

Australian film industry: the futility of calls for “cultural protection”

By Richard Phillips
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Over the past year the Australian government has been involved in a series of high-level negotiations with the US for a bilateral trade agreement. The Bush administration promised Prime Minister John Howard a free trade deal as a pay-off for Australian participation in the illegal US-led war against Iraq.

According to Canberra, the agreement will provide Australian agribusinesses and farmers with better access to American markets and boost export incomes. To achieve this, however, Howard told the media, “We will obviously have to agree to some things the Americans put to us.”

Local filmmakers and actors have warned that this will see a weakening of protective measures for the small Australian film and television industry. They also fear that the government will not demand new local-content quotas on US movies and television broadcast via Internet, multi-channel digital transmissions or other international electronic distribution systems.

In late November, Australian Screen Directors Association (ASDA) executive Richard Harris, backed by the actors union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), said this could lead to a collapse of the local industry. Actors addressing the recent Australian Film Institute (AFI) award night repeated these concerns and claimed that Australia’s “cultural identity” was under threat from Hollywood.

“I just beg you, Mr John Howard, to just see straight and not jeopardise our cultural future,” AFI best actress winner Toni Collette declared. “[W]e’re not talking about inanimate objects. We’re talking about the way we express ourselves, our hearts and our minds and you can’t sell that.” Actors Geoffrey Rush, Kerry Armstrong and David Wenham made similar pleas.

Hundreds of local technicians, actors and filmmakers are rightly concerned about their future and what the US-Australia free trade deal will bring. No serious filmmaker wants to see local cinema, and the complex web of human talent and resources that maintains it, destroyed by the vagaries of the market or the giant, mainly US-based, entertainment and media corporations. These enterprises, which have budgets that dwarf many national economies, dominate the market and are doing everything possible to marginalise or suffocate their global rivals.

But the complex issues confronting local filmmakers and artists cannot be resolved by simply counterposing Australian culture to US culture and “Hollywood”. This sort of denunciation is superficial and reactionary, splitting actors, technicians and filmmakers—who are part of a global industry and face common problems—along national lines.

Calls for increased protection have the same divisive impact and mainly benefit the industry owners. In Australia, this elite includes the Southern Star Group, Village Roadshow, the Seven Network and Publishing and Broadcasting Limited, which owns the Nine Network and is headed by Kerry Packer, Australia’s richest individual.

The prime concern of this tiny group, like their counterparts in Hollywood, is not serious cinema or “Australian culture” but profit. And, like their global competitors, these industry chiefs have not hesitated to ruthlessly axe jobs and services to maintain

their international competitiveness and profit margins. By contrast, most of those involved in the industry, excluding a handful of filmmakers and actor celebrities, live a hand-to-mouth existence, with high unemployment. The few in regular work are forced to work long hours on low rates of pay.

ASDA and MEAA’s appeals to Howard are also a dead-end and ignore his government’s record. The Liberal-National coalition has slashed more than \$100 million from local film and television funding between 1996 and 2001, imposed a stricter censorship regime and maintained an ongoing assault on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Over the past decade, the state-funded national broadcaster has been forced to axe hundreds of jobs, downsize production facilities and destroy crucial training that the network provides.

The issue posed is: on what basis can a principled struggle in defence of cinema production jobs and their intellectual resources be conducted? Any answer to this issue must start by recognising that the source of the problem is not “cultural conflict” but production for profit, which determines the future of filmmaking and all other human endeavour according to the dictates of the capitalist market.

Local film production

From the outset, global processes have dominated the Australian film industry. After an early beginning, it collapsed in the 1920s as British and US film producers and distributors penetrated the local market. All but dead for decades, the industry was revived in the early 1970s through direct government grants, tax concessions and rules guaranteeing 55 percent of all television shows and 80 percent of advertising were produced in Australia.

In the past two decades, however, major technical advances, particularly in computers and communications, has seen the emergence of global assembly lines with US studios cutting costs by diversifying production outside America. This, together with new film financing techniques, has undermined the basis for any national protectionist measures.

Today, Australian film and television, including distribution and cinemas, employs about 48,000 people, produces about 30 feature movies and 45 television dramas per year. As well as television production facilities, there are new high-tech studios in Sydney, Melbourne and the Gold Coast competing for international production contracts.

These facilities, together with cheaper labour and a low Australian dollar, encouraged a number of US and other foreign film companies in the late 1990s to make their movies in Australia. This expansion, however, has come to a halt recently because of increasing local production costs and a rise in the Australian dollar.

In 2001-2, the average cost per hour for Australian television productions rose to its highest-ever level and for the first time in 20 years no adult television mini-series, either local, foreign, or co-productions, were made. This trend widened last year with ticket sales for local films dropping to five percent, feature film production falling by a third, from 30 to 19, and overall investment in movie production dropped by 23 percent.

These figures indicate the impact of increasing competition and the accelerating global monopolisation of production and distribution on the local industry. They also express the

impossibility of defending film and television jobs through protectionist measures.

Operating with multi-million dollar production and advertising resources, the giant entertainment and media companies, whether US-based or in Europe, are constantly developing new ways to drive down costs and maximise profits. A constant round of restructuring, job cuts and other cost-saving measures dominate, as each local producer, big or small, tries to maintain its international competitiveness.

