Secret lives of Asian-Australian cinema: offshore labour in transnational film industries

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ABSTRACT

This article examines some of the material dimensions of Asian-Australian cinema through a discussion of selected production and postproduction flows since 1980, and the debates surrounding them. It begins with a theoretical discussion of the role of labour within the global film industry, before moving on to consider controversies around the offshoring of film production to lower-cost destinations. Specific examples of production relays between Asia and Australia are analysed in the context of models of cultural labour offered by Toby Miller et al and Ben Goldsmith. The author proposes a definition of Asian-Australian cinema which seeks to attend to cross-border collaboration at a variety of levels and to render visible 'below-the-line' Asian-Australian interfaces which do not necessarily register on-screen.

KEYWORDS

Offshore production, runaway production, cultural industries, film, Australia, Asia

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Narratives of crisis and decline have long dominated discussions of Australian cinema and its position within the global film market – but what lies beneath such narratives, and what else do they obscure? As a way into the murky waters of international audiovisual commerce, let us cast our minds back to 2003. Many of the speeches at this year's AFI Awards, and related press commentary, proposed a veritable Pandora's Box of horror scenarios for the increasingly internationalized Australian production industry, which was still reeling from the signing of the US-Australia Free Trade Agreement. From one side came warnings of a shift of domestic production capacity away from local projects to outsourced American blockbusters, of the demise of a truly 'Australian' cinema, of a talent drain, and so on. From the conservative commentariat (i.e. Henderson 2003) came accusations of indulgent introspection on the part of Australian film-makers, of the inability of our films to succeed in a global marketplace. Everyone seemed to agree that jobs for Aussie film workers were a good thing, but exactly what kinds of jobs, and on whose films, were matters for heated debate. The 'telling our stories' argument got a lot of airtime, a position which reconciled the economic-protectionist and the cultural-nationalist positions, but there was little consensus on what our stories are, how they should be told, and whether the ultimate arbiters of their Australianness should be film-makers, bureaucrats, distributors, or the box office.

This article seeks to revisit some of the recurrent debates that have taken place around the internationalization of Australian cinema to see what we can learn from how these have played themselves out in the public arena. Two tendencies are of particular interest. The first is the elision between 'international' and 'American' in much of the discussion of foreign production in Australia. The second is the central role that film *labour* has played in these discussions. Claims that Australian films are not good enough to compete with Hollywood, or that America is cherry-picking our best and brightest, attest to the former. The labour issue, on the other hand, was the subtext of arguably the most important question of the last few decades of Australian film history, a question which may be best put in old-fashioned Marxist terms: is Australia to be a factory for other nations' films, or should our film-makers control the means of production and the commodities thus produced?

Film workers are often rendered invisible in both academic and public discourse. As David Hesmondalgh (2007: par. 10) has recently put it, 'Television and film aren't just battlegrounds over social meaning, they're also fields of struggle over labour too.' And in a globalized market, film labour is increasingly footloose. To date, foreign production in Australia has generated more than A\$1 billion for the national economy (Australian Film Commission 2008). The majority of this has been major studio money, generated through blockbusters like the *Star Wars* franchise (George Lucas, 2002 & 2005) and *The Matrix* trilogy (Wachowski Brothers, 1999-2003). But it is important to remember that all roads do not necessarily lead to Hollywood. Other cross-border industry trajectories are possible for Australian cinema, though few have been the object of public debate or policy.

This article is an attempt to visualize one such future – an Asian-Australian production industry – and to think through its potential politics. While the importance of US-based

productions to the Australian industry should not be downplayed, I would like to suggest that it is also worth thinking about what it would mean to decentre the US from its position as the default instigator and beneficiary of offshore production in/from Australia. Overwhelmingly, the literature on offshore film production lives in the long shadow cast by the Hollywood sign. Key industry reports on the internationalization of the Australian film industry (AFC 2002, Herd 2004, Maher 2004) focus almost exclusively on the US-Australia nexus – an emphasis which is understandable given the high profile and relative economic significance of production activity on the Gold Coast and at Sydney's Fox Studios in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, recent developments may make it worth asking a different set of questions about the Australianness of Australian cinema, however that may be defined. For example: what are we to make of the increasing level of post-production and effects work being undertaken in Australia for producers in Korea, India and China? What about the long – if relatively obscure – history of Australian film production in Asia? Has Australia in fact practiced the kind of low-cost offshoring of which the Americans are accused? And if so, would we still be able to use the defense of our being the object, rather than the subject, of runaway production?

