



Watching Australian films in 2009

'A SPECIAL SORT OF LONELINESS'?

Is it true that Australian audiences don't like seeing Australian films? **Bruce Hodsdon** takes a look at the statistics behind the rhetoric.

IN A 2009 ESSAY FOR *THE MONTHLY*, Louis Nowra went in search of Australian cinema and, it seems, frequently experienced what he called the 'special sort of loneliness' of watching a film in an empty or near empty cinema.¹ This, it has been widely claimed, has become an endemic state in the reception of our films.

If its critics are to be believed, Australian cinema has been in crisis for much of the last two decades, the measure being the failure of our films to attract more than about 3-4 per cent of the box office dollar in most years. Even in 2009, widely seen as a vintage year, the share was only 5 per cent.

This 5 per cent of gross box office receipts came in a year when Australian films accounted for 12 per cent of releases. The comparable figures for films of UK origin were 8 per cent of releases for 8 per cent box office, while for films from the US, the dominant presence on Australian screens, 51 per cent of the releases for 83 per cent of box office returns. On the face of it, these figures would seem to be grist to the mill for those who regularly label the performance of Australian films on local screens as being below par or worse.

In 1998, leading critic Lynden Barber described Australian cinema's 4 per cent box office share as 'pitiful'. The film industry has been variously accused, in more recent times, of 'sleepwalking',² 'after years of subsidy ... still reeling'³ and as being 'on life support'.⁴ In 2007, Pauline Webber also commented in *The Australian* that 'it was time for [our industry] to grow up'.⁵ Louis Nowra seemed to sum up these sentiments in his essay, concluding that

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SAMSON & DELILAH; BLESSED; AUSTRALIA; AUSTRALIA; MY YEAR WITHOUT SEX; BALIBO

TABLE 1: GROSS BOX OFFICE SHARE BY ORIGIN, 2009*

	Limited release 0-19 screens			Specialty release 20-99 screens			Mainstream release 100-199 screens			Blockbuster release 200+ screens			Total		
	no. titles	GBO (\$ mil)	GBO/ title (\$ mil)	no. titles	GBO (\$ mil)	GBO/ title (\$ mil)	no. titles	GBO (\$ mil)	GBO/ title (\$ mil)	no. titles	GBO (\$ mil)	GBO/ title (\$ mil)	no. titles	GBO (\$ mil)	GBO/ title (\$ mil)
Aust	34	2.7	0.08	12	12.9	1.08	2	6.0	3.00	2	33.5	16.75	50	55.1	1.10
US	62	10.8	0.17	31	30.4	0.98	48	120.0	2.50	72	739.0	10.26	213	900.2	4.23
UK	14	1.6	0.11	12	9.3	0.78	4	23.4	5.85	4	64.0	16.00	34	98.3	2.89
ROW*	102	12.3	0.12	14	8.2	0.63	3	7.2	2.40	2	5.0	2.50	121	32.7	0.27
Total	212	27.4		69	60.8		57	156.6		80	841.5		418	1086.3	
Average			0.13			0.88			2.75			10.52			2.60

TABLE 2: GROSS BOX OFFICE TAKINGS OF AUSTRALIAN FILMS, 2009

FILMS IN LIMITED RELEASE (0-19 SCREENS)*

FEATURES: *Blessed* 0.5 (16), *Last Ride* 0.4 (17), *Wake in Fright* 0.3 (7), *Van Diemen's Land* 0.3 (9), *Stone Bros* 0.1 (7), *The Marriage of Figaro* 0.09 (11), *Beautiful* 0.06 (19), *Prime Mover* 0.05 (na), *Closed for Winter* 0.05 (na), *Shadows of the Past* 0.05 (na), *\$9.99* 0.05 (na), *Lake Mungo* 0.03 (na), *Coffin Rock* 0.03 (na), *Lucky Country* 0.03 (na), *My Tehran for Sale* 0.01 (na), *Crush* 0.01 (na), *Three Blind Mice* 0.01 (na), *Bad Bush* 0.004 (na), *Salvation* 0.003 (na), *Prey* 0.001 (na), *Under the Red Moon* \$87 (na), *Acolytes* (na). *Ten Canoes* is also credited with a \$232,000 GBO in 2009.

