Reconsidering the Place of Esben Storm's *In Search Of Anna* in the History of the New Australian Cinema

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ABSTRACT: Various Australian films made in the post-war period have attracted considerable attention both here and (occasionally) overseas, some deservedly so, others through media hype often based on sentimental, satiric, or otherwise simplified perceptions of this country. The political and social reality of Australia during this time, and of its complete cinematic culture, is more complex. *In Search of Anna* is one production from the fruitful decade of the New Australian Cinema which merits serious reconsideration. This account endeavours to correct the neglect of what is a significant work of art, setting it in a filmic as well as a social context.

Certain films from the first wave of the New Australian Cinema are today widely recognised as landmarks of the period. Features such as *Sunday Too Far Away* (Hannam, 1975), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir, 1975), *Caddie* (Crombie, 1976), *Storm Boy* (Safran, 1977), *Newsfront* (Noyce, 1978) and *Breaker Morant* (Beresford, 1980) have, rightly, been acknowledged for their formal qualities and key role in helping rejuvenate the Australian film industry. Yet, as with any art form in any culture, there are also a handful of examples that suffer a kind of unfortunate erasure from the shared cultural memory, significant productions that demand canonical reconsideration lest they remain completely excluded from the collective filmic (folk)lore developed in their absence. Esben Storm's *In Search of Anna* (1978) is a case in point: an exceptional work which has been largely forgotten in recent narratives concerning the revival of Australian cinema in the 1970s.

In Search of Anna

Esben Storm, writer, producer and director of *In Search of Anna*, was born in Denmark in 1950. His first production was *27A* (1973), the story of an institutionalised alcoholic made while Storm was still in his early twenties. Starring Robert McDarra, *27A* is a bleak, penetrating, documentary-like observation on the basic inhumanity at the heart of the post-war establishment in Australia. For his second film,[1] Storm

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[1] *In Search of Anna* is dedicated to McDarra, who died in 1975.

undertook another essentially realist study of a male protagonist positioned at the margins of society. However, *In Search of Anna* takes a quite different tack by breaking away from the institutional bonds underpinning *27A*: early on in the story the central character, Tony, is released from prison, from which point on representatives of authority— police, parole officers, government officials and the like—are entirely absent from proceedings. Instead, Storm chooses to focus in on the personal, on the psychology and the motivations that underpin human interactions of the most intimate kind.

The lead role fell to Richard Moir, who Storm met when both were working as assistants at Film Australia in the early 1970s.[2] Moir, who also appeared in *27A*, is perhaps best known for his performance in Phillip Noyce's *Heatwave* (1982). On-screen for virtually the entire 90-minute duration of *In Search of Anna*, Tony is a complex and enigmatic character, one who teeters on the cusp of his former criminality as he attempts to engineer an escape from the familial and social bonds of his Melbourne base. The ostensible goal is to locate Anna, his former lover who abruptly stopped writing to him while he was incarcerated. Tony is joined on his journey from Victoria to South-East Queensland by Sam (Judy Morris), who he first meets on the highway out of Melbourne. Chris Haywood and Bill Hunter, who had recently worked together in *Newsfront*, appear respectively as Jerry, Tony's erstwhile criminal cohort in Melbourne, and Peter, Sam's domineering Sydney boyfriend.

In Search of Anna was not unique in its diversion from the period dramas, bawdy romps and outback forays which dominated the first decade of the New Australian Cinema: films such as John Duigan's *Mouth to Mouth* (1978), Don Crombie's *Cathy's Child* and Paul Cox's *Kostas* (both 1979) provide further evidence of the late-1970s as an increasingly fertile period for accomplished cinematic observations of contemporary metropolitan society, films based in and around what A.D. Hope infamously refers to as the 'teeming sores' dotted around the edge of the continent.[3] Nevertheless, the film did establish Esben Storm as that rare Australian filmmaker of the time who, as Jack Clancy notes with reference to *27A*, '[dealt] directly with the here and now of contemporary Australia,' achieving 'on a low budget what films which cost many times as much [have been] unwilling to tackle.'[4]

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2   Unfortunately, Moir now suffers from Parkinson's disease; Storm and Moir collaborated in the 2005 documentary *The Bridge at Midnight Trembles*, which tells the story of Moir's fight against the condition and the radical brain surgery he underwent in 2003. <http://www.storm.net.au/PRESS_KIT.pdf> [accessed 15 June 2010].