Such questions are the departure points of the present article. Taking my cues from the groundbreaking work on international production by Tom O'Regan and Ben Goldsmith (O'Regan 1996; Goldsmith 2006; Goldsmith and O'Regan 2003), I seek to determine whether the existing work on this topic is translatable into the field of what this publication has christened Asian-Australian cinema. Considered collectively, the category of Asian-Australian cinema amounts to a sizeable – if relatively low-profile – collection of films, and a much larger amount of capital and labour. AFC data reveals that 17% of foreign features made in Australia since 2000 come from India, 7% from Japan and 4% from Hong Kong (AFC 2008). If we extend the definition to include productions with thematic and talent links to Asia, then the number increases dramatically. Research in the National Film and Sound Archive catalogue, conducted for the editors of this volume, has uncovered over 400 features, shorts, documentaries and telemovies which would qualify on the basis of thematics, key personnel, or production/post-production criteria; and many more undoubtedly exist. Critically acclaimed auteur works such as *Floating Life* (Clara Law, 1996) and *The Home Song Stories* (Tony Ayres, 2007) are present, as are canonical documentaries including *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (Dennis O'Rourke, 1991) and large amounts of ethnographic/anthropological fare. But so too are less visibly Asian-Australian collaborations, such as the simultaneously-shot samurai Westerns *Blazing Continent* (Moeru tairiki, Nishimura Shogoro, 1968) and *The Drifting Avenger* (Koya no toseinin, Sato Junya, 1968), both Japanese productions set in California and shot near Tamworth, or the martial arts epic *Hero* (Zhang, 2004), which features effects work done in Sydney.

These 'secret lives' of Asian-Australian cinema offer us an opportunity to theorise cross-culturality in cinema not only as a matter of explicit textual engagement but also as a 'relation' (Goldsmith 2006) enacted at the levels of production and financing, whose traces may or may not be visible in the finished product. In what follows, I revisit some selected moments from this minor film history to see how they mesh with the conceptual models that have been used in public and academic discourse around

Australian cinema and its internationalization. While there are inevitable erasures involved in the use of a term like Asia (or, for that matter, Australia), the Asian-Australian framework has an important pay-off. Studies of offshore production which do not hinge upon a Euro-American axis can constitute a more thoroughly transnational form of cinema studies, one which takes neither the Hollywood blockbuster nor the European art film as its default template, and which can think inclusively about different geographies of film production without erasing – or fetishizing – textual difference.

PLACE AND POWER IN THE AUDIOVISUAL ECONOMY

Both the objectives and the effects of national cultural policy become increasingly complex when we take into account the global political economy of the audiovisual industries. There is much that can be said on this topic, and the work of scholars such as Michael Curtin (2007) and Janet Wasko (2003) contains much more detail than I can hope to provide here. However, for the moment, let me offer a short introduction to some of the debates around one particularly thorny issue: offshore production.

We can begin by differentiating between two different types of offshore production: aesthetic and economic (Herd 2004). The former refers to those films which are shot outside their country of origin for reasons dictated by the location requirements of their script or for other reasons relating to the *textual* needs of the film. Film-makers have been doing this for a very long time, and despite the havoc this often wreaks on local cultures and environments (recall, for example, the fiasco surrounding Danny Boyle's filming of *The Beach* [2000] in Thailand), it is not generally regarded as a problem, at least not in principle. The latter term, however, refers to those 'runaways' who choose to shoot overseas because of the lower associated costs. It has been this imperative that has brought so many productions to Australia over the last decade, and which has also proven to be so contentious.¹

One way of approaching this type of offshore production is offered by Toby Miller and his New International Division of Cultural Labour (NICL) (see Miller 2001; Miller et al 2005; Miller and Yudice 2002). This is a model of comparative advantage enacted on a global scale, a riff on the older New International Division of Labour (NIDL) thesis which sought to explain how different forms of production are spread unevenly across different parts of the world. The NICL extends this argument into the realm of audiovisual production. It argues that, in an age of transcontinental mobility and satellite communications, film producers are essentially able to think of the world as their 'back lot' (Christopherson and Storper 1986), choosing between shooting

