

## Australian Indigenous Screen in the 2000s: Crossing into the Mainstream

*Therese Davis*

After 12 years of consistently high quality in both drama and documentary, this body of work cannot be dismissed as fad or novelty. The interesting stories just keep coming. The diversity and originality of voice displayed over the years tell me we are here to stay as a distinctive force in the Australian film industry.

—Sally Riley, Manager of the Indigenous Branch  
of the Australian Film Commission.<sup>1</sup>

In the past ten years, we have witnessed an explosion of diverse Indigenous screen content that has attracted large audiences and been critically lauded in Australia and internationally.<sup>2,3</sup> In 2009, Warwick Thornton was awarded the prestigious *Caméra d'Or* at Cannes Film Festival for *Samson and Delilah*, an Indigenous teen love story. *Bran Nue Dae* (Rachel Perkins, 2009), an Indigenous musical, won the Most Popular Feature Film award at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2009. *Toomelah* (2011), written, shot, directed, edited and scored

---

T. Davis (✉)

School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University,  
Caulfield South, VIC, Australia

by the multi-talented Ivan Sen, was honoured with the United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture Award at the 2011 Asia Pacific Screen Awards. And *The Sapphires* (Wayne Blair, 2012), a musical comedy-drama loosely based on the true story of an Indigenous girl group that entertained troops in the Vietnam war, swept the 2012 Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Awards (AACTA) and was rolled out globally by American distributor The Weinstein Company (TWC). 2009 also marked the beginning of a wave of high-end, big-budget Indigenous-authored television drama and documentary series produced in collaboration with Australian public broadcasting services and other national and international television organisations. These include the historical documentary series *First Australians* (SBS/Blackfella Films, 2008), the social drama series *Redfern Now* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC]/Blackfella Films 2012–2013) and sci-fi drama series *Cleverman* (Goalpost Pictures/Pukeko Pictures/Red Arrow International/Sundance Studios/ABC television, 2016). Yet as Wayne Blair, director of *The Sapphires*, reminded audiences in a videotaped interview for Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News following the AACTA awards, it is important to remember that this current wave of Indigenous content did not emerge from nowhere, and recognition of Indigenous filmmaking has been a long time coming: ‘We never expected this [large number of awards]. The past 30 or 40 years for Indigenous filmmakers—writers and directors—has been a slow, hard road ... And it still will be after this film’.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the commercial and critical success of these and other recent Indigenous-authored screen works overturns the long-held view within the industry that Australian feature films with Indigenous themes are box office poison in the Australian market.<sup>5</sup> Sandra Levy, former Chief Executive of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, claims that we can now ‘confidently say that Australian Indigenous [screen creatives] have become a force to be reckoned with ... They are now firmly at the heart of contemporary screen practice. They are using film and television to document their cultures, promote social change and entertain, and these productions are now mainstream’.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter pays attention to two key strategies pursued by the Indigenous screen producers in pursuit of mainstream reception: ‘cross-cultural “cross-over”’ features,<sup>7</sup> and Indigenous-produced and themed primetime television drama and reality television formats. It argues that by opening out a space in the mainstream for the expression of a wide

range of Indigenous perspectives, identities, subjectivities and personal histories, these films and television programs are collectively countering negative images of Indigeneity that continue to dominate news media, such as the political discursive framing of Indigenous Australians as ‘the Aboriginal problem’. The chapter acknowledges, however, that there are significant limits to such strategies. As it demonstrates through analysis of the reality television documentary series *First Contact* (2014 and 2016), Indigenous-authored works can appear ambivalent when seen from the perspective of ongoing racist stereotyping, and hence prove to be counter-productive. The chapter thus proposes that while there is much to celebrate about the wave of Indigenous screen production crossing into the mainstream, there is also a critical imperative to closely analyse the different textual strategies employed by Indigenous screen creatives.

#### SITUATING ‘MAINSTREAM’ INDIGENOUS SCREEN PRODUCTION

While the commercial success and critical acclaim of recent Indigenous feature films and television series have been widely discussed, what defines and delineates ‘mainstream’ Indigenous screen production and its intended audiences is unclear. To some extent, this highlights the fact that while the term ‘mainstream’ is frequently used, it is rarely clearly defined. As Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg write in their study of Black and Asian British film since the 1990s, usage of the term is complicated by the fact that it ‘overlaps with notions of mass/popular/middlebrow/commodified culture (themselves contested areas) in terms of intended audiences, instant intelligibility and conventional aesthetics’.<sup>8</sup> In film contexts, ‘mainstream’ commonly refers to large-scale commercial approaches to filmmaking associated with Hollywood cinema that appeal to a broad audience, in contrast to experimental film styles and works that are oppositional or subversive in their politics and that have limited or specialist appeal. Such usage is, however, misleading. Mainstream film cannot be reduced to a single ‘Hollywood’ style of film. All film industries have a dominant or mainstream cinema, which, as Annette Kuhn says, emerges in the relationship between ‘the economic and the ideological’.<sup>9</sup> In Australia, the term also needs to be considered in light of political and social divisions. In official government Indigenous policy and more widely, ‘mainstream’ is at times used to refer to Australia’s non-Indigenous majority. This chapter’s discussion of the Indigenous

