

**TITLE OF THESIS**

Marketing Australian National Identity Through Film: The Place of The Video Store

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**DEGREES**

Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology

**STATEMENT OF PRESENTATION**

This thesis is presented for the degree of Research Masters in Training (RMT) of Murdoch  
University

**YEAR OF SUBMISSION**

2011

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Video stores are one of the main sources of entertainment within Australia today. The films borrowed and sold portray varying cultures, issues and opinions. Assumptions of the educational efficacy of Australian films have always been bumped up against assertions of commercially produced Australian films as mere entertainment. Films are borrowed or bought for diverse reasons but since nationalism is often buttressed by narratives, the video store itself can be used as an instrument to promote and even measure cultural identity. Because film is a major part of popular culture and the video store plays a fundamental role in this domain, I wish to argue that video stores could be used as influential portals for the promotion of Australian films and by consequence of Australian national identity.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of many people.

I wish to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Martin Mhando who was abundantly helpful and offered invaluable assistance, support, guidance, and in put through the entire process of writing this dissertation. His endless support merits the deepest gratitude.

Finally, I wish to express my love and gratitude to my beloved family and friends for their understanding and endless love through the duration of my studies.

Thank you for supporting me while I endeavor to accomplish my dreams.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the prevalence and importance of video stores in contemporary society, media research has surprisingly little to say about them. Maybe this is because we have not yet developed instruments by which we can measure attitudes and cultural potential of this marketplace - the video store.

Home video is indeed a modern ritual. If we define ritual as a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value, with its social and individual repetitive patterns, then in ritual we also find the primacy of the social dimension in understanding culture and its mediating properties. Indeed social structures can also be processes, messages, and meaning systems. In the context of film viewing, meanings reside in the visual, oral and behavioural codes; representation alone is not enough to understand the meaning processes. We therefore look towards the complex inter-relationships that constitute the video store ritual and allow semiotic analysis.

At present, a questionnaire or survey would be the best available option to measure attitudes of the video store goer. If the information obtained is properly measured, this information can give an insight into the varying social values accessible to a video store beside the objective of entertainment. As with any device that is available to a wide and varying audience, the educational, cultural and commercial influences of a video store hold a wealth of untapped potential. It seems almost obvious that the best audience to invite comment from are those who go to the video store regularly – almost ritualistically.

These taken-for-granted understandings undermine the tendency to "naturalize" knowledge. It might be prudent to go beyond the obviously commercial and social use of the media outlet to understanding the semiotic analysis of the social activity in order to give it a discursal perspective.

A central issue of this social activity turns towards the relationship between education and culture. What have been the cultural effects and consequences of viewing social texts such as national narratives? Have state-sponsored films such as the ones produced by Australian filmmakers succeeded in sustaining and advancing a national cinema ethic? Does watching films transform local culture in ways consistent with the visions and interests of state and commonwealth film producing organs? Is there a trend that one can fathom from film policies that would ensure the social and financial security of future films products?

This research aims to illustrate the importance of ritual in human psychological life. In the video store's case, the transforming effect of a ritual to complete identity processes could be important. The video store and client work together to create a ritual that is specific to national-social experiences. Video-store owners are aware of the importance of ritualised moments in the film business, mindful of the importance of the ritual that the store performs outside the cinema, in the home and including the processing of critical events in the national calendar. At this point it is important to note that the DVD is the distribution medium and the video store is the site in all assumptions and discussions throughout this Dissertation.

The video shop has indeed continued to be a centre for suburban cultural activity for the last 20 years and its importance has not diminished. Many video stores have helped catapult

the retail marketability of film and more recently video games. In fact, the AVRRRA (Australian Video Rental Retailers Association) has launched a weekly ratings list that reveals the Top 20 movie rentals in demand for a particular week.<sup>1</sup> The ratings are derived by counting every movie title hired in a sample of more than 100 stores across three chains of video stores. Most importantly the ratings include urban and rural locations therefore encapsulating a wide consumer demographic. This is a true example of instruments and available data that could be used to advance and promote Australian film and thus Australian film identity.

At closer inspection it seems there is quantitative research available within a Video Store that can be explored and that supports the concept that video stores can be used to promote a particular culture and a particular identity. For example, at present the video store chain *Video Ezy* has introduced new genres of films titled *Eastern Eye* and *World Cinema*. In the *Eastern Eye* section all films relate to the Asian and at times Middle Eastern film industries whilst *World Cinema* displays films from all foreign countries with fundamentally French and European themes. These types of films are promoted and are made available in this particular video store chain as overnight and 3-day new releases as well as weekly hires. In essence such promotional genres could be used across a wide palate including the local film industry of Australia and would no doubt aid, promote and increase its availability and market potential. Furthermore there are the figures and quantities in terms of hire and purchases that can be investigated. With these captured statistics one could filter data and create reports for a particular film or film genre and analyse these

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<sup>1</sup> This was introduced in June 2008 and has been initiated with [www.DVDindustry.com.au](http://www.DVDindustry.com.au)'s weekly newsletter and *Encore* magazine's website (<http://www.avrra.com.au/pdf/050608.pdf>, accessed 2nd December 2009).



figures to great length. For this reason the Video Store system holds within itself a wealth of information if properly measured and analysed.

At this stage it is important to note that there is also a need for qualitative data analysis within this research topic. Not only should there be facts and figures arguing the links between Australian national identity and the video store but emphasis needs to be made on the possible qualitative expression available. That is aiming to gather in depth understanding of the human behaviour at play within a video store, investigating the why and how of the film viewers' decision making processes. In essence researching why and how the viewer relates to a specific film in terms of Australian national identity. That is why it is proposed that one area that will be touched in this thesis one that could be researched at a PhD level is semiotics of the video store.

The rhetorical orientation of this nationalist narrative is obvious. It is possible that the viewers are not simply consuming nationalist dogma in the films they watch;, they actually might accept to hire or buy the videos in order to optimize the perceived value in the narratives describing the nation.

However, this does not imply that video shopping experience is only discursive and does not have any "real" grounds for nationalistic drives. The shopping experience suggests that the actual narratives of the Australian nationalist lived-experience could also be recognised as a political tool, and the video consumers employ narratives to make sense of their experiences rather than looking solely for the meaning of these experiences. By focusing its attention on the production of meaning as a dialogical construction between action and discourse, the video shopping experience constitutes a promising method to uncover parts

of consumers' experiences that often remain overlooked by marketers using exclusively empirical methods.

This Dissertation will address a number of topics in each chapter to reveal that the video store could add to national Australian identity. Within the 'Literature Review' section I will address what literature is available discussing the importance of video stores as markets, then progressing into the tradition and stereotyping of video stores within the 'Culture, History and Development of Video Stores' Section. Once this is reflected upon, I will introduce the correlations between 'Australian Cinema and National Identity' in the similarly titled section focussing thereafter on 'The Role of Film Critics' in negatively or positively reinforcing the previous mentioned correlations. The remaining sections strengthen the theme of this Dissertation by explaining the proposed hypothesis and methodology, two case studies as well as their outcomes to promote the view that the video store could add to national Australian identity as well as the potential value in further researching this topic at a Doctorate level.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Cubitt explains that “contemporary Hollywood feature film production is quite cognisant of the importance of video markets to the long term profitability of its films. Some films are made with that eventual home specifically in mind” (Cubbit, 1993, pg 13). The mere fact that film makers and distributors target the video store should be enough evidence that as a subculture in its own right, video stores can be used more readily in terms of marketing film identities. It is also important to bear in mind the accessibility of hire films and the financial impact on consumers. Generally speaking if you compare the costs of a cinema ticket per person and the single cost of a DVD hire, it is reasonable to assume that it is far cheaper to rent a movie than it is to view one at the cinema. Firstly, by hiring a single film it can be viewed by a multitude of spectators. That is one hires a DVD with no viewing restrictions in comparison to purchasing a ticket, which will allow viewing access for one person only unless additional tickets are purchased. Secondly, many video stores have promotions and vouchers available thus lowering this cost even further. This might be found in mail drops, internet downloads or issued in store as part of a customer loyalty or VIP incentive. Thirdly, some video store chains have a subscription option of payment available where you pay a prescribed amount per month but can view a number of various films on the condition you only have a set quantity on hire at one time<sup>2</sup>

A brief review of the existing literature reveals that there is still a dearth of material on this cultural activity. For this reason I believe this is an excellent topic to research and feel that the video store is an area that will promote more insight into other subcultures and their

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<sup>2</sup> . For example, in 2003 Video Ezy was one of the first video store chain’s to market a subscription model called DVD unlimited ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video\\_Ezy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_Ezy), accessed 2nd December 2009) .

functions. As previously mentioned a strong emphasis on semiotics would be highly beneficial in analysing the information that might be gathered from the video store, specifically due to its emphasis on culture.