This has had an extraordinary impact on local producers in every country. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Italy made about 200 films a year; today it averages about 90, with movie jobs slashed by 55 percent in the same period. Similarly, the liquidation of nationalised property relations by the Stalinist bureaucracies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe saw an almost total collapse in film production. In 1990 the Soviet Union made 200 films; six years later only 20 features were made.

As film and television enters the twenty-first century the emergence of globally integrated digital delivery platforms, which can by-pass local content broadcasting rules, are rapidly undermining protectionist measures and will lead to a further monopolisation of production and distribution. Any attempt to stop audiences downloading films, videos and other visual entertainment by digital national border controls or high tariffs is akin to England's King Canute trying to make the tide recede, and will ultimately fail.

Those calling for increased protection to maintain the local film industry attempt to justify it by appealing for the defence of "Australian culture". This is politically bankrupt, chauvinist and stifles genuine artistic and intellectual work.

As history demonstrates, artistic development, like all other forms of human endeavour, has only advanced on the basis of broad collaboration between co-thinkers across the widest geographic boundaries. Just as no scientist can progress if limited to the data and resources available on the national scene, so artists and filmmakers cannot develop if confined to a diet of local culture.

Moreover, the Australian nation state is just over 200 years old and its cultural identity relatively undeveloped. In fact, with almost 30 percent of the population having travelled to Australia during the post-World War II period, a distinguishing feature of the country is its polyglot character. Instead of deeply probing this, the overwhelming bulk of movies purporting to reflect local culture are self-indulgent, superficial and ultimately false. Few filmmakers seem willing to deeply explore the realities of contemporary life or plumb important periods in the country's history.

Mad Max, *Crocodile Dundee*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and other mindless products hailed as "Australian culture" are only remembered for the profits they earned. Local television is no better, a seemingly endless supply of police shows, neighbourhood dramas, or a thin gruel of "earthy" but cynical comedies about suburban working class life.

Advocates of a "free market"

Not everyone in the local industry supports calls for new protectionist measures. Some, particularly those connected with media and entertainment giant Rupert Murdoch who owns Fox Studios in Sydney, extol the virtues of the global free market and arrogantly dismiss the concerns of Australian filmmakers and actors about their future.

One of their champions, Padraic McGuinness, declared in the

Sydney Morning Herald on November 25 that the Australian movie industry was a "sheltered workshop". Film actors, who were "notoriously ill-educated and ignorant," he continued, were demanding "permanent welfare," irrespective of the "quality, competitiveness and exportability of the product". In other words, the "free market" should be the ultimate factor in determining the industry's existence.

Others present a somewhat more sophisticated argument, calling for Australian cinema to repackage itself as an "independent" producer and "find niches" in the global market. Brian Rosen, Film Finance Corporation chief, said local filmmaking had to become "innovative, risky and edgy" and said it needed Australian versions of figures such as Miramax chief Harvey Weinstein.

But Miramax and other so-called independents, large and small, US or European-based, have been engulfed by the giant monopolies, which draw them into their financial orbit and impose their own stultifying production values or political outlook.

Miramax is a good example. Disney absorbed this "independent," which made its name backing "art house" and foreign films in the US. Today, it functions as a subcontractor to the major entertainment corporations and, instead of helping to develop artistically and politically challenging cinema, has embraced the same narrow outlook and production values as the major studios.

The Quiet American, the most recent feature by Australian director Philip Noyce, is a case in point. Miramax refused to release Noyce's movie for almost 18 months after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, claiming it could be regarded as "anti-American" and "unpatriotic". Eventually screened in the US, it was restricted to a handful of cinemas, mainly in New York and the West Coast.

A similar fate befell Gregor Jordan's *Buffalo Soldiers*, a rather limited satire about US army life in Germany in the late 1980s. Miramax purchased distribution rights to the young Australian's film in September 2001, but postponed its release five times, finally showing it in a few US and European cinemas in July 2003. It claimed the movie was "too difficult" to release under conditions of the US "war against terrorism".

But neither "free market" nor protectionist policies, both of which accept film production for profit, provide a solution to the crisis developing in the local film industry.

Without minimising the immediate problems ahead, the first component of an effective strategy to defend the jobs and resources of Australian filmmakers is a recognition that they confront a struggle against all the media and entertainment corporations—whether US-, European- or Australian-owned. Filmmakers, actors and technicians have to look beyond their immediate national borders and unify with their fellow workers internationally.

Secondly, the struggle to defend film production facilities is bound up with the fight for a new intellectual and political climate. Serious cinema and great art not only requires access to equipment and distribution chains but powerful and liberating ideas. This is connected with the revival of socialist culture in the international working class and an understanding that capitalism threatens the cultural gains of humanity as a whole.

The tasks ahead involve nothing less than the abolition of the profit system and the creation of conditions where creative workers of every kind are liberated from the mind-numbing pressures of the market and can preoccupy themselves with the issues of artistic and historical truth. Only if filmmakers, actors and technicians begin considering these issues will they be able to deal with the challenges they now confront.