3   Hope, A.D., *Selected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973), p. 8. The full verse, from his 1939 poem 'Australia', is: 'And her five cities, like five teeming sores/ Each drains her: a vast parasite robber-state/ Where second-hand Europeans pullulate/ Timidly on the edge of Australian shores.'

4   Clancy, Jack, 'Australian Films and Fantasies', *Meanjin*, 2 (1979), 193-205 (p. 204).

Road movie setting for In Search of Anna *(1978), (photograph by Carol Jerrems).*

Critical Reception

Critical analysis of *In Search of Anna* tended to unite in praising it as unique addition to Australian cinema up to that point. For Anna Dzenis, its 'narrative structure is complex and ambitious'—it is, she says, 'a film just waiting to be rediscovered and appreciated for the mini-masterpiece it is.'[5] David Stratton describes it as 'one of the most exciting and original Australian features,' going on to quote a contemporary review by Sandra Hall of *The Bulletin* in which she calls the film a 'a small-scale tour de force in which, for once, conception matches technique.'[6] Barbara Boyd, in her *Cinema Papers* review, similarly emphasises it as an 'ambitious and courageous film about contemporary Australia,' one that provides a new challenge for viewers 'accustomed to a diet of nostalgia from the Australian film industry.'[7]

One of the few to find the movie wanting was respected film scholar Brian McFarlane, who, with particular reference to its non-chronological narrative, suggested Storm's creation to be pretentious, flashy and largely incoherent.[8] However, it is interesting to note that in his 2010 essay 'Resisting Tarantino: A Seminal Year in Australian Cinema', McFarlane is far more positive in his embracing of the experimental aspects of latter-day productions like Warwick Thornton's *Samson &*

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5   Dzenis, Anna, 'In Search of Anna', in *Australian Film 1978-1994: A Survey of Theatrical Features*, ed. by Scott Murray (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 33.

6   Stratton, David, *The Last New Wave: The Australian Film Revival* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980), pp. 193-195.

7   Boyd, Barbara, 'In Search of Anna,' *Cinema Papers*, May-June (1979), 385.

8   McFarlane, Brian, 'Horror and Suspense', in *The New Australian Cinema*, ed. by Scott Murray (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1980), pp. 61-77 (p. 76).

Delilah and Ana Kokkinos' *Blessed* (both 2009).[9] In retrospect, his earlier take on *In Search of Anna* seems a remnant of the cultural cringe that enveloped twentieth century aesthetic criticism in Australia, whereby commentators would react with suspicion to any attempt to infect local productions with 'outsider' avant-garde techniques. Neil Rattigan alludes to this circumstance when he writes of Australia's tendency toward an 'acute sense of rejection [of] Eurocentric cultures,' of it being dominated by 'the need to differentiate itself from seemingly comparable cultures.'[10]

Nonetheless, commentator Paul Byrnes provides an apt summation for the overall reception of *In Search of Anna* when he calls it

> an intriguing hybrid film, an attempt to imbue a mainstream road-movie romance with some of the more innovative techniques of experimental cinema. In style, it's somewhere between the breezy, rock 'n' roll aesthetics of Chris Lofven's trippy *Oz* and the more rigorous and demanding formal experiments of Albie Thom's *Palm Beach*.[11]