I am profoundly intrigued by Rachel Lawes perspective of semiotics as it relates to market research. I will quote her at length here as she argues:

Market semiotics is different from traditional qualitative research, which normally takes an inside-out perspective. Interviews and groups are geared to getting psychological phenomena such as perceptions, attitudes and beliefs out of people's heads. Semiotics takes an outside-in approach. It asks how these things get into people's heads in the first place. Where do they come from? The answer is that they come from the surrounding culture in which respondents (and semioticians!) participate. Here is a quick and easy example. Suppose your product is a packet of chocolate biscuits with a lot of gold on the packaging. When you show it to groups of consumers and ask 'What kind of biscuits are these?' you discover that people perceive them as 'luxury'. Now, there may be psychological factors at work here but usually when lots of people produce the same interpretation, it is reasonable to assume that at least part of the reason is because they are drawing on shared cultural resources. In other words, when consumers agree that the biscuits seem 'luxury', it is reasonable to look at the culture they (and we) share in which, for example, gold is very well-used shorthand for riches and wealth. The connection between gold and luxury is a cultural connection. Perhaps the defining feature of semiotics is that it takes the culture and not the consumer as the object of study. (Rachel Lawes, 2002,pg253)

As described above, understanding and focussing on semiotics and its relationship with culture within this research would be beneficial in understanding and explaining how external factors or signs (such as the video store) effect and encourage viewers to relate to film and the idea of, for example, Australian national identity.

In terms of this research topic and to delve further into semiotics I suggest a comparison be made between the movie theatre and the video store. These are two related areas but very

much their own distinct entities. At this point we might introduce the notion of subcultures. Within our culture and media, we often might hear or read a review about a film which states 'this film will go straight to video'. This opens a portal for many questions to explore including but not limited to: Why would or should it go straight to video? What are the pros or cons of a film being marketed especially for the video store audience? Can this be used to a film's advantage? Can it be used to promote specific cultures and identities of film? What are the social and demographic impacts of this? What is the perceived difference between the film being a success at the cinema and a film being a success as a DVD release?

What additional perceptions are involved with films? And in particular the perception of their content? I shall argue (and appropriately investigate) here that films encourage their viewers to perceive specific cultures in a specific and somewhat categorised or stereotyped way. For example, as Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis explain: "Filmic like literary fictions inevitably bring into play every day assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships." (*Stam et al*: 1992) Are film producers utilising the cultural and social assumptions of their viewers and depicting it in their film content? If so, could a film therefore be marketing Australian national identity? What factors encourage this and how readily available and accessible are these films at the video store? How many people have access to viewing the film? John Jurgensen confirms this when he says,

The director of "Haze," Pete Schuermann, says he resisted at first and tried to convince the producers to keep trying to find a theatrical buyer. But eventually the director put his longstanding dream in check of getting his movie "in a theater near you," he says. "It's a bittersweet thing. But then I have to weigh that against the educational goals of the film. Now there's the potential of a lot of people seeing it." (John Jurgensen, 2008, The Wall Street Journal website).

To further develop the notion of accessibility of hire films a note of this excerpt from Christine Laue's article "Family Video puts plans for state on fast-forward" is appropriate:

Family Video, a national chain that rents and sells video games and videos with such titles, is entering the Omaha and Nebraska market aggressively, with a strategy of locating not in the usual retail shopping center but "on the way home from work or school,". (Christine Laue, 2008, Omaha World-Herald website)

This quote emphasizes the accessibility in hiring films but also encourages a previously introduced notion of the video store going being ritualistic. By being easily accessible it opens the doors to a wider and varying range of people but also encourages those prone to introducing this film ritual to their daily lives. Most importantly video store goers enjoy going to the video store whether it be during school holidays or weekends or directly after work or school. Visiting a video store becomes a part of life and in turn a ritualistic exercise. The point is, it is far more enjoyable to do something repeatedly by choice than it is to complete a mundane and obligatory routine:

“Rituals are repeated and shared activities that carry meaning and provide an emotional reward to family members. Although routines are also repetitious family behavior and vital to family life, they lack the symbolic content and compelling nature that rituals possess. Unlike rituals, routines are purely instrumental rather than symbolic; they are activities family members have to do rather than want to do”. (Dawn Marie Barhyte 2006)

Because DVDs offer and allow the video store audience the opportunity to create their own home theatre experience, consumers relish in the idea that they are in control of the theatre experience and the additional functionalities available within in their very own homes:

“DVD is the fastest-growing UK consumer entertainment product ever, and is set to continue its rapid growth.....The DVD also taps into key consumer needs - more so than VOD has. It offers people the chance to get even closer to their favourite films through additional content and an enhanced visual and aural experience.....DVD manufacturers have allowed people to create their own home theatre. The whole process of watching a movie becomes more of an event, an immersion experience more comparable to going to the cinema” (Martin Moore 2002page).

Moreover, the video store encourages a variety of modes to reach its audience beyond the obvious library rental method. For example many stores have introduced the rental of movies by mail, movie downloading services, and as previously mentioned subscription services (to name a few):

“Today's movie renters have a myriad of options for shopping, selecting, and receiving their movies, including brick-and-mortar video rental stores (e.g. Blockbuster); Pay-Per-View (PPV) or Video-On-Demand (VOD) services offered through their cable or satellite TV service; direct-mail rental services (e.g., Netflix), as well as online movie download (OMD) services (e.g., CinemaNow, Movielink, or iTunes). While all of these services compete with one another, few consumers use only one type of service; most choose instead to use the one that best suits their needs at the specific time” (Business Wire, 2007 & Gale, Cengage Learning, 2008).

Just as video stores support and offer different types of video and film consumption, there are other mediums which one might view as intrusive in terms of the video store ritual explained earlier. The main contributing factors include internet downloads, mail or post rentals, film download payment systems, on-line DVD hire, pay per view, and mobile phone video downloads to name a few. Some might also argue that the popularity of video stores has diminished due to the introduction of these supplementary sources. Statistics show that at the end of June 2000, there were 1,975 businesses in the film and video production industry, which was a decrease from the 2,004 businesses operating at the end of June 1997. At the end of June 2000, there were 58 businesses operating in the film and video distribution industry, which was a reduction from the 66 businesses operating at the end of June 1997, and the 69 businesses at the end of June 1994 (Film and Video Production and Distribution, Australia, 1999-2000).

On the positive side, the statistics reveal that the DVD age is growing immensely. In 2003, 51% of homes possessed a DVD player compared to 24% in 2002. Wholesale sales of DVDs increased from \$70million in 2000 to \$798million in 2003 (*Australia's Audiovisual Market*

*Edition 1*, Australian Film Commission 2004). Furthermore there were 15,195 persons working for businesses in the film and video production industry at the end of June 2000. While this represents a 58% increase on the 9,591 persons recorded at the end of June 1997, it should be noted that employment in the industry can fluctuate depending on what productions are underway at that time. The total income for businesses in the film and video distribution industry was \$1,142 million during 1999-2000. This income represented a 17% increase on \$974 million recorded in 1996-97 (Film and Video Production and Distribution, Australia, 1999-2000).

As the information relating to the main issue of national identity through the video store culture is somewhat lacking, I believe the proposed research will be a good basis for delving into this relationship and cross pollination of national identity, film and the video store.



## HYPOTHESIS

There has always been a great affinity between identity and subcultures, and the suburban video hire store is a phenomenon that supports the growth of video viewing culture in Australia. The video store therefore is a potential site for developing Australian (or any national identity) due to its capacity to project audience trends.

I begin from the premise that given the growing utilisation and social semiotics of the activity, a close examination of the subculture would reveal structural conditions that allow for the development of Australian identity through the marketing of Australian film and television videos.

Data obtained from video store reports as well as video goer surveys will highlight any trends evident in the hiring of Australian film and whether the popularity of these DVDs coincides with persuasive factors such as: the release of other Australian films, the release of films containing the same actor/s, award nominations, professional and personal media attention received by cast and crew members, and Australian holidays for example.

A number of questions immediately appear that the thesis would propose to answer eventually.

Are films that are more readily targeted as video store accessible more popular in terms of hiring?

Would films that are marketed on the store website, magazines, on in store loop tapes, posters, text messages, emails, vouchers and merchandise be more prevalent to being hired?