¹ The distinction between aesthetic and economic runaways is a useful way into the issue, however it is important to note that this terminology is in many ways a relic of those national cinema frameworks so thoroughly critiqued by the likes of Higson (1989) and O'Regan (1996). In the rough and tumble of production, these categories frequently blur. For instance, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Peter Weir, 1982) was set in Indonesia but shot partly in the Philippines (does this make it an aesthetic or economic runaway?). When we take into consideration co-productions, which are an increasingly attractive option for many filmmakers and their backers, the meaning of 'offshore' becomes even more complicated.

destinations on the basis of cost. For example, if there is a significant saving involved in shooting a Western in Romania rather than the US (as was the case with *Cold Mountain* [Mingella, 2003]), then this is what will tend to happen. It is on this basis that Australia has in recent years attracted big-budget Hollywood productions like *The Matrix*, *Ghost Rider* (Johnson, 2007) and *Superman Returns* (Singer, 2006).

Of course, a site's climate, landscape, infrastructure, regulatory environment and national language(s) will all factor in as potential assets or liabilities, and obviously not all films can be shot in Manila instead of Manhattan. But in cases where there are few specific location requirements, the cost of labour may be a deciding factor. Given the large numbers of stagehands, grips, make-up artists, drivers, electricians and other 'below-the-line' workers whose labour ultimately produces the images on our screens, the cost savings involved in wage reductions across this workforce can be considerable. Thus, the broad argument of the NICL is that if all other factors are equal, or can be equalized at lesser cost, production will head where the costs are lowest.

Miller argues that the NICL stratifies locations into a tripartite structure. The nerve centre of the production industry remains California, followed by medium-cost options such as Canada, the UK and Australia, with the second and third worlds functioning as low-cost destinations suitable for the most labour-intensive and/or ecologically dubious productions. (Recent production hotspots have included Morocco, South Africa, and the Philippines.) As such, the NICL is in some senses a world-systems model of film production, one which maintains that both those who own the means of production and those whose labour and/or resources go into making the film-commodity are beholden to the spatial logic of capital. One consequence is that various national, regional and city-based actors outside the US become lured into a 'race to the bottom'. Recognising the increasingly mobile nature of production capital, they try to out-do each other as the cheapest possible site for production by offering generous tax-breaks, accommodation deals, cheap location permits, and other forms of corporate welfare. This divide-and-conquer arrangement benefits the major studios by keeping costs down across the globe.

There is substantial empirical support for this argument. Studies by Scott (2002, 2005) and Aksoy and Robins (1992) highlight to the degree to which the decentralization of production across the globe has been coupled with the recentralization of allocative power on the West Coast of the USA. In this sense, the situation has more than a little in common with the outsourcing of other industries, such as manufacturing. If we were to strip this process of its material complexities and render it in the crudest terms possible, it would look something like this: Multinational Corporation X enters into talks with the government of Developing Nation X, which promises the MNC tax breaks and a disciplined workforce; MNC sets up (sweat)shop, keeping wages low by threatening to pull out of the country at regular intervals; when a cheaper offer finally comes along from Developing Nation Y, the MNC packs up and leaves, taking its investment with it; and the cycle begins again. Now, in the case of film production, numerous technical and commercial factors complicate this scenario (Herd 2004, AFC 2002, Maher 2004). Nonetheless, the 'incentives game' (Herd 2004) played by film commissions across the world does tend to conform to this narrative, affording footloose film producers unparalleled choice and value for money with little required in return.

This, in essence, is the NICL theory. But does it tell us the full story? Can offshore production be good for local industries, or are Australian film workers merely 'Mexicans with parkas and mobile phones' (Brillon 2006)? Other studies suggest there may be advantages in being a bit-player in the NICL. An important AFC report (2002) found US productions to be a valuable source of employment, skills and networks, and suggested that this offshore production world tended to complement, rather than suck the life out of, local production. Ward and O'Regan (2007) also offer some similar evidence in relation to TV production on the Gold Coast. So it would appear that, in certain circumstances, there is something to gain from the Global Hollywood world-system.

Another feature of the NICL model is its US-centricity. There is no getting past the fact that Hollywood is the crucible of the audiovisual IP industries and will be for the foreseeable future (Scott 2002) – so Miller is absolutely right to insist on this point. However, a model such as the NICL tells us less about forms of production which are not routed through the USA, of which there are and have always been many. These networks constitute an alternative map of cinematic production, one which is not necessarily incompatible with the NICL topography but which may tell us a slightly different story.

