


 TIME OUT

A Croc of Gold?

Is Australia's film policy producing trash? Toby Miller.

The US market beckons: Yahoo Serious in *Young Einstein*.



It isn't always easy to know what people are talking about when they voice the words "the Australian film industry". The term serves to bring together some very diverse filmmaking and funding practices that have very distinct sorts of politics. It is odd to unify under the one heading, for example, a polite pornographic western (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*), a fish-out-of-water Winfield farce (*Crocodile Dundee*) and a complex-feminist documentary drama (*Serious Undertakings*). They are funded differently, made for different purposes, and shown in very different types of venue.

But the topic of "the Australian film industry" has become a significant one in a variety of quarters. For Bob Hawke, apparently, it stands on a par with social inequality: just as he has guaranteed the eradication of child poverty by 1990, he has guaranteed the survival of the film industry. For Gary Punch, film is "Australia's broadest-based element of culture". The link between the tourism industry and film as an "international calling-card" makes a "magnificent contribution to the nation".

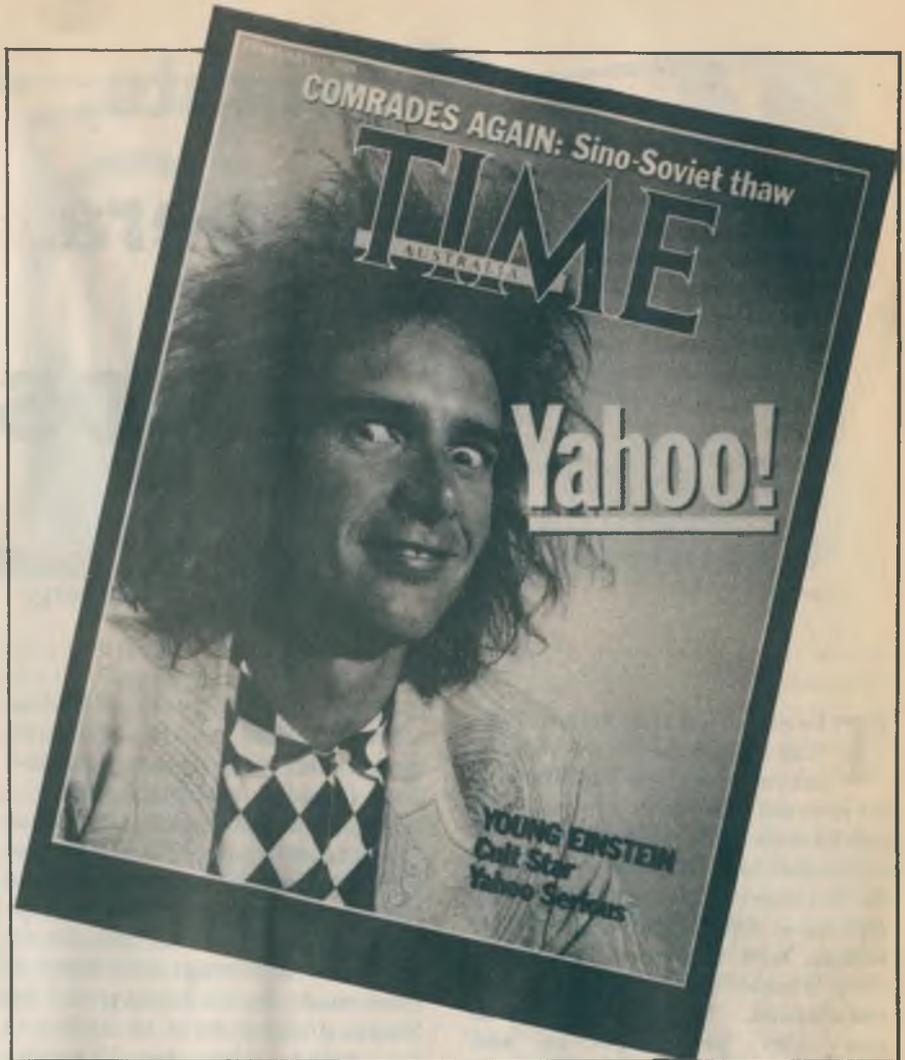
Film industry workers and bureaucrats, confused and concerned by the way that taxation rebates (the 10BA scheme) have acted to encourage large numbers of unpopular, expensive and politically barren films, have sought other

options. Only the American and Indian industries survive without state support: that possibility was effectively ruled out from the beginning.