Would genres that are easily accessible and visually attractive be more frequently browsed and hired than those that are not?

Trends may also be prominent regarding the sex and age of the audience member renting a film. A link between school age children and University students may become more evident due to study topics that relate to Australian film. Overall, evidence highlighting a lack of interest in the hiring of Australian cinema might also be found. This might primarily be due to the overwhelming marketing of Hollywood and American cinema. In turn video stores might find a gap in their current marketing strategies which if appropriately improved could result in a stronger marketing of Australian film and thereby national Australian identity.

## METHODOLOGY

This research presents reliable data gathered to validate or not the various demographic variables of factors influencing the take up or not of Australian video products at the stores. At first the information gathered is a sample of one geographic and demographic space with the potential to widen across Western Australia. All data collected and collated is reliable and actual empirical figures. The information was gathered through various rental reports, and questionnaires. An example of types of questions that were asked include: what is the main source of information regarding Australian film and television? What or who encourages the video store goer's desire to view Australian film? Intervening variables such as films being represented under the incorrect genre will also be considered and reported on to evaluate possible new presentation and design strategies. Please see Appendix B for a sample of the questionnaire.

It must be noted that this is hypothetically an applied research intending to show opportunity, capacity and potential trend of the cultural activity rather than a definitive quantitative research.

The research measures who watches the Australian product by gender, age, ethnicity and by proximity as well as availability. The survey also measures attitudes to Australia video product within these group parameters. Additionally the survey underpins which type of film identity is more widely and readily available to the Australian movie store goer. It assesses the current knowledge about Australian films and the main source for this knowledge. At this point we notice any trends as to whether a video store promotes or hinders identity and most importantly how it can be used to promote identity, particularly

Australian film identity. Most notably, it highlights how the subculture could be utilised to implement the promotion of Australian films and identity.

An outcome of this concept could be to examine the cultural potential of this sub-culture. Furthermore, one could research into additional sub-cultures such as the increasing popularity of video game hire and video game retail available at video stores. Increasingly there seems to be a link between film and games and it is evident that these two factors functionally unify the video store and act collectively to promote one another. These sub-cultures invite more and a wider range of audiences. Inherently this helps promote the Australian film identity to more movie store goers.

(Please note in order to collect such data I was able to support the Video Store Video Ezy at Canning Vale Western Australia to collect their data from which I was able to derive data for my research. My involvement in the collection of the data was purely as an employee but permission to use the data was sought and given).

I use the seven-point Likert Agreement Scale (7-strongly agree to 1 Strongly disagree). This wide range helps us identify a tight deviation standard. When responding to the questionnaire items, the respondents specify their level of agreement to each question. The items of the seven-level Likert format include:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Slightly disagree but unsure
4. Neither agree nor disagree
5. Slightly agree but unsure
6. Agree
7. Strongly Agree

This method of scaling assists the research with its process of measuring and ordering in a quantitative manner.

I measure at the start the usefulness or not of Video shops in the suburbs. Most predominantly, the objective is to research audience perceptions and knowledge of Australian film and the Australian film identity through the use of surveys. Additionally, the research needs to reflect the frequency of visits made by the audience to the store. Many factors might be involved as to why or why not the visits are frequent. These might include the location of the store as well as the accessibility of the store. For example a store located at a major shopping centre or in the vicinity of many fast food outlets may generate more visitors than a store situated on its own.

## **CULTURE, HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF VIDEO STORES**

The video store may traditionally, and somewhat stereotypically, be labelled as a place where one might go to get 'those' movies that weren't 'good' enough to see at the cinema or where you go to hire something to watch when there's nothing 'good' on TV. Generally speaking, there's always seemed to be a bit of a stigma attached with the products available at a video store. However, in recent years it seems video stores have become more popular as what they have to offer has changed and in many ways improved. Some of these changes might include the addition of and focus on technological advances such as the updating of videos to DVDs and most recently the launch of Blu-Ray DVDs. Moreover, there's the introduction of retail films in addition to purely just the hiring of films and giving the video store goer the opportunity to permanently enjoy the cinematic experience within their own home. Also on the list is the expansion from film only into the addition of games and television. For instance the hiring of games and consoles as well as the availability of television shows on DVD are popular options at video stores at present. These have all aided in expanding the list of reasons for visiting a video store and encouraged a wider audience to partake in the ritual that is visiting the place of the video store.

To begin to understand the culture of the video store, we need to begin looking at the foundation of the video store. When we start researching the history of the video and video stores on an international level, one thing is certain – it has come a long way and there have been some turbulent times to get it to where it is today. Originally, in the 1970's and specifically using the United Kingdom as an example, major film distributors were initially reluctant to embrace the new medium of video for fear of piracy – possibly part of the initial foundation of negative connotations associated with the video store. Additionally, there was

the fear of the video market becoming flooded with low-budget horror films produced by small independent film companies. Hence if a film was deemed to be obscene and in breach with *The Obscene Publications Act*, then a prosecution could be brought against the film's producers, distributors and retailers. Consequently the *Video Retailers Association* were alarmed by the apparently random seizures and asked the *Director of Public Prosecutions* to provide a guideline for the industry so that stockists could be made aware of what was liable to be confiscated and what they could legitimately keep on their shelves, reducing this negative effect on the video and video store industry (Video Nasty, 2009).

Generally, films that registered a high interest and public concern were the horror movies allowed to stream in through the system and often encouraged negative publicity such as the article *How high street horror is invading the home* published in the *Sunday Times* in 1982. The exposure of these 'nasties' to children, as they were named, began to be blamed for the increase in violent crime amongst youths and any accompanying negative behaviour. Ironically, the growing media frenzy only served to increase the demand for such material among adolescents and it is for this reason that the *Video Recordings Act 1984* came into effect on 1 September 1985 (Cubbit, 1993). At this point the *British Board of Film Classification (BBFC)* became responsible for the certification of both cinema and video releases. It was once classifications came onto the scene (no pun intended) that the true distinction between cinema and video releases was evident and the place of the video store was established. Once the classifications were implemented, video releases after 1 September 1985 had to comply with the *Act* and be submitted for classification by the *BBFC* (Cubbit, 1993). Films released on video before that date had to be re-submitted for classification within the following three years. The increased possibility of videos falling into the hands of children required that film classification for video be a separate process from

cinema classification. Films that had passed uncut for cinema release were often cut for video – once again reinforcing the current misconception that the video store is always the second choice after the cinema (Video Nasty, 2009).

Although the video store has developed and improved over time, it could be assumed that it has only recently completely formed and successfully settled as is. Implementing the list of products mentioned above was problematic and spurred by many factors. For example in his article *Video Opinion* Chris Malcolm (2002) states that the video industry is “an awkward adaptation of one economic model for a product it was not designed for”. In his article Malcolm goes onto describe that we live in a society that is based on the concept of ownership; what he calls a magpie culture. We like to buy things, take them home, and ultimately we want to own them. He believes this concept came to pass because of a whole series of peculiar restrictions, and also because of the mindset of the film and entertainment world, which has less to do with distributing products and more to do with controlling them. At the time of writing the article Malcolm argued that it was possible to buy virtually any videotape you might want, but it was not easy to figure out how. He described that any of the large video rental operations would order tapes for when requested by a video store goer, but it was definitely not the orientation of their service. He believes that if you went into a video store chain and said you would like to buy a copy of a particular film title, they couldn't just sell you one. Instead they can only record your particulars and endeavour to order one for you. But at the time of ordering your video they couldn't tell you the price until they have spoken to their distributor. They couldn't guarantee it is in stock or when it might come in (if ever) and they couldn't refer you anywhere that might stock it. The only option seemed to be E-commerce which could virtually give a person any film they might want through video wholesalers. All that was



needed is a title and a credit card (Malcolm 2002). However at present, and in my experience with the video store, the retail of DVD titles has become almost half the business besides that of the hiring out of titles. The video store chain might have an online website directly linked to its distributors on which they can check whether a particular title is available to order, when the delivery date would be, and how much the title would be. This however is often the last resort as so many titles are for sale and in stock. Keeping on top of this and ensuring that they can be profitable and not lost business unnecessarily has helped the video store decrease the effect of e-commerce on the place of the video store.