For one such model, let us consider a recent essay by the Australian researcher Ben Goldsmith (2006) entitled 'Australian International Cinema'. As the title suggests, this paper proposes a move away from the national-cinema framework, which Goldsmith sees as having impoverished our understanding of the true value of the film industry. Instead, the author argues for 'the positive cultural potential of cinematic internationalism' (2006: 1), urging us to take seriously, and indeed to celebrate, the achievements of Australian film-makers, actors and crews who work on foreign productions. Such productions not only have material fringe benefits for our local industry (however such a thing may be defined), but they also constitute such an important part of the commercial landscape that they should, Goldsmith contends, be considered Australian in their own right, even if they are set or financed elsewhere. Hence the title of the essay: Australian *international* cinema.

Goldsmith's intervention forms part of a broader body of work which has sought to interrogate the way we define Australian cinema (i.e. O'Regan 1996; Goldsmith and O'Regan 2003). This involves rethinking the inclination exhibited by some sectors of the film community towards a reflex anti-internationalism – equivalent to an unwitting form of cultural *nationalism* – which is often presented as an antidote to the cultural imperialism of the global audiovisual industry, which in turn tends to a euphemism for the USA. Goldsmith is keen to highlight a way out of this deadlock by pointing to the positive role of international production at both cultural and economic levels. Offshore projects conducted here – an increasing number of which are Asian in origin – not only have important flow-on effects in terms of skills transfer, capital investment, network building, and so on. They are also indicative of an *openness* which Goldsmith sees as something to be commended, and they may also bear stronger textual traces of their Australian production context than is commonly acknowledged. From this perspective, the countless Australian personnel who relocate overseas should be considered as flag

bearers for Australian International Cinema, rather than rats deserting a proverbial sinking ship (which is how the brain-drain discourse sometimes presents them).

This is a *relational* model which sees Australian cinema not as a 'thing' to be protected but a constantly unfolding set of connections formed through engagement with international industries and traditions. Importantly, it draws our attention to below-the-line film labour and to other forms of cultural production which do not necessarily show up on screen, or which register textually in unpredictable ways. For Goldsmith, considering these forms of labour on an equal footing with the traditional indexes of Australian cinema is an opportunity to

think about the breadth of relations between Australian and international filmmakers, and to really assess the incredible creative contribution of Australian sound editors, mixers, foley artists, visual effects artists, and screen composers. They are almost always forgotten in analyses of film production, and yet their international work is not only growing and forming a critical part of their business, it is also enabling them to work on what Australian projects are out there without going broke and without their equipment becoming outdated. (Goldsmith 2006: 4)

This concern with the political dimensions of film labour has resonances with Miller's NICL, but its perspective is quite different. However, it is possible to reconcile these two approaches, and even to see them as opposite sides of the same coin.

There is no doubt that production follows the logic of capital, seeking out cost savings wherever possible. To think any different is to romanticize what is, and has always been, a rapaciously commercial industry. Miller is correct to highlight this logic, and also to insist that its primary beneficiaries are the major studios. However, this is not to say that US producers are the *only* beneficiaries from such a situation. As Goldsmith demonstrates, foreign production leaves in its wake skills, investment and infrastructure, all of which feed back into 'local' production. And even if this were not the case, there is little to be gained from the defense of cultural nationalism, which in the current geopolitical climate is an increasingly dangerous option (Goldsmith 2006). A critical *internationalism* is a better option, which would require being pragmatic about such things as Australia's peripheral situation in the global film economy, the giant bottleneck that is international distribution (Epstein 2005, Scott 2002, Lobato 2007), and the kind of industry that an English-language culture of our size can reasonably expect without massive injections of government investment.

Offshore production is a volatile business, one which is particularly vulnerable to currency fluctuations. Foreign production as a proportion of total feature production dropped from 73% in 2004-05 to 17% the following financial year, before rising to 31% in 2007-2008 (AFC 2008). The recently announced federal producer incentives (40% tax offset for local productions, 15% for offshore productions) are expected to boost these figures substantially, but it is nonetheless difficult to predict where the runaways will head and whether Australia will remain a favoured destination. What is certain, however, is that the internationalization of the Australian film industry is here to stay.