DOCUMENTARIES: *The Voyage That Shook the World* 0.1 (na), *Bastardy* 0.04 (na), *The Merchants of Bollywood* 0.04 (na), *The Burning Season* 0.02 (na), *The Chilleys of Busby Street* 0.01 (na), *The Choir* 0.009 (na), *Into the Shadows* 0.004 (na), *Celebrity: Dominick Dunne* 0.002 (na)*

IMAX: *Antarctica* 0.1, *Australia: Land Beyond Time* 0.04, *Sydney: Story of a City* 0.01

FILMS IN SPECIALTY RELEASE (20-99 SCREENS)**

FEATURES: *Samson & Delilah* 3.2 (38), *Beautiful Kate* 1.6 (29), *Mary and Max* 1.4 (67), *Balibo* 1.3 (49), *Disgrace* 1.2 (33), *My Year Without Sex* 1.1 (25), *Bright Star* 0.9 (65)*, *The Combination* 0.7 (34), *Two Fists, One Heart* 0.3 (50), *Cedar Boys* 0.2 (32), *Subdivision* 0.2 (66)

DOCUMENTARY: *Love the Beast* 0.8 (67)

FILMS IN MAINSTREAM RELEASE (100-199 SCREENS)**

FEATURES: *Charlie & Boots* 3.9 (181), *The Boys are Back* 2.1 (163)

FILMS IN BLOCKBUSTER RELEASE (200+ SCREENS)**

FEATURES: *Mao's Last Dancer* 15.4 (267), *Australia* 10.6 (643)*, *Knowing* 7.6 (204)

TABLE 1 (ABOVE): *Includes all titles that recorded box office returns with the Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia in 2009. *Rest of the world

TABLE 2 (LEFT): Maximum number of screens during release in brackets. *In millions of dollars rounded to one significant figure. **In millions of dollars rounded to the nearest \$100,000. *Films still in first release run at the end of 2009.

only \$0.31 million. The remaining fourteen grossed a total of \$2.35 million, an average of \$170,000 per title. Compare this with an average of \$170,000 for the sixty-two US titles and \$110,000 for the fourteen UK features released on less than twenty screens.

See Table 1 and Table 2.

Specialty release (a max of 20-99 screens) is the category in which most Australian features that made any significant impact in 2009 (it includes three that made minimal impact) were released. However, the total GBO of all films given specialty release in 2009 accounted for less than 6 per cent of GBO for all release categories (see Table 1). The ten Australian features in specialty release, despite the relative critical and box office success of most of them, thus accounted for little more than 1 per cent of total GBO for all release categories. The claim that Australian audiences are indifferent to our own films is largely based on their performance measured as overall audience share when, I suggest, performance should be measured in relation to that of other English-language films also given specialty release. In so doing, we are comparing apples with apples rather than with the whole shop. Table 3 shows that Australian features on specialty release in 2009 achieved a 14 per cent higher average return than their English-language counterparts included in the sample. This is despite being released on an average of 7 per cent less screens.

'Australian audiences don't like seeing their own films.'⁶ This, I will argue, is a proposition that does not stand up to close statistical analysis, although it is evident that Australian films have lost ground at the box office since 2001. Many of our films, like a significant proportion of imported ones, did not make an impact at the box office in 2009, but those that did more than held their own.