In saying this, with the continuing technological advances and the increase in these being readily available to the public, the issue of downloading titles has been the newest development and concern for video stores to combat. In Brian Lazenby's article *Video rental industry adjust to consumer demands* he describes the new measures being taken by video stores to decrease or eliminate the effect of downloading on the video store (2009). For instance Blockbuster is testing technology in a small market that allows consumers to download titles to a portable media device. An additional concern particularly in the United States is the constant switching from say a Blockbuster to a Redbox – a film vending machine. This vending machine is preferred by some video store goers purely for its simplicity. It's always available, and at US\$1 per title, the cost may be the main reason Redbox has become the first source of movie rentals for many consumers. This particular video vending company now has various locations. Hence, the traditional brick-and-mortar stores such as Blockbuster have felt the impact from new trends in video rental such as 24-hour Redbox vending machines as well as the growing popularity of online and subscription rental companies. The growing popularity of alternative forms of video rental has caused the US Blockbuster in particular to branch out with some of the same services offered by

other companies. It is obvious that competition and the economy are impacting all businesses in a variety of ways and many companies are now taking action. Blockbuster is also branching out into branded vending machines and now offers a subscription service similar to the one described regarding Australia's Video Ezy chain. The US Blockbuster announced in September that it would close as many as 960 stores by the end of the year. It's believed that this is partly due to the fact that the vending machine and subscription options are both less expensive than Blockbuster and are more convenient. Currently one drawback to the vending machine is a lack of title selections, but this is only a temporary problem as technology evolves that will eventually allow the vending machines to burn any movie title on the spot. As mentioned earlier and according to the US Entertainment Merchant Association's 2009 annual report, Blockbuster is testing technology in a small market that allows consumers to download titles to a portable media device (Lazenby, 2009). On a positive note, while vending machines and subscription services are gaining popularity, brick-and-mortar rentals make up the bulk of the rental business. The article notes that since the introduction of pre-recorded videos, rental has been a popular option for consumers and consumers continue to embrace it. Video rental stores will innovate, as they always have, to meet consumer demands (Lazenby, 2009). It would however be extremely valuable to further investigate the possible threats to the video store and thereby its capability of aiding national Australian identity and at Doctorate level research of this topic.

In terms of marketing Australian national identity through film and specifically within the place of the video store it is interesting to note that the video store retailers release films on

video (or DVD) at very carefully planned periods. As Charlotte Linde explains in her article

*Narrative and Social tacit knowledge:*

Narrative provides a bridge between the tacit and the explicit, allowing tacit social knowledge to be demonstrated and learned, without the need to propositionalize it. Institutions can best maintain their stock of stories by providing occasions on which they can be told. (Charlotte Linde, 2001)

What I'm trying to highlight here is the notion that we can only truly and successfully link and reinforce narratives and therefore culture to the video store goer/viewer when providing the story during an occasion or sensitive moment which relates to the theme of an Australian film. Interest in such a film will be greater and will reinforce, encourage and ultimately market Australian national identity.

For this reason one might hypothesise that the culture of the video store is to able encourage and enhance a variety of cultures and ideals. Emphasizing issues that are close to home and especially during a time when these issues are rife will in return draw the video store goer to the product and video store more readily. Furthermore, the culture of the video store in recent times has changed to reflect the growing demand of ownership of both the films themselves as well as the ideal of a home cinema and the entire cinematic experience. These assumptions would definitely require more research and input at a Doctorate level but has obvious potential in demonstrating that video store could add to national Australian identity.

## AUSTRALIAN CINEMA AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

This section aims to delineate the major links between Australian cinema and national identity. In addition to defining the cultural appropriations within Australian films, there are three main arguments presented. The first is that Australian audiences are aware of Australian films and consciously choose to view them, secondly the films are utilised to construct identity and therefore when distributed and consumed support the nationalistic feeling, and finally Australian films have commercial appeal.

It is important to examine the issue of national identity itself. A key starting point is to look at the notions encouraged by Richard White in *Inventing Australia* where he argues that there are three main influences contributing to the making of Australian identity (1981). The first influence is the notion that national identities are invented within a framework of modern Western ideas about science, nature, race, society, and nationality. White goes on to argue that each addition to the Australian identity has reflected changing intellectual needs and fashions in the West. The second influence is the class of people – that is those most responsible for the definition of identity such as writers, artists, journalists, historians, and critics. And the third and final influence is the groups in society who yield economic power (White, 1981).

By examining these three influencers it is evident that national identity in itself is particularly impressionable, continually evolving and swayed by various factors which are current to the era and accompanying trends. Today in Australian society the video store is a mecca for encouraging the above mentioned influencers of Australian identity. The combination of the place of the video store as well as the films it stocks are certainly

capable of contributing to the making and therefore marketing of Australian national identity.

Film has continually proven to greatly influence and market national identity. There are accounts where White emphasises that Hollywood was blamed for increasing vulgarity in the 1920's. Writers and artists reinforced this idea that Australia was besieged by what they described as foreign evils (1981).

“In 1936, the influential publisher, P.R. Stephensen, argued for the virtues of Australia.....and demanded the ‘de-Pommification’ and ‘un-Yankeefying’ of Australian culture. The fellowship of Australian Writers formed a ‘Cultural Defence Committee’, with Stephensen as Chairman, and proceeded to condemn newspapers, radio and film or propagating ‘a set of cultural ideas which are entirely and literally foreign to Australian sentiment....” (White, 1981, pg.146)

Even though there was such firm affirmation against the arts and its influence on Australian national identity, over a period of five decades its influences and the opportunity to use it as a medium for marketing identity greatly developed. During the 1970's Australian drama and film had significantly advanced. White discusses how Whitlam (the 21<sup>st</sup> Prime Minister of Australia) had built on this with an election policy for the arts which deliberately set out to ‘help develop a national identity through the artistic expression and to project Australia’s image in other countries by means of the arts’ (White, pg. 169).

In *Being Australian*, Catriona Elder argues that most nations use arts to tell national stories, or national stories and values inspire artists, writers, painters and musicians’ in their work.

The meanings of being Australian have commonly been expressed in films, novels, music

and similar (2007). Elder notes that the Australian film industry is one of the oldest in the world and that one of the very first feature length films was made in Australia in 1906. Additionally, Elder states that the medium of film as a form of representing the story of the nation has existed as long as the Australian state has been in existence (2007). The Australian Film Commission was established in 1974 and was imagined as a 'manufacturer of cultural products for export' (Elder, 2007). It is obvious at this point that there is no doubt that the arts and in particular film is an incredible medium for promoting national identity.

Elder (2007) encourages that "national stories or feelings of belonging to a nation must be continually reinforced. The idea of being Australian is not an innate feeling. For the idea of being Australian to have particular meanings, these meanings must be produced against all other possible meanings. National days are important events in the production of these meanings. Australia Day and Anzac Day are central stories in creating feelings of loyalty and love of country. Pg260

Always in the shadow and closely compared to the quintessential American cinema and its Hollywood, Australian cinema has evolved over the past decades and come into its own – most significantly supported by a strong essence of cultural significance, patriotism and identity (Turner, 1993). Over the years there has been rich evidence of cultural production in terms of distinct national narrative traditions. Between the 1970's & 1980's one of the most notable traditions used by Australian filmmakers is that of encouraging narrative and content that is real and historic above that which is fictional and imaginary (Turner, 1993). This historical essence encourages remembrance, patriotism, belonging and above all a

national cultural identity. The Australian Government was the main reason and force that propelled this notion during the period as government funded institutions intervened and revived as well as established the Australian film industry as we've come to know it. The films produced at this time were colloquially referred to as the AFC genre, an acronym for films supported by the Australian Film Commission. Although the films produced under this genre conveyed subject matter which is Australian based, to somewhat of a disadvantage it was purely historical topics that attracted the Australian filmmakers of the day's attention above that of contemporary Australian society and issues (Turner, 1993). To add insult to injury, it was the earlier eruption of what was fondly entitled 'ocker' films that further encouraged the film funding bodies to specifically support historically based films, since these productions were deemed as more quality films than the fictional 'ocker' comedies. Examples of the ocker genre can be easily traced as far back as 1919 in one of Australia's most celebrated silent films *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919) which displays the larrikin hero frequently evident in the conventional ocker film. The term larrikin is most commonly used to describe a person with comical and outlandish behaviour. In film, traditionally it is a male who is rowdy and makes a mockery of authority and shows complete disregard for the norms of good manners. To provide a more recognisable example, the film and character that has proven to be extremely successful both nationally and internationally, and is a romantic version of this mythology is *Crocodile Dundee* (1986).