This has important ramifications for the way we define and conceptualise Australian cinema, and it renders the 'telling our stories' argument somewhat problematic. Without downplaying the enormous struggle that the film community had to go through in the 1960s and 1970s to get an Australian industry off the ground, it is safe to say that the global economy in which films are financed, produced and distributed is such that it is no longer financially feasible for film-makers to envision *only* an Australian audience for their films – and this has not been the case for many years, if ever. This does not necessarily have to translate into an erasure of local content in the name of global competitiveness, as a film's locality can in many cases be an asset rather than a liability. But it does mean that internationalism should perhaps be approached not only as a fact of commercial life but also as a potentially enabling condition, which is something that Australian producers have known for a long time anyway.

The following section offers two case studies of internationalization at work.

ASIAN-AUSTRALIAN INTERFACES

Having sketched out some of the theoretical positions we can take on foreign film production, let us now turn to some of the Asian-Australian connections which are the topic of this edition of *Studies in Australasian Cinema*. As I have suggested, these connections are not as rare as we might think. Although the investment involved in such projects pales in comparison to the amounts which flow from the US to Australia, Asian-Australian production is important for what it can tell us about the multiple trajectories of film capital and the cultural artefacts these leave in their wake.

Ausfilm's *Made in Australia* database lists more than sixty feature films of Asian origin which have been shot or post-produced in Australia since 1990 (Ausfilm 2007). These cover a variety of genres and styles, from Bollywood films shot in Victoria (*Chak de! India*, Amin, 2007) through to *muay thai* action movies shot in Sydney (*Tom Yum Goong/The Protector*, Pinkaew, 2005). Further research has uncovered numerous other Asian films produced in Australia, from obscure Japanese features (*Tasmania Monogatari/Tasmania Story*, Furuhata, 1990) to Indonesian comedies (*Cinta 24 Karat*, Buntario, 2003). A large number of Australian features shot in Asia also exist, including the Australia-Bhutan co-production *Travellers and Magicians* (Norbu, 2003), John Duigan's *Far East* (1982; shot in Macau), and Phillip Noyce's *Echoes of Paradise* (1988; shot in Thailand). Asian-Australian production connections also appear repeatedly in specialist sub-genres such as the surfing movie (*Tubular Swells*, Hoole and McCoy, 1976; *Morning of the Earth*, Falzon, 1971) and, of course, the innumerable WWII or Vietnam War movies, which tend to be the genres in which Asia is most frequently mobilized as a setting or theme.

Let's take a closer look at one of these more obscure Asian-Australian interfaces. The work of Australian director/producer Antony I Ginnane, head of International Film Management, represents a controversial example of footloose production. Ginnane, who used to joke that the 'I' in his name stood for 'International' (Hills 1988), was one of the

most aggressively global producers of the 10BA period. After an unsuccessful directorial debut with the European-styled art film *Sympathy in Summer* (1971), Ginnane began to target the exploitation market, releasing a large number of genre movies with abundant nudity and/or violence throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These included the erotic adult comedy *Fantasm* (Richard Franklin, 1978), the horror flicks *Patrick* (Franklin, 1978) and *Thirst* (Rod Hardy, 1979), and the sci-fi/action movie *Turkey Shoot* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1982), described by Phillip Adams as 'a film of unrivalled sadism and brutality' (*The Sun* [Melbourne], 27 July 1982). These were low-budget films designed to play well in overseas markets. The emphasis was on visceral entertainment, and they represented a radical departure from most of the AFC-funded projects of the 1970s and 1980s.² Indeed, as Dermody and Jacka (1987) suggest, Adams and Ginnane in many ways represent two competing visions of Australian film culture during the 1980s, the former championing a government-subsidized auteur cinema modeled along European lines with defiantly 'local' thematics and the latter a commercial cinema with global ambitions and a Hollywood format.³ This approach to film-making was reflected at a variety of levels in Ginnane's productions. He cast overseas leads such as David Hemmings in his movies, much to the anger of local actors' unions, and many of his features are faithful contributions to established exploitation sub-genres with global 'playability' such as the vampire film, the martial arts film, and the humans-as-prey film.