Australian films at the box office in 2009

At first glance, Australian films on limited release (nineteen screens or less) seem to have fared similarly, based on a per title average, to films of overseas origin. It should also

be noted that most of the latter go through the distribution and exhibition filter in their home countries before being picked up for Australian distribution on the strength of their pre-established critical reputation and/or commercial performance. It is almost obligatory, however, that all Australian features ready for release in 2009 record some kind of return at the box office (to the extent that filmmakers will fund their own screenings, known as four-walling, for films that were not picked up for local distribution), thus dragging down the average return in the limited release category. Of the thirty-four Australian films that appeared on limited release in 2009, twenty, including ten documentaries, took less than \$50,000 each, in total grossing

TABLE 3: PERFORMANCE OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FEATURE FILMS ON SPECIALTY RELEASE, 2009

	Number of titles	Avg. max. screens	Avg. GBO (\$ mil)
Australian features	10	42.3	1.12
Other English-language features	26*	45.4*	0.98*

Table 3 (ABOVE): Excludes documentaries and films still in first release run at the end of 2009. *The twenty-six English-language films of overseas origin represent a comprehensive listing in this category, based on the weekly top-twenty box office figures supplied by the MPDAA and published in *Urban Cinefile*. TABLE 4 (RIGHT): Films on specialty release are shown in bold. Overseas films are listed in the shaded rows at the bottom of the table.

Measuring the strength of box office response

The advertising budget of a film is a function of the release strategy (limited, specialty, mainstream or blockbuster). In the majority of cases, a film appears on the maximum number of screens in the first two weeks of release. On occasion, however, films are given time to build interest, reaching a substantially higher maximum number of screens three or four weeks into the release. A recent example of this is *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), where Oscar success was anticipated. In 2009, striking examples of this phenomenon were *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008), the international sleeper of the year that went from an opening on thirty-three screens in late 2008 to a maximum of 211 nine weeks later, and *Samson & Delilah* (Warwick Thornton, 2009), which went from twelve to thirty-eight screens. Unlike *The Hurt Locker*, however, these increases would seem to be more a response to unexpected success than a planned strategy.

Films whose potential may have been underestimated and remained not fully realised can be identified retrospectively by dividing the gross box office in millions of dollars (GBO) by the maximum number of screens (S) reached in a week or weeks during a film's first release run. This yields a quotient that is a comparative measure of the strength of audience response in the locations where the film is screening. The quotient complements the gross box office figure, which is a function of the scale of release, or the number of locations where the film is screening. Table 4 includes the seven highest-grossing

TABLE 4: COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE OF SELECTED 2009 FILMS, RANKED BY GBO/S

	Average \$ per screen in fourth week	Week ended	GBO (\$ mil)	Max no. screens in first release run (S)	GBO/S quotient
<i>Samson & Delilah</i>	20,221	3 Jun 2009	3.2	38	0.084
<i>Mao's Last Dancer</i>	6453	28 Oct 2009	15.4	267	0.058
<i>Beautiful Kate</i>	5342	2 Sep 2009	1.6	29	0.055
<i>Bright Star</i>	3976	20 Jan 2010	3.0	65	0.046
<i>My Year Without Sex</i>	4446	4 Jun 2009	1.1	25	0.044
<i>Disgrace</i>	5009	15 Jul 2009	1.2	33	0.036
<i>Balibo</i>	3631	9 Sep 2009	1.3	49	0.027
<i>Charlie & Boots</i>	3117	30 Sep 2009	3.9	181	0.022
<i>Mary and Max</i>	2315	6 May 2009	1.4	67	0.021
<i>The Boys are Back</i>	1487	9 Dec 2009	2.1	163	0.013
<i>The Reader</i> (US)	8322	18 Mar 2009	4.4	53	0.077
<i>Moon</i> (UK)	7060	4 Nov 2009	0.7	14	0.050
<i>Easy Virtue</i> (UK)	5550	8 Apr 2009	2.9	65	0.039

Australian films on specialty releases in 2009 (bolded) along with a selection of other titles for comparison.

The performance of the top four Australian films given specialty releases compares favourably with the three English-language features of overseas origin included in the bottom rows of the table.