What is important to note here is that these genres became inherent and realistic in relation to Australian cinema. It is evident that Australian audiences became aware of Australian films due to the history and foundation of Australian Cinema as a whole. Australians purposely and consciously choose to view these films, as they easily recognise the underlying cultural elements. Furthermore, the films are utilised to construct Australian

identity and therefore when distributed and consumed support nationalist feeling. Largely, the trend of producing such films essentially became a pivotal role within constructing Australian identity itself. As Turner (1993) describes:

That these 'quality' films concerned themselves almost exclusively with the representation of the past is not at all surprising, given their cultural obligations. In order to demonstrate that Australia was a culture, Australian cinema had to demonstrate that the nation had a past; the contemporary credentials of Australian culture were to be implicitly signified in the style and sensibility of its depiction of Australian history.....aesthetic achievement was of far greater importance than commercial success; similarly, overseas recognition of aesthetic achievements tended to overshadow the more significant cultural and commercial fact that Australian films were now attracting substantial Australian audiences.

*Crocodile Dundee* was a successful film not because the actual content of the film was overwhelmingly appealing but rather because it seemed the film would provide a declaration of Australia's culture and cultural self-understanding. It also posed the opportunity for comparisons and contrasts between the Australian and American cultures. *Crocodile Dundee* was clearly an Australian comedy playing on Australia's image and identity however closer analysis of this construction reveals that the film makes few tangible declarations about what Australia is like but through the use of comedy and plays on what an Australia is not. The film challenges and tears down several popular images of Australia and if anything is a portrayal of the Australian sense of humour and our ability to laugh at ourselves. In the film few examples of the popular images of Australian life which are revealed to be just that – images – which have little grounding in reality, include the following scenes: Firstly, Mick Dundee prepares to shave, and as befits the image of the outback man, seems to be wielding a large knife for the purpose. However, he actually uses an ordinary razor when Susan is not looking. Secondly, although appearing to tell the time naturally from the position of the sun, the audience sees him glance discreetly in the



direction of the nearest wrist watch. Both these particular examples reduce Mick Dundee's apparent distance from civilisation. Thirdly, a Westernised image of the Aboriginal Nev is portrayed in the scene when Susan tries to photograph him. He tells her that she is not able to do so, not because it will take away his spirit but because her camera still has its lens cap on. Besides these contradictory views of the popular Australian images encouraged through humour, it is the landscape that entices the audience's fascination with Australia through mute presentations of visual delights. Australia's uniqueness is encouraged through a range of scenes panning across the outback, displaying its raw and natural beauty. In addition to the mentioned there are a few moments of metaphorical significance such as the subway train scene in New York when Mick pulls himself up by the overhead grinders and walks over the sea of heads and shoulders to get to Susan. Once he takes her into his arms the crowd breaks into spontaneous applause. This scene encapsulates distinct Australian-ness recreating the image of sheepdogs walking over the heads of sheep and also represents the notion of mateship (Abbey & Crawford, 1990).

*Crocodile Dundee* demonstrates the potential for authentic local products to succeed overseas. Retrospectively, the fact that this particular film moves from the Australian setting to the American setting through its narrative, further encourages its success overseas and in particular within the United States. Through multiple comparisons and contrasts this film has not so much ignited a newfound love affair between American and Australia but has given Americans justification for loving their own society. That is seeing it as being almost better and more advanced than Australia. This notion of travelling enhances the cultural aspect of the film. Both parties leave the familiar and experiment with foreign ways and styles, ultimately leads to an encounter with and realisation of their own national identity.

Regardless of these cultural aspects and the Australian life portrayed in this film, the international economics of filmmaking poses a fundamental dilemma. Australian filmmakers need to ensure international audiences see aspects of Australian life as interesting and entertaining. One can argue that, problems arise if cultural products must be excessively tailored in order for them to be acceptable to an international market. This has mainly become an issue due to the growing cost of filmmaking and the impossibility of recovering an investment without overseas sales. The question posed would be whether the Australian film industry would be willing to tailor and sacrifice our films to satisfy the wishes of international markets such as the United States? Or on the other hand, can it be argued that films like *Crocodile Dundee* open a door to the international market through which other Australian films will be able to pass. Hence, even if *Crocodile Dundee* sacrifices its Australian-ness, the films that follow will be able to authentically reflect the reality and diversity of Australian life, Australian culture and therefore Australian identity. Although *Crocodile Dundee* has been the main example used here, films such as *Kenny* (2006), *Charlie & Boots* (2009) and *The Castle* (1997) have also worked well as definers of Australian national identity. With these in mind what is most important to note here is that Australian films do have commercial appeal both locally and abroad. It is the marketing of these commercially appealing films that will aid in grounding the popularity and appeal of Australian films. Dependent on factors such as available budget and the Distributor, the video store could be the best forum to market these films thereby inadvertently assisting in its addition to national Australian identity.

## THE FILM CRITICS ROLE

Whilst staying true to the origins and genres of Australian film as discussed above we can often see elements of Hollywood present in newer productions. A recent example of this might be Baz Luhrmann's film *Australia* (2008). However it was evident in the reception of this specific film that the Australian film culture of reviewers and critics is displeased about this new found ability. Is it in this field of scrutinising where the resistance to genre is strongest and where each individual Australian film is still asked to shoulder a national responsibility (Turner 1993). As it is believed critics and their reviews play a very important role in the entertainment industry, one has to consider what the film critic's role might be in terms of marketing Australian films and national identity. Eliashberg & Shugan (1997) suggest the critic can fall into one of two roles: an influencer – the influencer's perspective is popular and may make or break a motion picture opening and reception of the film; or a predictor – this role is merely a leading indicator with no significant influence on the motion picture opening and reception of the film. However, Eliashberg and Shugan also present statistical evidence that show that positive critics' reviews were ranked tenth in a study presented by the University of Pennsylvania as influencers for viewing particular films. Furthermore, it was concluded that "the influence of various sources of information on the decision of whether to see a movie at the theatre, (both groups) ranked theatre trailers and television advertisements as the two most important sources of information" (pg 70). Therefore it is obvious that either role of the critic only seems to affect films at their cinema release and that any attention paid to a critic's review becomes less influential and almost completely diminishes as other sources such as word of mouth become more rampant. As we attend on focussing on the place of the video store, one might assume that a critic does not play an influential role at all in terms of affecting a viewer's choice of renting a particular

title as other sources have overridden the critic's review. In addition, from a cultural perspective, it is important to note that the critics understanding of audiences may sometimes fail to take into account cultural factors such as nationalism, proximity, or simply the appreciation of well-structured narratives.

With this in mind, it is important to consider what the original intention and role of the film critic was. In theory and initially, the work of the critic was to contribute to the consecration of a product as art as well as add to the legitimacy of the critic and of criticism itself. Locally, however critics don't seem to have been as influential and present as what is evident in America and Hollywood. AFCA (Australian Film Critics Association) was only formed in 2004 whilst Film Critics Circle of Australia (FCCA) was formed in the 1980's. This is a vast difference in comparison to their American counterparts such as the New York Film Critics Circle founded in 1935. None the less these groups of critics were learned individuals and experts within their field. However as technological developments occur such as the internet, they change the conditions of global production, distribution and consumption. For this reason the critical enterprise must negotiate the terms of its cultural capital. The website RottenTomatoes.com (to be referred to as RT) represents one of the major ways that film criticism is being repackaged. This online film criticism is a departure from the established and more conventional versions of publication such as newspapers and magazines. Film critics used to be an intellectual group who honed their craft for years before earning a print venue for their views. These days anyone with an opinion and keyboard can post their views for the world to see via the internet (Shephard, 2009).

A site which describes itself as an unsurpassed resource for review criticism, RT was started as a way of compiling reviews from American film critics by Senh Duong in 1998. Figures

show that over 7 million readers depend on RT globally each month as a resource for coverage of films including those released on DVD. More than 250,000 titles are accessible via the website with growing amount of reviews linked to each title. The reviews are broken down into numerical values and the averages are used to distinguish the film's position on the Tomatometer. The approved tomatometer critics' scores will deem whether a film is a 'fresh' tomato (a title awarded to films with a score of 60% or more) or a 'rotten' tomato (films with scores less than 60%). Users can search for films which are 'certified fresh', in other words a film with a tomatometer percentage of over 75. A certified fresh film also has to receive reviews from at least forty critics, including five 'cream of the crop' critics. To be classified as a cream of the crop critic, the reviewer must be popular and notably from one of the top twenty circulating U.S newspapers and/or top five circulating Canadian newspapers. The criteria to be a RT critic includes: an affiliation with one of a list of major film critics societies and associations. And/or current employment as a film critic with at least fifty published reviews in an established journalistic outlet in the U.S, Canada or Australia. Generally a films RT page displays twenty review excerpts from these critics. The reviews can be clicked on and link back to the full review (Shephard, 2009).