But the decision to wind back **10BA** was announced months before anybody decided on a replacement. The material effects on the workforce were staggering. As at October 1988, an estimated four thousand members of Actors Equity had been out of work for a year: the finance had simply ceased to flow as investment advisers discouraged doctors and lawyers from choosing an outdated means of minimising their contributions to Consolidated Revenue. The policy-makers in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne were busily debating the merits of various proposals for government involvement. These included a film bank, a new television station along the lines of Channel Four in Britain (which has specialised in funding such films as *My Beautiful Laundrette*), new forms of tax incentive, revised investment guidelines, and many others besides.

An announcement was finally made in the middle of the year. A new body, the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) was established. It is an incorporated company with investment funds drawn from public revenue: \$70 million in 1988-89, and with guaranteed continuity for four years. So far, so good; the corporation is set up to perform an important function in terms of jobs, local culture and active state participation in the economy. **But** no projects are proceeding as yet; the 4,000 remain unemployed; and very few FFC staff have been appointed. These might be seen as the teething problems, common to any ordinary business putting an infrastructure in place; but the decisions on budget and basic direction have effectively been taken. In the euphoria that followed an announcement of action, little attention has been focused on how that infrastructure is likely to operate.

Corporation staff may be thin on the ground, but the *Financial Review's* job columns are to the rescue, calling all investment



executives. What are we to make of this? Coupled with membership details of the FFC Board of Directors (a banker, an academic, a lawyer, two bureaucrats, an actor and a director announced so far) and the small amount of other information available, it is emblematic of an approach which is euphemistically being referred to as "market-driven". In practical terms, this means that the corporation is primarily interested in putting up government money to support projects that can already demonstrate private sector commitment. It is not interested in the specifics of a desirable local cultural presence (other than as measured by origins of personnel, money and story). Questions of gender, ethnicity, class — questions of *Australia* — are outside the brief of the organisation.

How do we know? We know because the corporation's guidelines state that it will only look at scripts in the absence of "substantial market commitment". It will not, one suspects, be employing experts in issues of representation; nor will it be attending to the internal employment dynamics of the industry. Rather, its purpose will be to spend taxpayers' money on the basis of advice from financiers, thereby driving the definition of "film industry" further in the direction of deeply conventional narrative feature films.

Stand by for a lot more fish-out-of-water Winfield farces. Times may become increasingly hard for progressive Australian cinema.

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Lights, Camera, Glasnost

The Iceberg of Soviet filmmaking is beginning to thaw,
reports Karen Rosenberg.

The main character in the Soviet film *Repentance* is a Georgian mayor who resembles Stalin in his external calm, inner paranoia and ruthlessness toward those who contradict him. His son symbolises the Brezhnev-era tendency to justify repression and silence dissenters: a woman who denounces the small-town dictator is found insane and hospitalised. "After showings in every city, people got up and applauded the blank screen," the movie's director, Tenghiz Abuladze, told me in Moscow not long ago. "It was the first swallow of *perestroika*."

Lenin called cinema "the most important art", and the administration of Mikhail Gorbachev has mobilised the power of the movies in its campaign to restructure Soviet society. The decision to release *Repentance* in 1986, two years after its completion, was reportedly made at the Politburo level. And in May 1986, some say with the sanction of Alexander Yakovlev, then the Central Committee member responsible for culture, the Soviet Filmmakers Union became the first artistic association to vote out its old leadership and pump in more liberal blood. The filmmakers had been frustrated for a long time, as the 160 or so feature-length movies released each year by Soviet studios numbingly indicated. Made under

the watchful eye of the Moscow office of Goskino, the country's central film agency, they were too often formulaic and predictable.

As one result, film attendance fell drastically. In 1975 a Moscow Film Studio production drew some 18 million moviegoers; a decade later the total was down by half. In the same period, average attendance at films made by the Leningrad Film Studio dropped from 14 million to 6.3 million; by the Ukrainian Dovzhenko Film Studio, from 11.2 million to 5.3 million.

And yet, as Soviet cinema lost much of its appeal as mass entertainment, a few Soviet directors such as Andrei Tarkovsky captured the imagination of the intelligentsia. In the Russian tradition, artists are supposed to be martyrs who sacrifice themselves for truth, and those filmmakers who suffered at the hands of the Goskino censors enhanced their reputations accordingly. Now, in the Gorbachev era, many of these same *auteurs* are expected to provide not merely entertainment but moral guidance about the meaning of *glasnost*.