These figures suggest that films in specialty release of less than about forty screens with a litmus test reading (GBO/S) over about 0.05 might well have gone into wider release of forty to sixty screens.⁷ Although the number of screens was increased for *Samson & Delilah*, it does appear from the exceptional per screen returns in the first four weeks that it could have gone wider still in that time. *Beautiful Kate* (Rachel Ward, 2009) would seem a more marginal case of under release, while *Mary and Max* (Adam Elliot, 2009) clearly did not justify its 67-screen release, despite being backed by a well-orchestrated promotional campaign. The two films in mainstream release – *Charlie & Boots* (Dean Murphy, 2009) and *The Boys are Back* (Scott Hicks, 2009) – did not really deliver, particularly the latter, although admittedly *The Boys are Back* was released during the seasonally quiet pre-Christmas weeks.

An alternative measure of the strength of audience response is the average box office

per screen in the fourth week of release (see Table 4). There is a correlation between the average box office per screen figures and the GBO/S quotients. For films opening on a specialty release of around twenty to thirty screens, a per-screen average of around \$5000 or more in the fourth week (the approximate equivalent of a GBO/S quotient of more than 0.050) is indicative of probable under release.

Australian feature films in the last decade

See Table 5 and Table 6 overleaf.

Much of the ongoing anxiety about the alleged poor performance of Australian films is the product of a largely misplaced fixation. We continually compare recent overall box office share with the benchmark twelve years since 1977 (1980–3, 1986–88, 1992, 1994, 1996 and 2000–01), in which market share ranged from around 8 per cent to the peak of 23.5 per cent in 1986, the year of Peter Faiman's *Crocodile Dundee*. The average market share in the past fifteen years (1995–2009) has been 4.6 per cent, down by one-third from 6.9 per cent in the previous fifteen (1980–94). The coincidence of two or more major successes (grosses of around \$10 million or more) in a single year backed up by returns from several films qualifying for entry into the 100 top-grossing Australian

TABLE 5: TOTAL GROSS BOX OFFICE OF AUSTRALIAN FEATURE FILMS (INCLUDING FEATURE-LENGTH DOCUMENTARIES) BY EARNINGS BRACKET, 2000-2009

	<\$2 mil GBO	\$2-7.5 mil GBO	>\$7.5 mil GBO	Total
2000	6.2 (16)	11.3 (3)	36.7 (3)	54.2 (22)
2001	4.9 (22)	2.5 (1)	56.0 (4)	63.4 (27)
2002	9.4 (16)	16.2 (4)	16.2 (2)	41.8 (22)
2003	9.1 (18)	12.8 (4)	8.4 (1)	30.3 (23)
2004	5.4 (14)	6.5 (2)	0 (0)	11.9 (16)
2005	5.5 (22)	17.6 (5)	0 (0)	23.1 (27)
2006	8.2 (24)	13.0 (3)	18.8 (2)*	40.0 (29)*
2007	13.4 (25)	2.6 (1)	20.0 (-)*	36.0 (26)*
2008	6.2 (31)	2.3 (1)	27.0 (1)*	35.5 (33)*
2009	12.2 (40)	9.2 (3)	33.6 (2)*	54.8 (45)*
TOTAL	80.5 (228)	94.0 (27)	216.7 (15)	391.0 (270)
Average per film	0.353	3.481	14.447	1.448

TABLE 5 (ABOVE): In millions of dollars. Number of films shown in brackets. The number of films represents new releases (including a full re-issue such as *Wake in Fright* [Ted Kotcheff, 1971]). There is not an exact match between titles and GBO since the latter includes, for example, takings in 2009 for *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer & Peter Djigirr, 2006) and IMAX documentaries released in previous years. *GBO for *Happy Feet* and *Australia* is spread over two years (2006/2007 and 2008/2009 respectively).

TABLE 6: MARKET SHARE OF AUSTRALIAN FILMS, 2000-2009

	Australian films GBO (\$ mil)	Total GBO (\$ mil)	Australian market share of total GBO (%)
2000	54.2	689.5	7.9
2001	63.4	812.4	7.8
2002	41.8	844.8	4.9
2003	30.3	865.8	3.5
2004	11.9	907.2	1.3
2005	23.1	817.5	2.8
2006	40.0	866.6	4.6
2007	36.0	895.4	4.0
2008	35.5	945.4	3.8
2009	54.8	1087.5	5.0
Average	39.1	873.2	4.5

films of all time (currently \$2 million or more) has occurred only three times since 1995, while in the prior fifteen years this coincidence occurred seven times in addition to the singular peak year of 1986.

