

Reconstructing the Australian Film Industry:

THE ONLY LAW A GUN

"In eighteen-fifty-one
The great Australian gold rush
The only law a gun
The only shelter wild bush..."

This jogging, galloping ballad, sung against fast-fanning shots of the outback, ^{hopping} kangaroos and other Australian, ushers in and out once a week the half-hour television ^{adventure} show Whiplash. It is the only Australian-made commercial serial ^{it is} produced by ^{transa,} the only Australian ^{studio,} commercial or otherwise, which has attempted to combat the stream of American television film pulp on its own ground.

Poor Whiplash hasn't had much luck. It still has not found the anticipated outlet in the USA, I understand. It was criticised in England for being too violent — although it found a late evening spot eventually. It does not enjoy a particularly high rating in Australia (

) and even at that it is not what one could call a critical success. The ^{late} Observer, ^{the} Bulletin and Nation have all carried attacks on it. Max Harris has had much amusement at its expense, quoting for example the ^{certainly priceless} line of dialogue ^{which was} exchanged across a billy on a camp-fire: "More sawfee, Mr Cobb?" Mungo McCallum called it a golden opportunity thrown away... repetitive episodes to a formula indistinguishable from half a dozen [American] westerns."

Practically all the criticism is justified, if one is discussing this work on the level of what the ^{magic} medium of television could be in a serene and beautiful world — or even, if you like, in New York, where television stations share an audience of ten million or so, and once in a while ^{one} can afford to be esoteric.

But let us please be realistic. It takes a thief to catch a thief.

everyday television
Judged on the basis Whiplash is acceptable fare. It is certainly not violent by Hollywood standards. Perhaps, at the beginning, Chris Cobb and his enemies were a little freer with their guns than the average Australian citizens of 1851, but lately the serial seems to be making a serious attempt to present lively melodrama without continual ^{mayhem and} murders, or even ^{endless} risticuffs. [One Whiplash ^{episode,} for instance, ^{carried} a coachload of suspicious-looking characters who were told that a murderer was at large in the area. Which of the passengers was he? Not one of them, it turned out. The worst scoundrel present was a rum-runner ("or sly-grogger, as you call it," explained Chris Cobb for the benefit of the non-existent American audience). Then, another time, we met the animal-loving kidnapper; and again the jovial bushranger (Chips Raftery) who first allowed himself to be caught rather than over-strain the prize mare he had stolen and was riding to freedom. [Of course it is all fairly nonsensical, but it is harmless and healthy enough, and a little of our history does come through in a muddy, amiable way. But the important thing about Whiplash is not its content. What none of its critics have admitted is that in the ^{matter} of film-making techniques—in continuity, editing, action-directing, musical timing, and so on—Whiplash is quite the smoothest piece of work ever made in Australia.

It may be ^{disappointing} that the technique it chooses to follow is the routine Hollywood one. But proficiency in this glossy technique is no easy achievement, and not to be dismissed lightly. [As one of many ^{long} suffering well-wishers to Australian films, who have sat through thousands of feet of art photography,

noble thoughts and high resolutions put together without an adequate exposure-meter or editing quillotine, I am one to congratulate Whiplash. It must be the first Australian film in decades which has done its homework properly. And at this stage in the process of resurrecting the Australian film

industry, good homework seems much more important and valuable than artistic aspirations.

Out in the strong and cynical studios of the newly-rich medium of commercial television the only law that means anything nowadays is a gun. Whiplash has at least a chance of success. It ^{would be} expecting far too much to ask it to compete with the Americans and to break the formula at the same time.