Repentance was only the most famous "unshelved" title that broke the taboos about the Stalin era. Alexei German's *Trial on the Road*, finished in 1971 and released in 1986, accords sympathetic treatment to a former prisoner of war and Nazi

collaborator who wants to return to his homeland. (Under Stalin, such men were considered traitors and often sent to the gulag, and only a few Soviet intellectuals had questioned that judgment publicly.) Another German film, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin*, finished in the early 1980s and released in 1985, is a portrait of a Stalin-era believer who is beginning to have doubts. "I wanted to understand why people like my parents were applauding Stalin," German said. Although to many in the West this film may seem a timid picture of the cruelty of Stalin's police, it nonetheless raised the hackles of Soviet conservatives because it challenged their idealised image of the building of socialism in the 1930s.

Other previously shelved films created a stir because they touch on Jewish life, a theme with a troubled history in the Soviet Union. According to some directors, Goskino would sometimes approve a scenario at a liberal moment and block the completed picture during a freeze in political life. Alexander Askoldov's *Commissar*, finished in 1967, is a romantic tale of a Red Army heroine that offers a sympathetic portrait of a Jewish family in the Ukraine, but it was deemed unacceptable after the Six-Day War. Last March Askoldov recalled, "[Alexei] Romanov, the



former head of Goskino, invited me for a confidential chat and, patting my knee, said, 'I have two suggestions for how you can save your artistic career: one, cut the part where the Jews are chased into the gas chambers, and, two, let's figure out how to change the Jewish family into a family of some other nationality'. Askoldov refused, and the film wasn't screened in public until the 1987 Moscow Film Festival, when the Filmmakers Union agreed to the director's impassioned public demand that it be shown. When Gleb Panfilov's 1979 drama *The Theme*, about an ageing, blocked hack writer, was finally released in 1986, it attracted attention because of its discussion of Jewish emigration. Although the writer/*refusenik* is only a minor figure in the final version, his strong desire to leave his homeland was an unusual sentiment to see expressed in Soviet art.

Of course, what is shown in these films is neither new nor original to the Soviet intelligentsia, which has dissected its society over the dinner table for years. Nevertheless, any narrowing of the tremendous gap between public and private discourse was greeted as significant in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev-era documentaries like *More Light*, which shows archival shots of Trotsky and calls for more and better research into early Soviet history, and *Risk*, which offers a view of Khrushchev more positive than the

usual, still leave a lot unsaid. Yet, in a country long dominated by clichés and rituals, every deviation from orthodoxy carries value.

So readers also took note when long and laudatory obituaries of emigre film director Tarkovsky were published in the Soviet press after his death in 1986 and when retrospectives of his films were presented in 1987 at a meeting of the Filmmakers Union and at the Moscow Film Festival. On account of his poetic, associative, unusual style, as well as his celebration of religious faith, this filmmaker had been controversial in the Soviet Union since the mid-1960s. Tarkovsky wrangled with Goskino censors for years and was refused permission to shoot a film abroad. In 1984 he sought political asylum in the West. The posthumous acceptance of a defector as a Russian artist and the screening of his works made in the West caused a sensation in the Soviet Union.

Film professionals (*kinoshniki* in Russian slang) and urban intellectuals I talked to last winter follow the big changes in their cinema so closely that one might think all Russians share their excitement. Igor Lissakovsky, vice-president of the Filmmakers Union, told me, however, that while three million out of the eight million Muscovites saw *Repentance*, that proportion did not hold elsewhere in the country. Some young people may

simply be uninterested in the theme of stalinism, but other moviegoers were probably scared away by Abuladze's demanding style, in which anachronisms are used to suggest that dictatorships are a recurring blight. Years of censorship hadn't allowed audiences much practice in deciphering visually complex works. When difficult films weren't shelved as "formalist" they were often printed in small quantities and shown in only a few urban theatres at inconvenient times or at small film clubs attended chiefly by movie buffs. Since most theatres offered films no better than what was on television, Soviet moviegoers tended to stay at home. Per capita attendance dropped from eighteen visits a year in 1976 to fifteen a year in 1982. When the Russians did go out, they preferred American adventures, Indian musicals and Arab melodramas to home-grown, politically correct fare.

According to a metaphor used by some Soviet directors, the easiest way to get this audience back into the theatres would be to turn filmmakers into waiters who give customers what they want. Indeed, the restructuring of the film industry is making consumer orientation a real possibility. Each Soviet studio, by next year, must try to support itself with revenues from pictures it produces, so making a few unprofitable movies could create financial crises. For that reason,

directors who lack a track record of popular movies may not get work — and that may mean those who make demanding artistic films as well as those who make dull ones. Goskino no longer holds veto power over scripts and films. The right to approve a scenario or a completed movie has shifted to the individual studios, but if they reject a project as too risky at the box office, that's censorship too, of a sort all too familiar in the West.