A preoccupation with box office has led to an excessive focus on the minimal objective of exceeding a 3-4 per cent audience share

and an overriding concern with achieving the coincidence of individual returns at the box office referred to above. This leads inevitably to a conundrum: do we direct our priorities, as George Miller and Baz Luhrmann would have it, to serially taking on Hollywood at its own game or do we concentrate resources on seeking a higher incidence of exceptional returns from a range of the medium- to low-budget features that have been the staple of the industry? Judged on its own terms, *Samson & Delilah* achieved an exceptional result, but its contribution to the share of 5.1 per cent GBO was a marginal 0.29 per cent. The three top-grossing Australian films in 2009, all co-productions, accounted for 3.09 per cent.

In the last decade, around one in twenty-five Australian films with a budget of below \$10 million has grossed \$5 million or more, while at least half of the rest would not have reached six figures. But to emphasise the hard yards our films have had to traverse in the last two decades⁸ is not the same as lamenting that as a nation we don't care to see our own films. Most obviously, this ignores the 4.6 million cinema tickets sold for Australian features in the last calendar year, with perhaps an additional two or three times as many viewings of Australian films on smaller screens. Such a degree of concern with financial return, even at the expense of cost, seems to be reserved almost

exclusively among the arts for film. This has led from time to time to the kind of public forum that was held at the Chauvel cinema in Sydney last October. The MetroScreen event 'Oz Film vs Oz Audiences' seems to have been triggered by the release of the documentary *Into the Shadows* (Andrew Scarano, 2009), which attributes the declining fortunes of Australian films over recent decades to the passing of independent repertory cinemas that amounted to a kind of loose network around the country from the 1970s into the 1990s. This is a proposition that does not stand up to serious scrutiny, except perhaps as some kind of metaphor for the changing face of film culture. As reported, the speculative mix of diagnosis and prognosis has an all-too-familiar ring.⁹

An 'action point' that emerged during the forum was a call for filmmakers to focus on 'making our myths' rather than 'telling our stories'. The meeting apparently adopted the contribution by Dr Karen Pearlman, head of Screen Studies at the Australian Film Television and Radio School.¹⁰ Her focus was on 'scale, dynamics and audience ownership' as a template for good cinema, with films that avoid 'the dire state of naturalism' seen to be Australian cinema's millstone. Dr Pearlman would thus seem to endorse the Miller-Luhrmann position of taking on Hollywood, until, that is, one finds *Samson & Delilah*, *Balibo* (Robert Connolly, 2009) and *Mao's Last Dancer* (Bruce Beresford, 2009), rather than *Australia* (Baz Luhrmann, 2008) or *Happy Feet* (George Miller, 2006), forced to fit in her square-peg-in-a-round-hole approach to 'classic mythmaking'. Still the idea of our filmmakers poring over Northrop Frye, preliminary to developing their scripts, might have something to recommend it.

Postscript: a preliminary look at 2010

Despite box office being on track to equal 2009, at least in dollar terms, the performance of Australian films in the first seven months of 2010 (a combined GBO of about \$28.5 million) further confirms that it is misleading to focus only on gross box office without taking account of the strength of public response to individual titles within the context of their release categories. Four features – *Bran Nue Dae* (Rachel Perkins, 2009), *The Kings of Mykonos* (Peter Andrikidis, 2010), *Daybreakers* (Michael & Peter Spierig, 2009) and *I Love You Too* (Daina Reid, 2010) – were given blockbuster releases (200+ screens), and *Beneath Hill 60*