[Many well-wishers ^{of Australian film have!} hopefully imagined ^{for some time} that, by an ironic paradox, the cinema's greatest enemy could be the film's greatest friend. Their theory is that, while television has wrought havoc on the ornate picture palaces, still it provides an ^{economical} potential outlet for some beginners, ^{and} it trains technicians, and it has forced the cinema to give itself a salutary re-examination. But in fact the potential outlet ^{for film on television} is virtually closed to beginners. Television has hardly shown a ^{single} experimental film ^{made} by Australians in its five year life here, ^{and} the one ^{story feature} film that has been made by Australians in ^{the last} two years was made in the old way: on 35mm. stock for general ^{theatre} distribution. * (SPACE)

[This one film was The Prize, made by Eltham Films, Victoria, and the result of some years of semi-amateur, part-time enthusiasm. It was the exact opposite of Whiplash in every respect. Its plot could be told in three minutes of Whiplash action: boy meets goat, boy loses goat, boy finds goat.

~~construction beyond the depiction of a few stock types.~~ What dialogue it had was as brief as the contents of balloons in a comic strip, and not as pitiful. Because of the shoestring budget and inadequate facilities, the film was shot silent and all dialogue was ^{later} dubbed in, with almost arrogant lack of precision.

The exposure of the camera seemed to be left to guesswork. Anyway, it had a ^{nerveless} tendency to blanch suddenly and unexpectedly.

The Prize
[In fact the only thing that ^{it} had in common with Whiplash was that it made no attempt at character construction beyond the presentation of a few stock types.

[Yet with all its faults The Prize was a memorable film.

Its faults were in material techniques, not in artistic integrity. Its sensitively composed pictures by Gerard Vandenberg and its bravura score by Dorian Le Gallien at times blended perfectly into cinematic poetry of the first order. It was never drama; it was never intended to be. But poetry is no easy achievement, and it, like smooth film technique, is not to be dismissed lightly.

[Originally The Prize was ninety minutes long. It was ^{cut} to one hour ^{when} its lyrical qualities won it a ^{spot} at the 1960 Venice Film Festival. In this form it was shown in the 1961 Australian Film Festival. All this time it was playing only for love and prestige. No one hired it. It had never earned a penny. Then it was cut by half again, with an eye to a half-hour television ^{spot}. Still no sale. But finally, in the half-hour version, it succeeded in landing a contract to tour the country as a supporting ^{feature} ^{one of} the foreign film circuits.

* (SPACE)

[There was a third recent Australian production relevant to this discussion. Strictly speaking, it was a television play, not a film. It was performed "live" in the ABC Sydney studios (except for the usual sprinkling of filmed cuts), and it was ^{attended by all the difficulties} of continuous performance. Yet to viewers in all other States this was an academic point. By the time they saw it the performance was on film - automatically recorded by the Kinescope process as the production went out from Sydney. Presumably the producers ran the film through later before packing it off to the other states. There was no reason, other than a purist attitude to the television medium, why they should not then trim and edit the film a little to sharpen it up where necessary. If they did not make the most of this opportunity, they should have done so. In any case, I think it fair to consider this production as at least a poor relation of the film medium.

[I refer of course to the well-received serial The Outcasts, by Rex Rienitz, produced in response to the public interest aroused by his earlier serial, Stormy Petrel.

Costs = must pay for talent

At the height of the success of *The Outlaws*, the Sydney Sunday Mirror ran the story as a serial, and advertised this commendable enterprise with a publicity build-up for the television show reminiscent of the great days of Hollywood: "It took £10,000, seven months' work, noted scriptwriter Rex Rienitz, a 30-man unit, 40 actors and dozens of planners to bring Australian TV triumphantly of age"; painted the Mirror. The mathematics of this statement are worth a moment's consideration. If we can translate the expression "dozens of planners" conservatively to mean, say, two and a half dozen, then one hundred people must have been involved for some time at least during the seven months referred to — not counting Mr. Rienitz. Now if we assume that one half the total cost of production went into material ^{and} non-human consumption — ^{i.e.} studio time, cardboard for sets, film, etc. — than each man and woman involved in the production received an average of £50, or about £7 per month ^{for their work} — not counting Mr. Rienitz. And it would be correct not to count Mr. Rienitz in making such a calculation, if we were to follow usual Australian procedure. As the creator, the brains behind the whole thing, Rex Rienitz, could probably be counted on (like ^{and} patriotic Australian artist) to do the whole thing for the enjoyment of it. After all, he was given a national platform so that he could put across his ideas, and that is more than most artists are given and as much as they should expect.