Glasnost has widened the possibilities for screenplays, but the ethos of "what's hot and what's not" may narrow them down. "In the film archives, everybody is sitting and looking at clips about Stalin, Stalin, Stalin," Georgian director Irakli Kvirikadze told me. "They're no longer interested in anything else. Previously, the very same people were all praising Brezhnev, Brezhnev, Brezhnev." Other formerly forbidden themes seem to be in as well: Kvirikadze and director Georgi Daneliya are working on separate pictures about Georgian Jews who have emigrated, and two projects in the works at a Moscow Film Studio unit for young directors concern the Soviet urban netherworld, whose existence has been long ignored by the media.

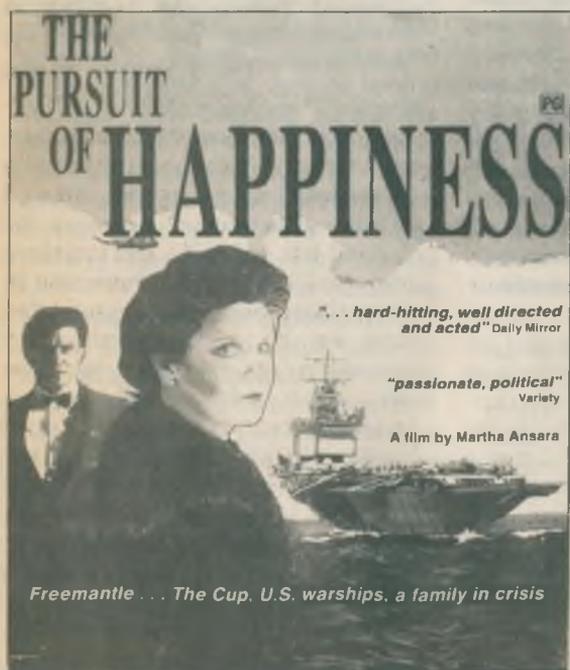
One of those scenarios, written and directed by Alexai Rudakov, is set at the bottom of Moscow society, among people with only a temporary permit to work in the city. The other, scripted by Valery Barakin, concerns professional card players, an underground phenomenon in the Soviet Union. "If such a film had been allowed three years ago, then it would have had to include a statement pointing out that card playing is bad, and especially for money," Karen Shakhnazarov, who heads the young directors' unit, told me. If new Soviet films eschew "boy meets tractor" and other stereotypes of Socialist Realism, it may be because filmmakers and administrators like the 36-year-old Shakhnazarov have had access to Western movies at film school, through the Filmmakers Union and on videocassettes, which now circulate unofficially, as Western books and audio tapes have for years.

One reason that some recent Soviet documentaries are attracting attention at international festivals is that they look more Western than was expected. In Juris Podnieks' 1986 *Is It Easy to Be Young?* no heavy over-voice interprets the words of a Soviet Hare Krishna

celebrant, a punk rocker and a burned-out veteran of Afghanistan, who are interviewed about their nonconformist stances. Herz Frank's 1987 *The Highest Court* also explores a neglected part of Soviet society, filming a man on death row guilty of black marketeering, robbery and murder. There's even some investigative journalism now: *The Bells of Chernobyl*, made by Rolan Sergienko and Vladimir Sinelnikov in 1986, looks into who was responsible for the nuclear accident and for the delay in informing the surrounding populace.

Russians stood in line to see the punker in *Is It Easy to Be Young?* assert, "You made us the way we are — with your hypocrisy and lies". However, despite its frank exposure of a generation's alienation, the documentary ends with a young man's opinion that no one takes young people seriously, which implies that the problem is just a failure to listen. The audience is invited to re-examine psychology rather than the defects of specific political and social institutions. There's a simple moral message behind *The Highest Court* as well: the interviewer's leading questions elicit orthodox responses from the prisoner, condemning his past desire for money and power and preaching gratitude to parents and society. And the final lines in *The Bells of Chernobyl* sound an uncontroversial warning against slackness among those who work with nuclear technology, not about atomic power itself. In the Brezhnev era, concluding a mildly controversial film with a happy ending was quite common. Now the heart of the film is often more provocative and the final section less optimistic, but the pattern of leading audiences out of the theatre with hope in their hearts remains in some works. Due to such caution, films are rarely on the cutting edge of *glasnost*. Today, as in the thaw of the 1950s, periodicals are where the sharpest debates take place.

KAREN ROSENBERG writes on Soviet culture. This piece reproduced courtesy of *The Nation*.



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