By exploring a website such as RT it is interesting to note the sense in which film reviews reflect less cultural capital and instead represent consumer reports of films. By designating the audience members as consumers, recent film criticism reflects the increasing importance of winning over particular consumer groups. Hence film criticism is now seen as value added labour with the predominant function of guiding consumer choice, a far cry from its original role. With this in mind, it is important to note that RT not only offers an online portal for reading reviews and making recommendations but also for purchasing cinema tickets and DVDs, thus consolidating dianoetic and commercial functions.

Interestingly, since 2004 RT has been owned by parent company IGN Entertainment, Inc – once more a far cry from film criticism's original role. IGN is an internet media and services provider focused on the videogame and entertainment enthusiast markets. It has been shown to attract one of the largest concentration of audiences of young males on the internet. Furthermore, IGN is a subsidiary of FOX Interactive Media Inc., which oversees the online business operations of major media conglomerate News Corporation (Shephard, 2009).

Fundamentally, films need film critics . They help audiences understand the state of movies, cultural life and general moral and political being. In Australia, film critics definitely play a role in identifying nationalistic elements and influence the viewers as well as the films in general. One only needs to view film reviews such as the one by Luke Buckmaster on the film *Australia* (2008) to see that this notion is very much alive. This is available at the In Film Australia website – a website formed in 1997 by some reputable Australian film critics. In general, Australian film critics take a strong stance on nationalistic ideals and identity, and expect accuracy and loyalty when it comes to depicting any historical topics. This being one of the main reasons the reviewers' reception of *Australia* was not a very favourable one. However, it's obvious through examples such as RT that the practice of critical thinking about film is under assault. So much in our culture is moving further and faster away from intelligence, individuality, morality and literacy. Real film critics are seemingly a dying breed. Critics judge movies because they know movies, a knowledge which is learned and based on experience (White, 2010). The New York Film Critics Circle's constitution reveals the significant difference between real film criticism and that presented by RT:

to represent, as an impartial organised working unit, the profession of film criticism; to recognise the highest creative achievements in the field of motion pictures and thereby to uphold the dignity and significance of film criticism

It seems film journalism has been considered a part of the film industry and expected to be a partner in the film makers, producers, and distributors' commercial system. Critics are no longer respected as individual thinkers but instead only as appendages to advertising.

White (2010) perfectly describes the evident changes in film criticism:

By offering an alternative deluge of fans' notes, angry sniping, half-baked impressions, and clubhouse amateurism, the Internet's free-for-all has helped to further derange the concept of film criticism performed by writers who have studied cinema as well as related form of history, science, and philosophy.....high-calibre critical exchange has turned into the viral graffiti on aggregate websites such as Rotten Tomatoes.....these sites offer consensus as a substitute for assessment.....It is the film critic's constant struggle to get filmgoers and filmmakers to understand that politics and morality are still part of the artistic equation, even at the movies. Without using morality, politics, and cultural continuity as measures of value, there is no way to appreciate the state of the culture or to maintain intelligence. Without criticism, we will have achieved the naivete.

With this in mind, it is evident that the role of the film critic began as an educational role and one of distinction. As time went on and with technological developments their role has diminished in importance. The fact that anyone can be a critic and their thoughts heard almost immediately via the World Wide Web has encouraged this decline. However, there still are reputable critics who have formed many associations and who still have valuable input and views on films. Australian film critics such as James Valentine, Marc Fennell, and Richard Wilkins are some of the more well-known critics who have enabled Australian audiences who might otherwise not view Australian films to take note and be aware of them. Whether the review is a positive or negative one the Australian viewers go and see or hire these films to make up their own minds and either agree or disagree with the strong

points of view encouraged by the *real* film critics. The critic therefore does not solely influence the viewer's desire to hire or not to hire a film. Using the critic more widely in the video store setting is not a tool that would be overly beneficial in ensuring the video store could add to national Australian identity.



## INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE STUDIES

I believe Australians enjoy watching Australian films and pay particular attention to how they are portrayed as a people. Australians often look at factors, including but not limited to, the setting of the film and whether this relates to their very own environment. They listen to accents and whether it's similar to theirs, and look at how relationships are portrayed, sense of humour, and just daily life in general and once again compare it to the Aussie image. But is the representation accurate? Do Australians genuinely enjoy watching it? Do they enjoy comparing? Is it all stereotypical or is there more substance to what's being reflected in Australian films? If not, most importantly – when and why do Australians view these films? Once again we are reminded of Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis' view point that: Filmic like literary fictions inevitably bring into play every day assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural relationships.

At this point I would like to introduce the notion that we can discern some sociological factors in how people access Australian film through the video store. For example, a popular marketing campaign used within the film retail industry is to feed off an event or holiday. Near Christmas or Mother's day or Father's day most video stores will have a marketing campaigning pushing video store goers to purchase the appropriate theme related films as gifts for the given occasion. In terms of national identity, Australia day would be the perfect time of the year to market a film such as *The Castle* or even more appropriately a film such as *Gallipoli* (1981) on ANZAC day. The remembrance or reflection of some part of our self or our culture which is translated onto film encourages the notion that there is a strong link between film and national identity.

One defining element of Australian films is that they talk about history:

“.....there was an understandable preoccupation with selecting stories proven in other narrative media-novels, history-rather than writing original screenplays.....The accent on visual style, particularly the exploitation of the exoticism of the Australian landscape, was evidence of an astute commercial judgement about what might make an Australian film distinctive and attractive to foreign audiences.....More important, however, are the more deep-seated, less pragmatic, culturally based positions which underpinned this trend. The role of the film within the construction of an Australian identity is itself significant here. At the time of the revival, although film was pervasive like other mass media such as television, it was unlike television in that it could also be seen as an art form, a legitimate cultural expression” (Graeme Turner, 1993)

For this reason Australian films historicise the relations an audience has with the characters and of course the environment. A film such as *Australia* portrays an array of Australian issues and home hitting truths even though it is in many respects an epic and romantic drama and fundamentally fictional. To name one of many, the issue of the Stolen Generation encourages the audience's perception of this issue; it allows the audience to create a comparison of their own thoughts and actions in relation to those portrayed by the characters; and allows for reflection or reminiscence for those of the audience that may have closely been associated with this subject. A very suitable example would be *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and the national topic of the stolen generations portrayed within this film.

It seems the early beginnings of Australian film, if not it's very foundation was based on portraying the nation. Efforts were made to stray from the traditional American structure and system of films and this encouraged the nationalistic methods of Australian film.

“.....it is clear that there were deep ideological differences between Australian and American narrative traditions and the ways in which their stories treated the relationship between the individual, their social context, and nature. Crudely, where an American narrative might tend to resolve the conflict between the individual, society and nature in favour of the survival and pre-eminence of the individual, Australian narratives typically stranded their protagonists at the point

of conflict between themselves, their social context, and the natural environment. Where American fictions (again, to make a broad comparison) locate meaning in the individual and offer mythologies of transcendence, Australian fictions produce alibis of acceptance and endurance as compensations for the failure of meaning" (Turner, 1993).

For this reason there is even further evidence to promote the consistent link between the marketing of Australian and national identities through film. To continue on the ideological differences between Australian and American narrative traditions I believe producing a comparison between the hiring frequency of these two types of film origins is a good place to start part of the research for this topic.

## CASE STUDY #1

When trying to distinguish whether cultural identity plays a part in film and especially in terms of the sub culture of a video store, it's important to distinguish whether video shop goers give equal or similar amount of viewing time to Australian films or whether they favour mainstream films which are often more readily available and more aggressively marketed through the Media.

For this case study two Australian films and two American films will be compared. The reason these specific titles have been selected is because they were closely released on DVD. These DVDs to be compared include: *Kenny* (DVD release December 2006), *Mission Impossible III* (DVD release November 2006), *Australia* (DVD release March 2009), and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (DVD release April 2009). Furthermore, two different release years will be compared to see whether the original finding has altered or not. At this point it's important to note that all information consists of figures gathered from one Video Store. Extraneous variables which might affect the results include viewers' age, occupation, culture (including Country of birth), sex, economic standing, and demographic. Please refer to Appendix A.

