since the advent of cinema.

A highlight of the conference, from our perspective as convenors, was *Australian National Cinema Today*, a panel featuring conversation between Jan Mills (Chair), Therese Davis, Adrian Danks, Olivia Khoo, Tom O'Regan and Jake Wilson. Each panellist is well-published and known for very distinct views on the subject. Each was invited to consider the relevance of a national cinema framework for understanding contemporary Australian screen, and to question how much has changed since the publication of Tom O'Regan's seminal text *Australian National Cinema* in 1996. The panel debated transnational approaches to analysis, the ongoing importance of national cinema approaches, and models for contemporary Australian film studies.

Three books on Australian film were launched at the conference. Discussing his book *Mad Dog Morgan*, the latest title in the *Australian Screen Classics* series edited by Jane Mills and published by Currency Press, film critic for *The Age*, Jake Wilson, made a case for *Mad Dog's* inclusion in what could be regarded as a 'popular' canon of Australian cinema. Directed by Philippe Mora and starring Dennis Hopper, who plays the eponymous bushranger, the film is an excessive, extremely violent, but well-regarded Ozploitation film that until now has rarely featured in discussion of classic Australian cinema. To mark the launch of the book, Currency Press sponsored a screening during the conference of an archival 35 mm print of the film from the National Film and Sound Archive Australia at the Australian Cinémathèque, Gallery of Modern Art. The event opened with a screening of *Album* (1970), and a tribute to the life and contribution to experimental filmmaking in Australia of its producer, director, editor and narrator David Perry (Ubu Films, Sydney Filmmakers Cooperative), who died shortly before the conference. The second book to be launched at the conference was *The Films of John Hughes: A History of Independent Screen Production in Australia* by John Cumming, part of the Australian Teachers of Media's impressive *Moving Image* series. The monograph is a comprehensive and detailed account of the career and body of work of the highly respected Australian documentary filmmaker John Hughes. The third book, the *Directory of World Cinema: Australia and New Zealand 2*, edited by Ben Goldsmith, Mark David Ryan and Geoff Lealand, was launched by *Studies in Australasian Cinema's* editor, Anthony Lambert. This book, part of the Intellect Directory of World Cinema series, offers a wide range of essays, critical reviews and reference material on Australian cinema, organised by film genre.

The conference concluded with the 2015 joint FHAANZ and Screen Studies Association of Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand (SSAAANZ) meeting – an important event with implications for the next Trans-Tasman film studies conference. The FHAANZ conference has for many years been perhaps the most important forum in this part of the world for academic film studies. Despite its title, however,

FHAANZ has always been a conference rather than an association; as such, 'membership' is bestowed by attendance at the conference and there is no annual fee. SSAAANZ, on the other hand, is an incorporated association. It has an elected executive committee and fee-based membership, and it offers a range of services to members. Traditionally, the FHAANZ conference was held every two years, with the location determined at a meeting at the end of each conference. Essentially, one or more members volunteered to organise and host the conference. Although they had access to advice and assistance from previous convenors and conference elders, the organisers were essentially left to run the show themselves. Each set of organisers effectively began anew. At the meeting at the end of the 2015 conference, a call was made for expressions of interest in hosting the next conference. Tim Groves of Victoria University in Wellington volunteered to convene the conference, albeit on the basis that the conference will be a screen studies rather than strictly a film history or film and history (or as it was originally, history and film) conference. This also aligned with SSAAANZ's desire to host its own inaugural conference. Emerging out of the meeting, the next Australian and New Zealand screen conference to be held will be badged as a SSAAANZ conference, with a film and history (or film history) strand, to be held in Wellington in November 2016.

The selected papers from the conference published here each examine aspects of, or issues concerning, Australian cinema history. The articles are organised chronologically. Stephen Vagg and Daniel Reynaud's article 'Alfred Rolfe: Forgotten Pioneer Australian Film Director' provides a detailed archival analysis of one of the most prolific Australian filmmakers of the silent era. Despite a successful career in theatre and film as an actor, the director and producer behind important silent war films such as *The Hero of the Dardanelles* (1915), *How We Beat the Emden* (1915), and the bushranger film *Captain Starlight, or Gentleman of the Road* (1911), has attracted only limited scholarly attention, particularly in comparison to more well-known contemporaries such as Raymond Longford. This article provides a much needed and detailed account of Rolfe's career in theatre and film, and attempts to evaluate the quality of these films in relation to standards of the time.

In his article "'A most miserable hotch potch": Charles Bean and the origins of the First World War Film Collection', Daniel Eisenberg, Curator of Photographs, Film and Sound at the Australian War Memorial, describes the efforts of Australia's official war correspondent (and founder of the AWM), Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean (CEW Bean), to ensure that films of Australian soldiers in various theatres of the First World War were brought to Australia for inclusion in the new national collection immediately after the war. Comprising over twenty hours of footage, the films include scenes shot by the British war correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett at Gallipoli. These scenes were added to the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World register in 2008. As Eisenberg outlines, the establishment of the AWM's First World War film collection was by no means a straight-forward task, but the national cultural patrimony is significantly enriched by its existence and availability.

Kenneth Slessor, the subject of Huw Walmsley-Evans and Tom O'Regan's article in this issue, is perhaps now best known as a poet and contemporary of the notorious bohemian Norman Lindsay. But in addition to being CEW Bean's counterpart as Australia's official Second World War correspondent, Slessor was also a journalist and editor. Among many appointments, Slessor reviewed early sound films for *Smith's Weekly* between 1927 and 1940. Walmsley-Evans and O'Regan argue that Slessor's work in *Smith's* laid down standards of good film criticism in Australia that continue to apply today. They convincingly contend that Slessor deserves greater recognition for his contribution to Australian cinema.

Adrian Danks' article 'South of Ealing: Recasting a British Studio's Antipodean Escapade' takes this issue in to the immediate post-Second World War period in which filmmaking in Australia consisted to a great extent of international productions. Danks reassesses the five Australian films made by Ealing Studios in the 1940s and 1950s. Rather than examining these films for their Antipodean resonances, Danks reads the films in relation to Ealing's broader output and fortunes in the years before it ceased production in 1959.

In his article 'Visions of Australian Colonial Authority in *Captain Thunderbolt* (1953), *Robbery Under Arms* (1957) and *Eureka Stockade* (1949)', Andrew Couzens compares representations of colonial authority in the local film *Captain Thunderbolt* and the two British–Australian co-productions, *Robbery Under Arms* and *Eureka Stockade*. Couzens usefully dissects the complex factors of

production and the ideological and political issues influencing the varying attitudes to the police force and colonial authorities in these films.

Kirsten Stevens' article 'From film weeks to festivals: Australia's film festival boom in the 1980s' documents the significant growth in film exhibition events in Australia from the 1980s. Although the boom, as Stevens recounts, coincided with an expansion in the number of festivals held around the world, it also had specific local catalysts and influences. The article fills in some of the blanks in the historical record, and usefully accounts for the rapid rise in film festivals in recent decades.

The historical themes of film preservation and exhibition introduced by Daniel Eisenberg and Kirsten Stevens are conjoined and placed in contemporary context by Ruari Elkington in his article, 'Arguing the Archive: Reconceptualising the National Film and Sound Archive in a Time of Austerity'. Elkington steps us through the key issues facing the Archive as it seeks to remain open and accessible while operating in an environment of declining government commitment to cultural institutions. The current crisis in funding and division about how best the Archive can fulfil its public cultural functions are both informed and overshadowed by the imperative for the Archive to digitise its assets. Ultimately, Elkington argues, the Archive's future existence depends on the ability of its custodians to build arguments around its public value.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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