Fragments of Influence

Even with the benefit of hindsight, a survey of contemporaneous Australian and international cinema for possible analogies seems to confirm in Storm's film the air of a stand-alone original. *In Search of Anna* engenders in the viewer a strong sense of it being a film that is in many ways between things, evoking glimpses and fragments of certain precursors without ever intimating that its influences can be easily mapped out. Rattigan's analysis brings attention to several of the film's contradictions: the flashback technique that works more in the manner of a parallel narrative; that 'despite its montage, the film is basically constructed from a realist aesthetic'; the tension between inner-city and countryside where (in Rattigan's view) the latter is privileged over the former.[12]

So far as Storm himself is concerned, he has recently said that

> the narrative is 'about a guy who's trying to move on but keeps getting dragged back to things that happened in the past; so the structure really

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9   McFarlane, B. 'Resisting Tarantino: A Seminal Year in Australian Cinema,' *Australian Book Review*, 317 (2010), pp. 45-47.

10   Rattigan, N., *Images of Australia: 100 Films of the New Australian Cinema* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991), p. 14.

11   Byrnes, Paul. 'In Search of Anna.' *Australian Screen*, <http://aso.gov.au/titles/features/search-anna/notes/> [accessed 31 July 2010].

12   Rattigan, N., *Images of Australia*, pp. 155-158.

is an expression of the theme. The climax occurs when the two strands collide.'[13]

Literary scholar Harold Bloom famously asserted that all writers are locked in an inner battle to absorb, yet at the same time somehow shake off, the inspiration of their precursors.[14] Similarly for Australian film, it is possible to argue that each new production can to some extent be read as the absorption of a combination of influences, both local and global. Here, however, the circumstances are further complicated by perceptions of a certain distance from the local scene made inevitable by Storm's Scandinavian origins.

Just as Byrnes terms *In Search of Anna* a 'hybrid' film, one that mixes romance and social realism with the road movie and experimental/auteurist traditions, any attempt to nail down Storm's influences seems destined to unearth more questions than answers. Dzenis notes, for instance, that the title recalls 'the search for another Anna who was never found' in Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960), a comparison which is nevertheless essentially limited to a loose association with 'European art-cinema tradition.'[15] Similarly, the mixing of experimental and non-chronological aspects into the road movie genre has echoes of, amongst others, Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) and Stanley Donen's *Two for the Road* (1967). Elsewhere, one might note a film such as John Boorman's groundbreaking *Point Blank* (1967) as potentially influencing Storm's multifarious flashback techniques,[16] while the number plate of Sam's vintage Buick car (285HUD) suggests a connection, albeit esoteric, to Martin Ritt's *Hud* (1963).[17] And, in an Australian context, *In Search of Anna* is to some extent pre-dated by the experimentalism of Nicholas Roeg's remarkable *Walkabout* (1971), it being notable that both films involved a foreign-born—indeed, in the case of Roeg, an overseas-based—director (which may have been helpful for international viewers trying to 'get inside of' the Australia being offered to them by the two films).

Yet, ultimately, these remain but fragments. One of the enduring traits of the film is how it defies precise classification and, with a nod to the Jorge Luis Borges essay 'Kafka and his Precursors',[18] can just as fruitfully be discussed in reference to *subsequent* filmic examples (one

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13   E-mail communication with author (13 June 2010).
14   Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997).
15   Dzenis, A. 'In Search of Anna,' p. 33.
16   Otherwise, *Point Blank* also revolves around a tough (albeit far more taciturn) male lead, and links in with a robbery, a double-cross and an outstanding sum of money central to a character's (in the case of *In Search of Anna*, Jerry's) motivation.
17   Tony's attractively roguish sneer might for some be evocative of *Hud* star Paul Newman.
18   Borges, J., *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. by Eliot Weinberger (New York, Penguin Books, 1999).

that immediately comes to mind is Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*, 2005).

