As a Pom, resident here for more than a decade, and before that in the ultimate trading-post of nationalities, Hong Kong, I reckon I have a stake in the great patriotism debate. While I'm delighted by the current flag because it's so unspecific that no one in their right mind would go to war under or over it, I suppose I want countries, regions, even suburbs to be aware of and stand tall for their own cultures (whatever meaning they want to give that word). So, to discover that both Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals this month have as a substantial subtext the visit of a delegation of European film bureaucrats and attendant (though not so numerous) film makers, all reportedly dedicated to the concept of something called "European cultural relevance", gave me pause for thought.

Now I'm all for not fighting wars over ancient grudges, and I'm all for redistributing German car profits to Sicilian olive farmers. But the idea that there is a cultural mindset linking the Dusseldorf car designer to the Prizzi peasant is one I not only have grave doubts about, but find positively dangerous. Who are the Empire builders in Brussels who want to weld together a European identity, after centuries when Yorkshire and Lancashire could hardly manage a civil word across The Pennines? For what purpose is it needed? And against whom might it be aroused?

Further researches reassured me somewhat. The European Commission's MEDIA programme — Measures to Encourage the Development of an Independent Audiovisual Industry — it all sounded reasonable enough. Dieter Kosslick, the head of the European Film Distribution Office (EFDO) delegation, maintains a well-balanced range of jobs from this European eminence down to managing the film funding for the City of Hamburg. And one of EFDO's functions is to help very culturally specific Welsh (or even Icelandic) films to find sympathetic markets in those parts of Europe that aren't familiar with The Mabinogian or Gnarl's Saga — and indeed outside Europe at events like Australia's premier film festivals. Look out for Endaf Emlyn's One Full Moon at both festivals, and Frédrik Fridriksen's Children of Nature in Sydney. But don't expect to see the latest Taviani Brothers film, or that by one of the new Spanish directors — both of which are accused of being Euro-puddings by Melbourne Film Festival director, Tait Brady. The Melbourne festival was having nothing to do with "films shot in Hungary, with the Italian actors dubbed into French, representing the Italian investment so badly that you can't tell what language the film's really in, and with Terence Stamp walking on briefly", he assured me. But with 23 different European film funds identified in a recent issue of Moving Pictures International, many of them requiring investment from two or three different countries before their funds are available, the temptation to milk the bureaucrats by tailoring your film to their purposes must be great.

And yet, the recent Belgian film Toto le Heros found room between the bureaucrats to create a delightful product and still satisfy the requirements of four of the funds. La Belle Noiseuse, La Vie de Bohème (a Finnish film in a year when so much is either set in Finland or taxis!) and Zentropa are also beneficiaries of the Euro-ecu at both festivals. Zentropa was the only one previewed for critics — and, unpromisingly, threatened Danish/Swedish/French/German co-production in black and white. But expressionist young Danish director, Lars von Trier has mastered the system, and even with money and actors from all those diverse origins he manages to concentrate on a bleakly Danish view of immediately postwar Germany. Rebuilding with America, shutters pulled down on the past while neo-Nazism survived, railway lines hypnotically leading forwards and backwards, and a Kafkaesque bureaucracy are all aboard this German train.

Whether the train is of the German or the gravy variety, it's intriguing that neither director has seen fit to open his festival with the 1991 European Film of the Year, Ken Loach's Riff-Raff — but rather with two different American films. Indeed, clearly lacking patriotism, they've also ignored the Cannes-heated local film, Strictly Ballroom, in favour of Robert Altman's The Player (Sydney) and Arne Glimcher's Mambo Kings (Melbourne). What does this say about an Australian industry which is, as ever, under pressure from Yankee culture? Both directors would argue the cultural specificity of their choices — an acid look at Hollywood (with about 50 of its stars walking on in Altman's return to his best), and a whimsical glance at the Cuban exile community in the States, gently eased out of Oscar Hijuelos' family memoir.

This difference of opinion over opening night between the two festival directors extends further this year than in most recent festivals. Tait Brady in Melbourne admitted that he felt 1992's Festival was the first of the five he's run which required real direction — meaning he's had to leave good films out. In, though, are Derek Jarman's Edward II, Wim Wenders' Until the End of the World, Errol Morris' doco A Brief History of Time and Aussie Ben Lewin's overseas venture, The Favour, The Watch and the Very Big Fish — none of which appear in Sydney. Paul Byrnes, the Sydney festival director, instead has given his program an Asian feel: the result of a first swing through North Asia. The result is interesting prospects from Korea and China (where he played a mean game of cat and mouse with the guar­ dians of post-Tiananmen banned films) and from Japan— where a meeting with American Nippophile,
Donald Richie, has produced a fascinating series of immediately postwar films produced when the country was reforming under American aegis.

Where both directors most conspicuously agree is in a continuing admiration for the Canadian cinema. "I see many comparisons between the Australian and Canadian film industries", explains Paul Byrnes. "There's a similarity in geography and history — both of which are dominated by the American industry. I've picked on the Winnipeg Film Group, while Tait has gone for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Where, one wonders, is the Alice Springs Film Group? The Winnipeg mob are weird...very culturally specific to Manitoba, mainly Balkan migrants stuck on the dead flat prairies, and dominated in their childhoods by US television. Now they're sending up the dominant culture — accurate, knowing, and very funny. They're real genre busters". Tait Brady sees in Halifax film-maker, Bill MacGillivray, a touch of Tasmania (where, again, no-one's making films). "He's isolated from the centre of power, and his films reflect strong, original roots".

