

EARLY AUSTRALIAN FILM AND FRANCE: AN INTIMATE CONNECTION

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In a recent submission to a Canadian government commission studying The National Film Board, the director of the board said that film, in particular the documentary films which are the hallmark of the Film Board's international reputation, must be made so as to reflect the national character and identity of Canadian people. Films must also reflect the idea of a national community, must re-enforce and give credence to, the specificity of Canadian culture.

I bring up these points because historically the cinema has developed and grown as a medium side by side with the growth of the nation-state. But the nation-state itself is, as a recent book by Benedict Anderson has put it, an imagined community. "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity". (*Imagined Communities*, by Benedict Anderson, Verso, 1983).

Of course the cinema too, is a vehicle for the imaginary, for the imagination. And the cinema has played a crucial role in bringing to countries like Australia and Canada an image of themselves and of other nation-states. However the cinema has also suffered under a variety of different monopoly situations. Industrially, and the cinema is first and foremost an industry, the cinema here in Victoria and Australia has been dominated and colonised by France, England and the United States. While well over ninety per cent of what is shown on our screens is American, we in Australia are actually not as badly off as the British. The effects of this industrial context cannot be underestimated. In trying to establish the inter-relations between Victoria and France, I have found that the French influence reached its peak during the early twentieth century and Australia was merely one of many countries within which French companies played a significant role. In fact for the first ten years of the twentieth century the Pathé Brothers firm dominated the *world* market. They produced dramas, comedies and 'realistic' films, the precursors of today's documentary films. Unlike the modern market structure where films are rented to an exhibitor and then shown for a short period of time, Pathé sold all of their films. As Georges Sadoul has put it, "The sale of all of these Pathé films went into hundreds and sometimes thousands of copies, bringing in profits fifty or a hundred times the cost of their production. With agents established in every part of the globe, it

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was not long before Pathé film production started in countries such as Italy, Great Britain, America, Russia, Germany and Japan. With such wide ramifications, it is not surprising that the firm of Pathé Bros. in 1908 sold twice as many films in the United States as all of the American companies put together". (*French Film* by Georges Sadoul, Falcon Press, London, 1953).

But I have jumped ahead of myself a bit here. The influence of Pathé in Australia and Victoria was very profound and far-reaching, but let me return for a moment to the period preceding the early twentieth century.

In conjunction with what was a period of strong economic growth in the 1880's many vaudeville houses and penny arcades had grown up in Sydney and Melbourne. Music halls were also very important. But the advent of the 1890's brought recession and bank failures to Melbourne in particular. Just around that time the Edison Kinetoscope was imported to Sydney and then to Melbourne. The kinetoscope was a precursor to the movie projector using still drawing and photos to produce an animated cartoon.

After the kinetoscope came the camera-projector and it was the Lumière Brothers working in Paris who invented it. They sent agents all over the world to promote it. Though the first public showing of a film here in Melbourne at the Opera House was actually arranged by an American with a camera-projector invented by an Englishman, this was of far less consequence than the entry onto the scene here of Marius Sestier. Sestier went first to Sydney and opened a Salon Lumière and he showed a program which was an exact duplicate of the one shown in Paris at the Grand Café. This was in September of 1896. Sestier then got together with Carl Hertz and arranged what was to become one of the most famous Australian films. Sestier, along with his companion Walter Barnett came to Melbourne and began filming the events prior to the Melbourne Cup and the race itself. He used a hand-cranked camera and filmed the crowds arriving, and a variety of prominent people. "The film stock was unable to record the horses in motion, beyond long-distance shots of the field galloping toward the camera, but this proved to be no hindrance to the film's massive audience appeal."

The film had its premiere at the Princess Theatre in Melbourne and it was an incredible success. Sestier shot a variety of films in Melbourne including one about afternoon tea at the races. I should add that the film about the Melbourne Cup was also shown in New Zealand and thus had the distinction of being the first Australian film seen abroad.

Here then we have a crucial connection between Victoria and France. Because it was not only the fact that a Frenchman initiated film culture here that is important but that all of his assumptions about the cinema and what it could do had of course developed in the context of French film. After all, by 1914 there were well over one thousand cinemas in France. Aside from the fact that the Lumière Brothers developed the narrative cinema, the French industry also

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put in place the short newsreel, of which the Cup film is a classical example.

It wasn't however until 1909 that the Pathé Brothers actually established a full fledged agency in Melbourne. The Pathé Bros. employed many Australian cameramen to shoot documentaries and short newsreels. One of the principal cameramen was Maurice Bertel. By 1911 with Bertel as the cameraman Pathé produced thirteen 1000 foot dramas. But the effects of Pathé go well beyond the immediacy of their concern for quality production and distribution. In effect they trained a whole generation of cameramen and audiences, acclimatizing them in effect to the cinema as both entertainment and information.

So here you have a convergence of industrial development, monopoly growth and the introduction of the cinema to Victoria. I should mention another company which had tremendous effects world-wide and here and that is Gaumont. Gaumont had a Melbourne office and in 1912 when an Australian company, Australian Photo-Play went bankrupt, it was Gaumont which took it over.

The Pathé Bros. company also introduced what was then called the "Electric Cinemato" in 1909. It was billed as the largest picture in Australia and was shown at the Bijou Theatre in Sydney and then in Melbourne at West's Pictures which was near the Princess Bridge and billed as the finest theatre in the world. The Pathé Bros. also filmed a premiership match between Essendon and Prahran. The film covered the players' training and crowd scenes and of course the game itself. Ironically an Australian Company operating out of South Melbourne, The Australian Picture Company, had to secure the rights to 1500 feet of a footy game between Carlton and South Melbourne. Pathé also got involved in shooting industrial films, the most notable being a film about the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*. Over one thousand feet of interior photography was taken without the aid of daylight.

Let me jump now to the period after the advent of sound, that is after 1930. The Australian industry was in deep crisis. The market was flooded with foreign films. There were discussions in New South Wales and Victoria about whether some specific laws should be passed to aid the local industry. In 1935 National Productions was set up. It was a sister company to National Studios which had been created in 1934. "The joint aim of the two companies was to establish a large-scale independent film industry producing features for the world market and to provide advanced studio facilities for the benefit of independents." (*Australian Cinema, The First Eighty Years*, by Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, Angus and Robertson, 1983.)

Crucially, it was the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation which provided the key assistance to the development of this company. They trained the staff, supplied production crews, including directors and writers. Ironically, but perhaps symptomatically Twentieth Century Fox took over Gaumont-British.

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Thus in a sense we have come full circle with the three main filmmaking nations all involved in the one corporation. I do not want to belabour the point but the convergence of industrial growth and the cinema is a microcosmic picture of the slow move towards monopoly control in many industries of which the cinema is but one example.

However, the effects of the French Cinema upon the Victorian and Australian context go beyond the industry and its structure. For instance, it would be impossible to talk about the cinema in general without reference to *La Nouvelle Vague*, The New Wave. Filmmakers like Truffaut, Godard, Bresson, Resnais, etc. have had a profound influence on every national cinema. The substance of those inter-connections cannot be discussed here. They would form part of a broader project which would deal with the intersecting developments in national growth and cultural history. But I hope that this small contribution to this meeting has at least opened up some area of future study.

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