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(Jeremy Sims, 2010) was given a mainstream release (164-screen maximum), virtually ensuring multi-million dollar returns. However, only *Bran Nue Dae* maintained strong audience response after the first two or three weeks while *Daybreakers* and *I Love You Too* – although generating total audiences of around 200,000 – faded quickly, indicating indifferent word of mouth. The successes of the half year have been *Bright Star* (Jane Campion, 2009) and *Animal Kingdom* (David Michôd, 2010), both on specialty releases of under eighty screens, with each generating strong attendance quotients substantially greater than those of the other titles mentioned here – including the only relative success on blockbuster release, *Bran Nue Dae*.¹¹

Note: Data is from weekly box office on *Urban Cinefile* (figures supplied by the MPDAA), a Screen Australia analysis of MPDAA data available online, and from *Get the Picture*, published online by Screen Australia.

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Endnotes

¹ Louis Nowra, 'Nowhere Near Hollywood: Australian Film', *The Monthly*, December 2009 – January 2010, p.44.
² George Miller quoted by Lynden Barber, 'Sleepwalking on Celluloid', *The Australian*, 22 November 2003.

³ Michael Duffy, 'Years of Subsidy and Still Reeling', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 2005.
⁴ Sandy George, 'Cinema on Life Support', *The Australian*, 15 September 2006.
⁵ Pauline Webber, 'It's Time to Grow Up', *The Australian*, 2007.
⁶ Nowra, op. cit, p.51.
⁷ Once a film goes onto more than 400 screens it is in saturation or near-saturation release. Although there are around 2000 screens, they are in only 492 cinemas. The quotient is still a rough indicator of the relative strength of attendance but is obviously no longer an indicator of 'under release' as it can be with films that open on twenty to forty screens. Quotients for recent major successes in wide release are 0.192 (112:583) for *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) and 0.152 (32:211) for *Slumdog Millionaire*. At the other end of the quotient spectrum with 0.010 is *The Soloist* (Joe Wright, 2009), which grossed a total of \$1 million after a poor opening week of ninety-seven screens. Quotients for Australian films on mainstream or blockbuster release in 2009 are *Australia* 0.058, *Mao's Last Dancer* 0.058, *Knowing* (Alex Proyas, 2009) 0.037, *Charlie & Boots* 0.022 and *The Boys are Back* 0.013.
⁸ Without any adjustment for inflation, fifty-five of the all-time top-grossing Australian feature films in Australia were released between 1995 and 2009 (twenty-three are pre-1990), while eighty-two of the all-time top-grossing American films in the US were released in the same fifteen-year period (eleven are pre-1990). As box office in the US closely correlates with that in Australia, this can be taken as another indication of how Australian films have lost ground to their main competition

since 1990. Of the fifty-four Australian films that have grossed more than US\$1 million in the US, twenty-one were films released pre-1990. These figures are an indication of the shift in audience preference towards blockbuster action and animated family entertainment where Hollywood is almost totally dominant. This also reflects changes in technology (digitisation, CGI and now 3D). The current decade has seen a decline in the art-house market in the US and an even greater decline in the market share of US independent films. This reflects shifts in audience preferences as generations X and Y have displaced the baby boomers as the most important and increasingly dominant audience segments. The market for low- to middle-budget and art-house films, which includes a substantial majority of Australian feature films, has been squeezed. An exception has been genre films produced on low- to middle-range budgets, such as *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean, 2005), *Daybreakers* and the *Saw* series, which draw on the younger audience.
⁹ Tina Kaufman, 'Shortcuts', *Metro*, no. 163, 2010, pp.6–9.
¹⁰ Karen Pearlman, 'Make Our Own Myths', *Urban Cinefile*, 29 October 2009, <<http://www.urban.cinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=16321&s=Forum>>, accessed 9 March 2010.
¹¹ The per-screen averages on the fourth week of release were as follows: *Animal Kingdom* \$7635 (0.060); *Bright Star* \$3976 (0.048); *Bran Nue Dae* \$3549 (0.032); *The Kings of Mykonos* \$3259 (0.024); *Beneath Hill 60* \$2131 (0.020); *Daybreakers* \$1980 (0.018); *I Love You Too* \$584 (0.010).