Table 1 refers to data regarding the Australian film *Kenny*. According to this data viewers were more prone to rent this title than to purchase it as their own. However the rental interest was quite high even though there were not too many units on hand for rental. On average each unit was hired 18 times. When comparing with the American film *Mission Impossible III* (2006) (see Table 3) it's apparent the rental popularity of the American film is slightly higher. Overall the total number of hires for each title differs with a total variation of 131 hires over 6 weeks. That is *Mission Impossible III* was hired 131 times more than *Kenny*.

However, as there were 13 more units available to hire compared to *Kenny* it's important to note that availability may slightly have affected this hire rate. It is, however, evident that owning a copy of *Mission Impossible III* was highly favoured as all retail stock available sold out along with an additional 15 ex-rental copies.

Table 2 refers to data regarding the Australian film *Australia*. According to this data viewers were almost equally prone to buy a copy of the title as they were to rent it. The film was also readily available for hire with 46 units on hand for rental, each averaging 11 hires. When comparing the American film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) (See Table 4). It's apparent that neither the rental nor purchases of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* were very high in comparison to *Australia's* figures. However we still need to note that half the available stock was sold and an additional 3 ex-rental copies were sold as well. On average, the hire per unit was only 4 hires per unit less compared to *Australia*.

When comparing the two types of films –that is Australian and American – there does not seem to be any noticeable differences between the popularity of each. As American films are more marketable and readily available and generally are in excess, it was expected that their popularity would far outweigh that of Australian films. Generally, there is criticism towards Australian film and its subject matter but there are a strong social connotations involved in the accessing and viewing of Australian films.

Both films, depending on availability and possibly genre, were almost equally well-liked. In saying that, it's important to note the difference in production values and budget sizes of these films. For example *Kenny* was a low budget film which in many ways was an unexpected box office hit grossing just over \$7 million. However *Mission Impossible III* had a budget of \$150 million and had gross earnings of more than double this amount. Further on

this point, when comparing the two Australian films selected it is evident that although they're both Australian and were both popular with Australian audiences, the difference between the two are vast. Largely this is due to the production size, the budget, the calibre of actors and cast and ultimately the marketing of all these factors. With all these differences in mind one factor that is common is that of film content and its promotion of Australian national identity.

The hiring of DVDs instead of going to the cinema has been a growing trend, yet there's an even more palpable growing trend to purchase and have ownership of films. According to the quantities available on the video store reports it's safe to say that retail sales of DVD's have increased in leaps and bounds and I believe they have strongly encouraged audiences to create their own cinema or video library within the comfort of their own home due to affordability. This notion of a home cinema experience gives the audience a sense of ownership and involvement within the entertainment industry. Additional features now available on DVD's allow the audience to delve deeper into processes of producing films through additional scenes, behind the scenes and making of clips, interviews with cast and crew etc. This encourages the growing attraction to the notion of a home cinema. Having a home cinema and owning Australian films once more encourages the marketing of Australian identity through film. It encourages the viewer to feel closer to the cinematic experience and part of this film they believe is a representation of their identity and culture. To further analyse cultural identity it would be beneficial to explore whether films like *Australia* and *Kenny* accurately display characteristics of Australian life and Australian culture. Besides the obvious historical topics, are there issues or elements evident in these films that Australians can relate to and identify with? Do they encourage a sense of patriotism in comparison to a history themed film such as *Gallipoli*? In many respects the

home cinema in itself becomes another sub-culture in its own right and definitely an area open to further investigation.

## CASE STUDY #2

To further analyse the video store culture it would be beneficial to explore whether the comparisons between Australian and American cinema's popularity varies at all when being viewed at the cinema. Is one or the other favoured or disliked more in a cinematic setting and experience. Do Australians prefer to view their home made films within their own homes?

To begin exploring this key question it is important to analyse the opinions of Australian residents who are also Australian film viewers. In a recent questionnaire participants answered a set of 10 questions that touch on the issues at hand. Participants were all Australian residents, almost exactly half of the participants were male and the other half female, and almost exactly half were born in Australia and the other half born abroad varying between the ages of 12 up to 60. 51% of participants were between the ages of 12 and 22 years.

Results proved that 63% of participants enjoy Australian films. On average between 1 and 5 Australian films had been viewed by participants in the last 12 months. 59% of these films were viewed on DVD in comparison to the Cinema. 48% of participants viewed Australian films purely for entertainment whereas the remaining 52% viewed the films for such reasons as to see their favourite Australian actor, due to advertising, and for obligatory reasons such as school or University assignments. However, 56% of participants said they enjoyed and preferred US films with the remaining 44% split between Australia, UK and Other origins such as India. In terms of the accessibility and availability of Australian films 58% of participants believe that it is easy to rent or purchase a film of Australian origin. Please see Appendix C for more detail.



At this point it is important to explain the reasons why the key questions were asked. The question 'Do you enjoy Australian movies?' was a blatant inquiry to distinguish the general perception of Australian films. Whether it is a positive or negative view. The results confirmed that 63% of the participants enjoyed Australian films. However when asked 'What is your preferred origin of movies?' 56% of participants preferred films from the USA. Another question 'Where did you view (the Australian films)?' was an inquiry as to where the audience preferred viewing the films. The two options were the cinema and on DVD (therefore the video store). The results confirmed 59% had viewed the films on DVD underlining the notion of the cultural experience within ones home almost as a private time of reflection and entertainment. What is more interesting and in many ways may contradict the majority of this questionnaire's results are the answers to the question which asked the participants to circle the Australian films from a list of 6 films. A percentage of 41% of films were correctly identified as Australian whilst 29% were entirely incorrectly identified. In essence one wonders whether the audiences actually know which films are Australian and which are not. In some instances, audiences confuse the origin of a film with the inclusion of an actor. Some automatically assume that if Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman or Russell Crowe are in a film it is Australian. However these actors predominantly star in American based Hollywood films. For this reason the results relating to factors such as enjoyment and availability are sometimes dubious.

It is evident from the above that there is need for more time and resources for research into this area and this current research is done in anticipation of a larger study at PhD level. The possibility of acquiring a wealth of information relating to Australian national identity through film and the video store subculture is exciting. There is an obvious inherent capability available for this research to enhance the cultural and media studies research

areas. I believe the findings and further investigation will support the notion that film does promote national identity, specifically in terms of Australian cinema and national culture. I also believe utilising the video store as an initial central theme and expanding into the associated sub cultures will produce exciting findings of substance.

## POTENTIAL OUTCOMES

The means are limitless in aiding this topic and only need to be measured and reported on appropriately. Surveys and questionnaires provide valuable and constructive information in developing this research and concentrate on some of the following variable parameters:

- SEX
- AGE
- COUNTRY OF BIRTH
- RELIGION
- EDUCATION
- INCOME
- POLITICAL POSITION
- SUBJECTIVE CLASS
- TIME OF RESIDENCE IN AUSTRALIA

All information is successfully analysed using three scales:

- One to measure attitudes to Australian films
- Another to measure frequency of visits to a video store
- Another to measure potential for sales of Australian video product

All these scales may be analysed from the following perspectives:

- Cultural
- Commercial
- Educational

Fundamentally, I believe video stores along with other subcultures of film such as music and video games can be positively used to market Australian and other film identities. That said the number of distributors encouraging Australian film definitely is not lacking.

Some of these distributors include:

### **Hopscotch Films**

Hopscotch is Australia's leading film distributor specialising in quality films from around the world since the end of 2002. Recent releases include *Touching the Void* (2003), *Fahrenheit*

*9/11* (2004) and the ground-breaking Australian film *Somersault* (2004).

### **Madman Entertainment**

Madman is an independent entertainment distribution company, specialising in wholesale distribution of video and DVD movies into retail and rental stores throughout Australia and New Zealand. Madman is a leading Australian distributor of Japanese Animation, Australian and Global Independent film, Asian Cinema, Bollywood and Action Sports.

### **Beyond International**

Australia's leading film and television production, sales and distribution company, committed to developing, producing and distributing quality television and feature films which are saleable to both the national and international markets.

### **NewVision**

Based in Melbourne, NewVision Film Distributors is Australia's premiere independent film distributor. Formed in 1982 by Frank Cox, NewVision has acquired some of the finest of world cinema and Australian features for distribution throughout Australia and New Zealand over the past twenty years.

### **Palace Films**

Palace Films is the distribution arm of Palace and imports quality international cinema for release in Australia and New Zealand, as well as distributing new Australian feature films.

At this point it is important that there are various constraints on the research. Predominantly there is the fact that the data collated, measured and analysed relates to only one video store. This is because permission was granted for the hiring and purchasing quantities at a specific store. I am hopeful following this introduction to the research topic that more stores can be involved. Furthermore, this research is part of a 12 point dissertation with a word limit of approximately 8000 words. There is no doubt that the research needs more time and resources and is done in anticipation of a larger study at PhD level.