The commercial context of the 10BA tax laws is important here. International Film Management was one of the key beneficiaries of 10BA, a tax write-off scheme which was introduced in 1980 by the federal government and which had the effect of funnelling huge amounts of private money into the Australian film industry. Scaled back in several stages throughout the 1980s, and only recently abolished in favour of the new producer rebate, 10BA enabled many investors to realize profits by securing flat-fee international presales. The video market which emerged in the late 1970s and boomed throughout the 1980s was also a bonus, allowing what Ginnane described as 'no-star average' features to rake in, on average, advance sales of around \$500,000 for US home entertainment rights and \$350,000 from other territories (Dermody and Jacka 1988: 32). These two factors ushered in a type of prolific, fast-and-cheap film culture which has not really been seen in Australia since, and they also contributed in significant ways to the internationalization of the Australian film industry by encouraging producers to seek presale deals abroad to underwrite their projects.

A controversial figure at the time, Ginnane and his films are now undergoing something of a reappraisal. Many have been recently re-released on DVD, and a few have become cult favourites. (At the Sydney premiere of *Kill Bill*, Quentin Tarantino dedicated his film to *Turkey Shoot* and its director Brian Trenchard-Smith, a Ginnane regular.) However, what is most relevant for our purposes is the fact that Ginnane's companies, including the spin-off venture Eastern Film Management, made a number of films in the Philippines. These include the supernatural horror film *Demonstone* (Andrew Prowse, 1989), the hostage/action feature *Savage Justice* (Joey Romero, 1988), the action/sci-fi film

² Exceptions do exist, such as Ginnane's Gillian Anderson-directed drama *High Tide* (1987), which was well received by critics.

³ See also *The Australian Film Industry: Homegrown or Foreign-Owned?* (Adams and Ginnane 1983), the transcript of a debate between Adams and Ginnane held at Murdoch University in the early 1980s.

Driving Force (Andrew Prowse, 1990), and the Vietnam War movies *The Siege of Firebase Gloria* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 1989) and *A Case of Honor* (Eddie Romero, 1988) These productions were thoroughly international affairs, as Dermody and Jacka note:

These films, all around \$1 million, were funded by US and Australian banks (including NZI Securities) and presold to US distributors like J&M, Atlantic, and Fries Entertainment. Again generally genre pictures, they were based on Australian scripts, used some Australian directors and key crew and US actors, and otherwise used Filipino crew and facilities, although post-production was done in Australia. The move to the Philippines was clearly designed to take advantage of the lower labour costs and to bypass union problems in Australia. (Dermody and Jacka 1988: 31; see also Ginnane forthcoming)

Ginnane himself is very upfront about this prerogative, describing the Philippines as 'a low-cost production center where we could maximize production for minimal costs' (interview, 23 January 2008). The strong history of local Filipino production was a factor in his decision, as was the natural landscape (the jungle settings could stand in for numerous Asian locations), the success that Roger Corman had had with his Philippines productions, and a number of other commercial connections Ginnane was developing at the time which involved expanding the IFM distribution network into South East Asia.⁴ Interestingly, while Ginnane was attacked by film commentators and the actors' union when he produced the film *Race for the Yankee Zephyr* (David Hemmings, 1981) in New Zealand, his Philippines activities were unremarked upon by the Australian film industry. Now based in the US, Ginnane has also offshored to other destinations including Mexico, Canada, Lithuania, and the former Yugoslavia. He nominates Bulgaria and the Ukraine as countries which represent particularly good value for money today (interview, 23 January 2008).

What we have here is a company actively participating in Miller's New International Division of Cultural Labour, making cost savings by offshoring the labour-intensive parts of its productions. But it is an Australian-run company, doing so from a peripheral position in the global film economy, and in the case of Eastern Film Management, in partnership with two Manilan entrepreneurs (Marilyn Ong and Rod Confessor). This represents a parallel rather than a centrifugal trajectory – a movement from one periphery to another – which is nonetheless beholden to the same logic of capital theorized by Miller. The distribution of these films tells another kind of story. Via presale deals with small distributors such as the UK/Irish outfit Liberty, the US independent Vestron, Roger Corman's New World, and a collection of other small operators, these films achieved a thoroughly global presence in the straight-to-video market without the benefit of a distribution deal with one of the majors. The following arrangement was fairly representative of how this market sector operated at the time:

Germany was sold to Highlight for \$125,000; the UK (video only) to Braveworld for \$110,000 with Sky picking up UK pay TV at \$30,000 per title. Pacifica in Japan paid \$70,000 each and 2 competing companies in Spain bought the 2 titles for \$25,000 each. Other territories initially licensed included Israel, Portugal, Korea, Greece, Turkey, South Africa, Sweden, Middle East, Taiwan and Central

⁴ An IFM office was opened in Hong Kong briefly, but Ginnane pulled out of Asia following the Wall Street crash of 1987.