So what is Australia offering to compare with the world's best? Should it — particularly at a time of low ebb — get special treatment? Do the festivals have a responsibility to educate local filmmakers — as well as to showcase a film like Proof, which surely reached wider audiences in Australia as a result of its enthusiastic festival debut last year than it might otherwise have done? Shouldn't reasonable local films get preferential distribution in this country anyway?

Again, the directors differ. For Brady in Melbourne, five features and two major documentaries was less than he would have liked. For Byrnes in Sydney, three of the features and the same number of docs is pretty much what Australia deserves. Both are agreed, though, on Baz Luhrmann's Strictly Ballroom (a heroic tale of artistic persistence, which began life as a student play in 1985), David Perry's idiosyncratic The Refracting Glasses, and Eight Ball, Ray Argall's follow-up to the extraordinarily gentle Return Home — plus the PNG documentary, Black Harvest, and Graham Chase's Port Pirie childhood recaptured in Modern Times.

Of these films, only Eight Ball's story of two men and a giant Murray cod, and Chase's childhood, can be described as approaching an examination of national identity. That seems to be something Australia specialised in over the Breaker Morant/My Brilliant Career era — did it, perhaps to excess, but did it rather well. Cultural specificity would seem to be an important factor in many of the best films of the moment — whether they're from Halifax, Nova Scotia or Mexico. Nor is cultural specificity restricted to national boundaries; the gay community continues to get a good showing in Sydney,
where Paul Byrnes sees its "strong surge of activity as being a response to the threat of AIDS".

Perhaps those Eurocrats are on to something in their search for a "European cultural relevance"? Perhaps Paul Keating is merely trying to get the film industry back up Hanging Rock by running up the flag? Perhaps the Finns have got there already? It's only by spending the first two weeks of June in darkened rooms in Sydney or Melbourne that you may come close to any answers. Personally, I'm most optimistic of finding enlightenment in the witty monologue in American Spalding Gray - whose Monster in a Box at both festivals finds him reporting from Bondi Beach.

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Get Real

"Authentic" music is all the rage. The homegrown David Nichols wonders, why.

(i) Things Used to be Realer Then

The Real Thing took quite a beating in 1990-91. Not Coke, the real Real Thing: Russell Morris' bizarre and esoteric late-60s epic—a monument to overproduction, written by Johnny Young Talent Time Young and produced by Morris' then-manager, Ian 'Molly' Meldrum. Not only did three different Australian acts attempt to recreate the magic of the original Thing, Morris himself did a cover version as part of an ill-fated attempt to get back 'up there' with Daryl Braithwaite, John Farnham and his other one-time contemporaries. (So, where's Brian Cadd these days?)

By the way, none of those Real Things were hits—but then it is still a source of amazement to anyone who ever sits down and listens to the tormented original that it made the charts in the first place. Nevertheless, this and hundreds of other retreats are hitting the record stores and TV screens regularly. It does suggest the obvious question: why do artists of the 1990s so often go for the easy option: the old cover, the rerun?

There are a few obvious answers. An oldie is recognisable; it places a new artist's first release in a context; a cover is a good 'bridge' between the familiar and the unknown. But then there are people like Westside Productions' Teen Queens, three 18-year-old girls who were flung together at the beginning of this year to make an impressive chart debut with Phil Spector's Be My Baby, The Teen Queens' market, a few gawking middle-aged men aside, is too young to have heard Be My Baby. In this case, the song rather fits the 'innocent, fun sixties' image which music video is promoting so heavily this year.

But it's not just a matter of recycled songs. Most 'serious' modern music today seems to be taking its cue from the presumed classics, eschewing innovation. Bob Dylan may have disappointed everyone but the most ardent fans on his Australian tour this year, but the Dylan of the 60s—just try and better that!—is the feeling in music now. John Mellencamp railed against the pop industry before launching into his pop song Pop Song on Australian stages last month. Mellencamp's earthiness and 'back-to-basics' approach, his insistence on the music 'counting', appeals to consumers and critics alike. No production tricks, no hype: just rock 'n' roll.

We still seem to need reminding that people like Mellencamp are taking a self-conscious stance themselves. But he (and his supporters, like Rolling Stone magazine and MTV) have got 'no bullshit' down to a very fine art. The idea that musicians ought to play, that singers ought to be able to sing, and listeners ought to be hearing what they think they're hearing, is nothing new. It's just that now, it seems, we need to have our terms redefined for us.

(ii) Why Can't They be Real Again?

When Molly Meldrum mixed The Real Thing in 1969, he was taking his cue from heroes like The Beatles (or, more specifically, their producer George Martin) and perhaps the Rolling Stones' Their Satanic Majesties Request. He was creating a deliberately overblown epic—and, in fairness, the rather slender song wouldn't have made half the record it did without the tapes of military music and people saying deep things backwards. At the time, Molly's work was applauded: it was state-of-the-art and very 'deep' for an Australian. 23 years later, Molly was being threatened with legal action by INXS' management for indignantly suggesting that the 'live' INXS album entitled Live Baby Live wasn't.

Of course, the terms on which you'd take the original Real Thing and Live Baby Live are completely different: no one was claiming that The Real Thing was a genuine real-time recording. But when Russell Morris hit number one with his single, conspicuous production was a fledgling art: the art hit its peak in the mid-70s with hits like 10CC's 'I'm Not In Love and Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody. The publicity for both songs stressed the enormous amount of time and craft devoted to their recording. In the case of 10CC, thousands of backing vocal overdubs have been mentioned.

Now, however, things have changed. Production has become a dirty word. Rather than aiming to make more of an original idea, production on a rock record nowadays means clarity and consistency, getting to the heart of the matter. When you go to see John Mellencamp you expect to see all his 'original' musicians on stage; when you buy his records you expect to hear...