screen's inroads into mainstream screen territories takes all these usages into consideration, but also pays particular attention to Indigenous film and television series intended for wide release.

'Indigenous screen' is also an ambiguous term. It is used in both industry discussion and film criticism to refer to films and television programs produced by non-Indigenous Australian industry professionals that portray Indigenous people, issues and stories, *or* screen works authored and creatively controlled by Indigenous Australians. In terms of the former, a number of high-profile and critically acclaimed movies about Indigenous subjects directed and often written by non-Indigenous Australians have been produced since the early 2000s, including *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002), *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, 2006), and *Charlie's Country* (Rolf de Heer, 2013). This chapter, however, is concerned with feature films and television drama produced and creatively controlled by Indigenous Australian screen creatives—directors, writers, producers and directors of photography.<sup>10</sup> Since the mid-1990s, these creatives can be understood as a cohort of Indigenous screen producers and creatives or, in the words of Keith Gallasch, a 'community of makers', firmly located *within* the Australian mainstream screen industry while operating as a *separate* sector *vis-à-vis* government Indigenous screen policies, funding programs and cultural protocols and perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

The development of an Indigenous screen production sector, and the long hard road to mainstream reception, has, to a large extent, been made possible by targeted screen policies and industry support. As Tom O'Regan observes, the 1990s was a period of transition that saw critical and cultural debate dominated by 'debates over the direction, possibilities, and limits of internationalisation and over an Australian cultural identity which needed to be reconfigured in ways welcoming of cultural diversity'.<sup>12</sup> In 1992, following the settlement of a complaint to Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission brought against the Australian Film Commission (AFC)—the then peak federal government development agency for the screen sector—by Indigenous actor and film director Brian Syron, the AFC commissioned Shirley McPherson to examine the Commission's relationship with Indigenous Australians. Her report, co-authored with Michael Pope, titled *Promoting Indigenous Involvement in the Film and Television Industry*, concluded that the AFC's record of Indigenous engagement with

Indigenous Australians ‘has in practice been very limited, and over the past 3 years, non-existent’.<sup>13</sup> In response, the AFC established a separate Indigenous-managed unit, known then as the Indigenous Branch (and since 2008 as the Indigenous Department of Screen Australia). It was allocated its own line of funding and a mandate to develop strategies to proactively ‘provide (Indigenous Australians) with appropriate assistance which enhances their skills and experience thereby increasing opportunities to engage in the film and television industry’.<sup>14</sup> With its roots firmly planted in the wider politics of Indigenous self-determination, the Branch developed strategies that would enable long-term Indigenous creative control of the representation of Indigenous identity and culture by ‘assisting the development, production and marketing of a diverse range of films which are viewed by wider and larger audiences’.<sup>15</sup> These strategies included a ground-breaking training programme based on national and international mentorships, which is still used today; strict funding rules that encouraged Indigenous production teams; drama and documentary production initiatives in collaboration with state film agencies and public service broadcasters; and industry-standard protocols and guidelines for filmmakers working with Indigenous communities.

Furthermore, developments in Indigenous film production coincided with massive national debates on Indigenous-related issues and events that saw the reconfiguration of government Indigenous policy and structures of Indigenous governance, and profound questioning of Australian cultural identity. These developments included the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1990 and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991; the High Court’s *Mabo* judgment in 1992; the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in 1991; and the *Bringing Them Home* report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families in 1997.<sup>16</sup> As Felicity Collins and I argued in *Australian Cinema after Mabo*, these events had a major cultural impact, with television (predominately news and documentary) and cinema (more belatedly) becoming a site for Australians to confront and work through its colonial past.<sup>17</sup> Works produced in the late 1990s by the then fledgling Indigenous screen production sector, mostly short films and made-for-television documentaries, contributed to this paradigm shift in dominant mainstream/non-Indigenous historical consciousness by bringing hitherto hidden Indigenous histories to the screen as expressions of Indigenous survival and pride in Indigenous identity.<sup>18</sup>