America. Filmpac took Australia on both titles and paid \$85,000 for the pair.
(Ginnane forthcoming, n.p.)

International trajectories such as these are piecemeal and subterranean, rather than global in the pejorative sense imagined by Miller et al. They ape Hollywood in terms of form and genre, but they are small-scale and ad-hoc enterprises which operate for the most part outside the studio system. Indeed, these Australian-Filipino films also adhere closely to what Meaghan Morris (2004) has described as the 'minor' mode of transnational action cinema – a fast-and-cheap sub-genre spawned by the straight-to-video market. For Morris, there is a transnational class imaginary that emerges from many of these films. But in the case of the Ginnane productions, this is more by accident than design. Although it contains some interesting critique of the Vietnam War, a film like *The Siege of Firebase Gloria* does not have a clear political agenda. Nor does *Savage Justice*, which is set in a dysfunctional South-East Asian country beset by civil strife and leather-clad rebel gangs. Yet at the same time, the transnational dimensions of the film are inescapable: the mixed-race cast and crew, the polyphony of accents, the strange cultural elisions that occur when 'local' talent is recruited onto international productions (Eddie Romero is one of the Philippines' most prolific and famous directors). In other words, the films bear at a textual level the legacies of their production context, and they are not directly comparable to the kind of Global Hollywood productions which seek to suppress these histories by making one place stand in for another, as was the case with other Philippine-lensed US productions such as *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986). In this sense, the IFM films both conform to and confound the NICL model.

The second Asian-Australian production interface I will discuss here is another limit case which problematizes some of the ways in which we commonly conceptualize offshore film labour. The postproduction, digital and visual effects (PDV) sector is a boom area for Asian-Australian collaboration, though again it is something of a 'secret' industry which doesn't get much press and has not been visible in the official AFC statistics (Goldsmith 2006). This is a shame, as Australian animators and effects artists have been involved in some of the biggest Asian blockbusters released in the last decade. Sydney outfit Animal Logic contributed some of the stunning effects in Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *The House of Flying Daggers* (2004). Other films which have received Australian technical input include the Chen Kaige epic *Wu Ji/The Promise* (2005), the Korean action thriller *Typhoon* (Kwak, 2005), and Zhang Yimou's *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (2005) (see Ausfilm 2007). Even the Korean blockbuster *The Host* (Bong, 2006) has an Australian connection – Queensland prop makers John Cox's Creature Workshop assisted with the slimy sewer monster around which the film's plot revolves.⁵ This amounts to a boon for certain sectors of the Australian film industry. As Hong Kong superstar Steven Chow told *Variety*, 'Australia is known as the best place for post-production in Asia' (Boland 2005: A1). The most recent data available estimates the annual income of the PDV sector at A\$387.6 million and notes that PDV is consistently more profitable than feature production in Australia (AFC 2008, pp. 83-88).

⁵ Other key PDV studios include Rising Sun Pictures, Illoura, Cutting Edge, Digital Pictures and Soundfirm. The recent increase in the federal producer rebate will make Australia an even more attractive option in the international division of PDV labour – it offers a 15% offset to foreign productions with an Australian PDV spend of over A\$5 million.

Post-production is an area of the film economy that is particularly prone to deterritorialization. High-speed internet connections have enabled work to be done in lower-cost destinations and co-ordinated from Hollywood, or elsewhere, in real time. (Creature Workshop boasts a 'purpose-built 1100 sq meter studio with Broadband internet facilities' which 'allow[s] all clients to view work in progress'.⁶) This makes commercial sense, given that much of the work involved in animation and effects is of a repetitive nature and there is no reason this cannot be done by workers in countries where wages are lower and workforces less unionized. Indeed, Miller et al cite figures which suggest that 90 per cent of the world's TV cartoons are made in Asia. The reasons for this are, they claim, purely economic: 'Manila's studios produce half an hour for US\$120-160,000, whereas the US cost is US\$300,000' (2005: 166). Australia lies somewhere in between these two extremes – a mid-cost destination with first-world infrastructure and skill bases.⁷