But more importantly research funds for travel and data collection was not available given the limited scope of the dissertation. MAPP is essentially not a research program; students might even undertake research with minimal research training or experience and often utilise the program for experience and practice of research methods and academic writing. Better resourcing of the program could deliver better outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Generally the research completed and presented opens an array of topics for discussion and yet at the same time encourages an exciting list of new questions that need exploring and inquiry. There are definitely copious sociological and cultural factors involved with films, the video store culture and its relationship with cultural identity.

Some areas that can be further probed into include topics such as the social conditions conducive to adopting Australian content videos. Examining the structure of the shops and their capacity to develop or hinder the video store subculture is also one area of interest. This particular area of research will be able to examine whether a store's layout encourages members to browse through Australian film sections and if these sections are at all available. Also to be considered is whether there are any promotional materials prompting people to hire or even purchase Australian films. These prompters could include but not be limited to posters, advertisements on the in-store loop tape, magazine articles, website articles, text messages, print media, and vouchers. All such prompters could continually encourage viewers to more readily consider and hire Australian films, in turn encouraging the ongoing notion that we are able to market Australian and national identities through film.

Furthermore, to understand the market standing of the films compared and those to be compared in future we need to take into account an increased number of variables. The four main variables that were utilised need to be analysed in more depth as to their influence on the take up of the film includes: availability, production size, release year and

DVD ownership. These may have a major impact on the promotion and marketing of Australian film and in turn the ongoing cultural notion.

With these points in mind, it would be favourable to develop a database, which would store and report all the information and data. The database could even be developed to support the current systems in place at the video stores. Realistically all that would have to be done is the exporting of the required information into the specially produced database where the data would then be properly sorted and used to generate the desired reports and information. In so doing, acquiring the needed statistics would not impose on the video store staff and management's daily tasks but instead be utilising the information that is already being recorded and readily available for research and measurement. This will also diminish any factors relating to human error.

Another question that could be looked at in further detail is whether releasing Australian films on or near Australian public holidays would increase their popularity and encourage cultural identity. Or would this only be beneficial if the film storyline closely related to the appropriate public holiday for example, ANZAC day.

Another factor to be further probed is that of the home cinema as a sub culture of the video store. Do particular films have a better impact dependent on the arena they are displayed in? Do particular genres and not simply film types attract an audience to the Cinema? Does the video store distribution system "disrupt the value chain" or enhance it. Is the video store to be seen as an innovative creative content business option? The challenge in creative industries is how to reach client when the principal route to the market is dominated by major players like the key distribution chains? Commercial success has always meant securing deals with the "gatekeepers". How can we subvert it? Is the video market a

possible subversion point? Does that also reflect on the identity factor? Can we use the identity factor as a marketing tool?

Better still, the information gained may indicate that Australian identity is not encouraged and marketed the way it could be given the potential and influence of the video store. It will be evident that there are many valuable tools and boundless information available to aid this cause. Please see the sections to follow for more information relating to the research completed and the actual outcomes attained.

As mentioned the research does examine the notion that we are able to market Australian and national identities through film. There is a strong cultural and sociological link between these two entities. There is definitely more room for inquiry into these areas and the prospect is exciting for those involved in the Media industry and anyone passionate about Media as well as Cultural Studies.

This thesis contends that a key question to look at while trying to understand consumers' experiences is not what people say about films they watch (borrowed from the video store) but how consumers relate to these experiences. This ritualistic practice may not necessarily reveal what the consumer thinks about a specific film but a pattern might actually reveal a specific discourse.

It is therefore important that the analysis of the data collated be consumed in multiple ways from the empirical to the discursive in order to understand both the activity and its experience.

What the findings show is that in order to grasp the experiential value of video store activities we need to see these experiences as ongoing processes where meaning is



constantly reasserted and encouraged. The research has revealed that there are diverse ways that customers or political-cultural populations in general manage their identity through narratives.

Somewhat unexpectedly what the research has revealed is not simply how the messages within narratives are consumed by viewers or that distributors work consciously towards a nationalist marketing drive, but that the whole activity is an acknowledgement of the consumer as also a co-producer of a cultural experience.

Given the tiny scope of the study, the obtained results are not intended to drive any specific agenda but simply to propose that further research should be conducted to critically analyse the various types of discourses that are produced by different actors where the commercial and experiential meet.

This thesis therefore shows the potential for determining a social outcome from analysing qualitative material together with the quantitative data. The qualitative analysis could be usefully employed to project and explain but not measure thoughts and feelings of consumers. In that way the ritual can be seen as a semiotic investigation tool suggesting new ways for seeking knowledge about the consumers and the market. Through this discourse analysis even survey interviews can be used to inform discursive approaches.

Instead of relying entirely on semiotic or psychological approaches that are concerned with text-content relationships we should be looking at the socio discursive conditions of diffusion and reception. These will reveal complex patterns that suggest that discourses and practices often constitute the reality of the social world. Indeed discourses are constructed as they relate to the lived world. In this context the fact that one identifies themselves as Australian allows them to construct a base of nationalistic narratives that one must see in

order to be part of the living Australian milieu- the lived social reality. This Dissertation establishes that through further investigation there is strong reason to believe that video stores could add to national Australian identity.

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## APPENDIX A

Table 1 – Video Store Report/Statistics: Australian Film 2006 (*Kenny*)

Units hand Rental	on for	Number of Hires	Average Number of Hires per Unit	Units hand sale Retail	on for as	Units sold as Retail	Units sold as Ex-Rental
22		408	18	18		5	9

Table 2 – Video Store Report/Statistics: Australian Film 2009 (*Australia*)

Units hand Rental	on for	Number of Hires	Average Number of Hires per Unit	Units hand sale Retail	on for as	Units sold as Retail	Units sold as Ex-Rental
46		507	11	26		11	15

Table 3 – Video Store Report/Statistics: American Film 2006 (*Mission Impossible 3*)

Units hand Rental	on for	Number of Hires	Average Number of Hires per Unit	Units hand sale Retail	on for as	Units sold as Retail	Units sold as Ex-Rental
35		539	15	10		10	14

Table 4 – Video Store Report/Statistics: American Film 2009 (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*)

Units hand Rental	on for	Number of Hires	Average Number of Hires per Unit	Units hand sale Retail	on for as	Units sold as Retail	Units sold as Ex-Rental
40		294	7	6		3	3

*\*NB: All figures relate to the first 4 to 6 weeks of DVD release and are courtesy of Video Ezy Canning Vale, Western Australia. Extraneous factors to be considered: returns of damaged copies, exchanges, re-rental of remedied disc. Films/Titles released at the same time eg. Blockbuster or film of low interest*

## APPENDIX B

### Australian Cinema Questionnaire

*(Please circle the appropriate answer)*

1. Do you enjoy Australian movies?  
Yes                                      No
  
2. Approximately how many Australian movies have you viewed in the last 12 months?  
0                                      1-5                                      5-10                                      10 +
  
3. Where did you view them?  
At the cinema    On DVD
  
4. What encourages you to view Australian movies?  
Entertainment                      Obligation (eg school/Uni assignments)  
Favourite Actor                      Advertising                      Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. What is your preferred origin of movies?  
Australia                                      United States    United Kingdom  
Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. How old are you?  
12-22                      22-32                      32-42                      42-52
  
7. Male                                      Female
  
8. Were you born in Australia?  
Yes                                      No
  
9. If no, how many years have you been in Australia? \_\_\_\_\_ years
  
10. Please circle the Australian film/s in the list below:  
Moulin Rouge    Saw                      3:10 to Yuma  
Strictly Ballroom                      Ned Kelly                      Romper Stomper
  
11. How easy is it to find an Australian dvd to rent or purchase?  
Easy                      Difficult                      Not sure



## APPENDIX C

### Australian Cinema Questionnaire Results

**63% enjoy Australian films**

**An average of 1 to 5 Australian films have been viewed by each person in the last 12 months**

**59% of Aust films were viewed on DVD**

**48% view Aust movies purely as a form of entertainment**

**56% prefer US films**

**51% of those who completed the survey were between the ages of 12 and 22 yrs old**

**The survey was almost exactly 50/50 percent regarding sex (male & female)**

**The survey was almost exactly 50/50 percent regarding those born in Australia and those not**

**41% of films correctly identified as Australian  
29% of films incorrectly identified as Australian**

**58% feel that it is easy to rent or purchase an Australian DVD**