[Actually, the Mirror's mathematics clearly were not meant to be analysed and it is probable that Mr. Rienitz did receive something for his creation. But it should be clear to any other outsider that £10,000 is a ridiculously small budget for a series of twelve half-hour programmes. It is about ^{the sum allotted} to make a single half-hour programme in a routine action series.

at the edge of the precipice which Cameron had discovered for himself and centred, as far as he could judge, about the point of rounded stones where he had reeled. The development receded from this point on either side, taking overall the shape of a boomerang. The tapered arms of the boomerang were the dormitory areas, or the suburbs. "We think it's time to present a new image of the suburb", said Kurt, "Sparkling. Sort of elegant and glamorous." The thicker central part of the boomerang was filled by Vacation World, an immense circle about half a mile across bounded by a man-made river, continuous revolving. Its endless mine bed would be nearly ^{two} miles long in fact, but in effect would be seem endless to its pleasure cruisers and water skiers. In the centre of the circle a great six-pointed star would be described on the ground and each point of the star was directed at one of six groups of buildings just inside the perimeter river. The groups would look very different from each other and were indeed designed to give the greatest possible atmospheric contrast while each contained every conceivable facility and device for wholesome holiday enjoyment: not merely swimming pools and bowling alleys and restaurants, but cabarets, nightclubs, Vacationland's own closed-circuit television. "Gaiety around the clock", said Kurt. The atmospheric contrasts between the groups would reflect their names, for each would represent a continent and would be designed accordingly. "Both pleasurewise and stylewise," Kurt explained,

[The Outcasts, a story of Macquarie and emancipists in twelve half-hour episodes, was done in BBC style, which means that it came in a series of dramatic climaxes which owed all the conviction it carried to the dialogue and acting, and nothing to ^{the} crafts of camera work, ^{staging, lighting, musical support} or cutting. Between the climaxes everything moved at a leaden pace. The camera dwelt ^{long before the actors arrived} on empty painted scenery, and lingered on after they had made their paralytic exits. No music ^{many of the} broke long silences between the wordy exchanges. In effect, The Outcasts was a stage production presented on television with the smallest concessions to the flexibility of the medium. Yet this stiff production was alive. It had a mind and a heart, and it represented human characters with a certain suggestion of gradation between black and white. ^{Even attempted} to present a development of character before the eyes of the viewer. ^{H. H. Ellis was appalled by its history, yet it} reconstructed a period quality in a believable way, despite its unbelievable mechanics. But ^{as a production} it was hardly more polished than your neighbor's Kodachrome record of his summer holidays. [In short, The Outcasts was ^{a visual failure but, within} the limits of a serial, a dramatic success. And ^{this is what} makes it so significant. For the dramatic, the literary and the historic areas of filmmaking are just where Australia has been weakest in the past, from When The Kellys Rode to The Overlanders, to any sponsored semi-documentary of the last decade which one can bring to mind. All our other filmic shortcomings are of no significance compared with the painfully stilted dialogue and the atrociously self-conscious acting which has been the rule even in professional Australian films.



[Here then, are three recent films which might be considered ^{as representing} the three bases for a tripod on which an Australian film industry could stand: technique, poetry, and drama. Each of these three films succeeded ^{only} in its one chosen area and failed even to start in the other two. But at least each has succeeded

in its chosen field. Whiplash is normally first-rate film technique. The Prize is sometimes first-rate film poetry. The Outcasts was often first-rate drama. None of this is to be belittled. Although the inactivity of recent years is to be deplored, it seems that perhaps the time has not been entirely wasted. There are technicians, poets, dramatists and actors about. The real trouble is their separation. Who or what can bring them together?