However, the examples of Asian-Australian PDV collaborations discussed above tend to buck the NICL trend, as they often involve a movement of film capital *from lower-cost to higher-cost destinations*. This phenomenon is due in part to the highly specialized nature of film PDV, not all of which is as easily replicable as the more basic work carried out for the TV industries Miller et al refer to. Such movements do not necessarily discredit the NICL model, but they do tend to complicate it. Skill bases, personal relationships, government incentives, the intangibilities of a city's 'brand', and other complicating factors temper the flow of capital and function to recentralize certain forms of industry activity in places marked by intensive agglomerations of skilled workers, universities, professional associations and financial infrastructure.

All this is not to say that Asian-Australian collaborations are welcomed unconditionally by the Australian industry. Recent comments made by the director George Miller on ABC-TV's *The 7.30 Report* in response to the success of his animated spectacular *Happy Feet* (2006) reveal traces of the protectionist impulse:

They [the Chinese] want to take the Chinese stories out into the world. They are using talent from us. They are using companies like Sound Firm who started off doing major sound on Australian features, everything from *Crocodile Dundee* to *Mad Max*. They are in Beijing. Animal Logic, the company behind the visual effects on this film, they are doing stuff in China and so on, because they want that expertise. Within a handful of years, they will know what we do and we'll be forgotten. (ABC 2006)

The us-and-them rhetoric is crude, but Miller is right to take seriously the potential of Asia's new media industries. The scenario he presents here is, among other things, one of capital relocation from one periphery (Australia) to another (China).⁸ As this essay has argued, (post)production trajectories such as these, which are not routed through the USA, are worth considering for what they can teach us about the tendencies of film

⁶ See <http://www.johncox.net/aboutus.html>.

⁷ Again, this is a common trend but it is not the only trajectory for PDV. Other flows have a reverse movement. For example, Warner Bros' *Superman Returns* followed a reverse trajectory: production took place at Fox Studios in Sydney but most of the effects were done back in the US. Note also that the figure cited by Miller et al presumably includes the enormous *anime* industry centred in Japan.

⁸ On the topic of Chinese new media industries, I refer the reader to the five-stage model of Michael Keane (2006), which plots out a series of industry trajectories from low-cost outsourcing through to higher-value "clusters".

capital in a globalized audiovisual industry. Equally worthy of our attention are the cultural dimensions of these industry movements, and the possible grounds for comparison – and even solidarity – between peripheral sites. (One wonders whether the Chinese or Filipino film communities have used similar terms to debate the offshore production invasion and the degree to which this may affect the telling of ‘their’ stories.)

CONCLUSION

A key aim of this essay has been to reconcile two different accounts of labour movement within the global film economy. I have argued that the New International Division of Cultural Labour model is effective as a loose template, but to fill in some of the blanks we need to complement this with alternative explanations of industry development. Goldsmith’s Australian International Cinema model is one such alternative, being both a pragmatic response to the problem of market size and an important reminder of the dangers of cultural nationalism.

One implication of such a reconciliation may be a minor realignment of the way we conceptualize film capital – its nature, its current form, and its future trajectories. Political economy tends to present us with a machinic image of capital, which is imagined in the work of theorists like Miller as something akin to a Stealth bomber. This sleek machine follows its own logic, seeking to extract maximum value at every stage of production. Its movement is unidirectional (it goes where costs are cheapest) and its momentum is largely unstoppable. However, the examples I’ve discussed throughout this essay demonstrate that such a machine is also unpredictable. It responds to a huge variety of stimuli, not all of which can be mapped in advance, and its movements are sometimes erratic. Its routes do not always conform to the centre-periphery models which we still tend to carry around in our heads. In most cases, it will reach the final destination of cost-minimization and profit-maximization, but it may detour along the way.

Australian-Filipino action movies and the complex cultural politics of PDV work represent two such detours, neither of which show up on conventional maps of the film industry but which can both tell us interesting things about the contemporary cultural economy in which we live and work. These are some of the secret lives of Asian-Australian cinema, submerged relational networks of industry, culture and regulation which suggest an alternative history of Australian film, and perhaps gesture towards a different future as well.

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