

News from under the Southern Cross - Edition 21. The World of Cinema

9 July

“Tell me what films I should watch and what books I should read in order to better understand Australia and Australians!”

Just over a year ago, this is a question I posed whenever I got hold of either Australian friends or Japanese acquaintances with experience of living in Australia after I learned that my next port of call would be Australia.

So in this edition of News from under the Southern Cross, I would like to talk about film while also including something a little bit private.

1. Starting Point: “The Godfather”

As a student who took advantage of a break in classes at Komaba to head to the cinemas in Shibuya, movies are a very familiar presence. During my time as a student in New York, an American friend of mine of Italian heritage once told me that “to understand an immigrant nation like America, ‘The Godfather’ is essential viewing”. It seems like it was only yesterday that I made my way to a small cinema in Greenwich Village in order to watch all three Godfather films back to back.



The Godfather (Paramount Pictures, Alfran Productions)
The Godfather Part II (Paramount Pictures, Coppola Company)
The Godfather Part III (Paramount Pictures, Zoetrope Studios)
(Source: SMAILOG home page)

2. If the country changes, the movies change

Since then, no matter where I have been posted in the world, I have always made an effort to enquire what movies I should watch to better know that country and its people. I have then made time to actually watch them.

In particular, my time in the UK saw me watch a lot of films, which was deeply satisfying. It also proved to be an effective way of dealing with the long, dark London winters.

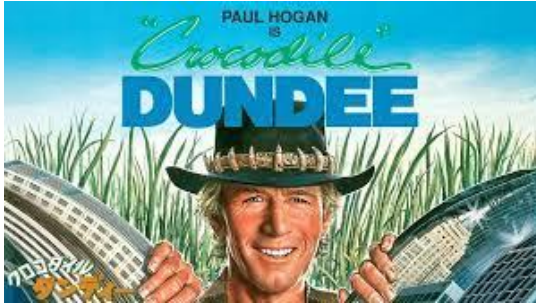
3. English language study

This might seem laughable in the age of Netflix, but my viewing methods are a bit unusual. I either buy or rent DVDs, switch on their English language subtitles, and then watch them at my own pace. If I miss something I 'rewind' it, and watch my favourite scenes over and over again. I must have watched the previously mentioned 'Godfather' films and 'Love Affair' over 10 times each.

The truth is that for someone like myself, who had no experience of living abroad and went overseas for the first time at the age of 24, English language study has been particularly difficult. Even now, when every day is a lesson, catching every word can be a struggle. The study method that I outlined above was something I came up with in response to this. It is a method that I strongly recommend, as I did to my young colleagues setting off to study in the US while tutoring them as a Director in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

4. Australia: a treasure trove of film

It was through such experiences as these that I arrived in Australia, where I continue to follow this practice. My personal fondness for Australian films such as "Crocodile Dundee", "Mad Max", and "Babe", allowed me to indulge myself in Australian film in general.



(L) 'Crocodile Dundee' Rimfire Films (Source: dTV homepage)

(R) 'Mad Max' Kennedy Miller Mitchell Productions (Source: Stereo Sound homepage)

However, I have found that Australia has an extraordinarily diverse range of films. After arbitrarily arranging a mountain of treasures from among the many recommendations people from all walks of life have made to me, how does the following sound to you?

(1) Films linked to beaches or oceans which are so beloved by many Australians

Example: "Breath"

(2) Films notable for their depiction of life in the Outback or the red earth of Australia

Examples: "The Dressmaker", "The Dry", "Ned Kelly", "Tracks"

(3) Historical films

Examples: "Gallipoli", "Australia"

(4) Films with indigenous Australians as the main characters

Examples: "Rabbit Proof Fence", "Sweet Country", "The Sapphires"

(5) Comedies

Examples: "The Castle", "Muriel's Wedding", "Strictly Ballroom", "The Dish", "Kenny"

(6) Family and human drama films

Examples: "Red Dog", "Penguin Bloom", "Paper Crane", "Amy", "Shine", "Storm Boy", "They're a Weird Mob"

(7) Films about social issues, such as drugs etc.

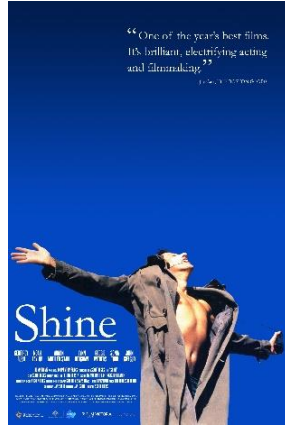
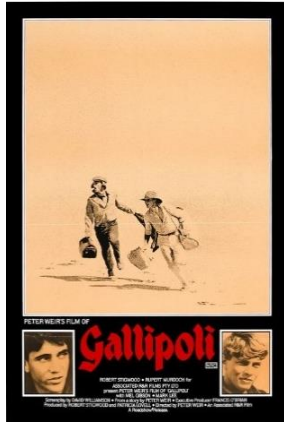
Examples: "Animal Kingdom", "Candy"

(8) Love Stories

Example: "Japanese Story"

(9) Mysteries and thrillers

Examples: "Picnic at Hanging Rock", "Lantana"



(L) 'Gallipoli' Associated R&R Films (Source: IMDb home page)

(R) 'Shine' South Australian Film Corporation, Film Victoria, Australian Film Finance Corporation, Moment Times, Pandora Cinema, BBC Film (Source: IMDb home page)

5. A bridge to mutual understanding

Of course, you're all aware that a movie that is over 2 hours long will contain its share of dramatic performances and simplified storylines. This is why you should avoid thinking that just watching movies will give you a greater understanding of a society in question.

And again, some of them contain jokes at the expense of Japanese people, which can lead to some uncomfortable feelings.

Yet on the other hand, film is a tremendous teaching resource that helps one understand what makes Australians laugh or cry. When I was giving a speech the other day I quoted some of the dialogue from an Australian comedy film, in response to which the venue burst out laughing (the speech transcript can be read [here](#)).

6. And in order to learn about Japan?

Flipping the coin on its head, Australians often ask me "What films should I watch in order to better understand Japan?"

A long time ago, it would probably have been Kurosawa films and Ozu films, wouldn't it? As a public servant, "To Live" was required viewing. More recently, "Departures", "Always: Sunset on Third Street", and "The Last Samurai" would fit the bill. I can almost hear people saying 'watch Tora-san and laugh', and 'watch Yamato and The Eternal Zero to better understand the thinking of Japanese people at that time'.



(L) 'Departures' Departures Production Committee (Source: IMDb home page)

(C) 'Yamato' Yamato Production Committee (Source: Amazon home page)

(R) The temple of Shoshazan Engyōji, which served as a film set during 'The Last Samurai' (Source: Shoshazan Engyōji home page)

By the way, the Embassy of Japan is planning to show a film in Canberra soon in conjunction with the Embassy of Poland. It is based on the life of Japanese diplomat SUGIHARA Chiune, who was instrumental in helping thousands of Jewish people escape from Europe via Japan to Australia and the United States during WWII. This is the kind of activity through which I aim to increase mutual understanding between Japan and Australia.

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