Stylistic and Formal Attributes

The non-chronological narrative of *In Search of Anna* would, on some heads, seem to demand its inclusion in the tradition of the art film, yet in truth it does not sit entirely comfortably with such a categorisation. According to Suzanne Speidel, art cinema, amongst other things, is characterised by obfuscation and randomness of plot, favours narrative method over narrative substance and typically avoids closed endings.[19] Here, however, Tony's journey moves him inexorably away from his past and forward to a final epiphany (albeit not quite the one expected). Moreover, the key relationships all come to some kind of resolution: Jerry's treachery is exposed and revenged; Tony reaches an uneasy reconciliation with his father; the nascent intimacy between Tony and Sam is finally consummated.

Nevertheless, the chronology of the film has an intricacy unprecedented in Australian cinema to that point. For instance, the opening voice-over dialogue—Jerry's 'not like this!' plea to Tony, heard some minutes before the former's first on-screen appearance—is extracted from the middle of the narrative yet later presented in full to the audience as the penultimate scene. As a plot device it serves both as a flashback (in terms of story time) and a flash-forward (in terms of screen time). Furthermore, the chronological variations are diverse, alternating between detailed narrative sequences of differing length, and short, sharp cuts of a more avant-garde bent. This all culminates in an increasingly rapid montage sequence which crosses back and forth between Tony and Jerry's final confrontation (acted out atop the massive portside crane which broods over Melbourne throughout the film) and Tony's final epiphany in a bush setting somewhere in South-East Queensland (itself played out in scenes alternating between bright sunlight and shadow-filled forest, culminating with a brilliant flash of white across the screen).[20]

The sophistication of *In Search of Anna* does not, however, end with its non-linearity. Of equal note is the diverse sound design. Tony's voice-over narrations of his jail-bound written correspondences with Anna provide a haunting backdrop to the proceedings, while the mordant harp

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19 Speidel, Suzanne, 'Film Form and Narrative', in *Introduction to Film Studies*, ed. by Jill Nelmes (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 60-89.

20 There are in fact several epiphanies for Tony throughout the film: for mine, the key one is when, on the coastal road between Melbourne and Sydney, he fires the shotgun he has been carrying into the ocean, then throws it away. Shortly afterwards, Sam asks Tony if he heard a shot: he says yes, but when she says that she thought it might have been him, Tony replies: 'No, I haven't got a gun.'

Judy Morris (Sam) and Richard Moir (Tony), In Search of Anna *(photograph by Carol Jerrems).*

music of Alan Stivell, the delicate folk music of British singer-songwriter John Martyn, and various contemporary Australian rock songs by bands such as the Angels and Rose Tattoo are organised with an all-too-rare congruency. Only on one occasion, when Tony and Sam are about to part ways upon arriving in Sydney, does the non-diegetic musical accompaniment descend into cliché, with the playing of the Angels' 'Am I Ever Gonna See Your Face Again?'

In Search of Anna must also be considered in light of the extensive tradition of the road movie in Australian cinema. In this sense it runs against the grain of the majority of local examples—from *The Cars that Ate Paris* (Weir, 1974) to *Mad Max* (Miller, 1979) to *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994)—all of which direct their protagonists *inwards* toward the mysterious centre of the continent. Instead, the journey of Tony and Sam takes them around the South-Eastern periphery of the country, much of it filmed with a blueish-tinge appropriate to the coastal locations.

'In Search of Anna' and the Developing Canon of Australian Cinema

Moves to construct a purely Australian version of a cinematic canon have been underway for some time. Contributions to the development of such definitive chronologies are always a combination of the deliberate and the unwitting. So far as the former is concerned, one can point to a collection such as the recently published *100 Greatest Films of*

Australian Cinema.[21] With the first wave of the New Australian Cinema, we find that the assembly of critics involved have, in this case, fortified the standard list of acknowledged masterpieces with noteworthy, but ultimately fatally-flawed, tall tales (Colin Eggleston's *Long Weekend* and Richard Franklin's *Patrick* [both 1978]) and vulgar affairs of dubious historical value to say the least (such as Tim Burstall's *Alvin Purple,* 1973). Despite the many positive critical analyses it engendered, the likes of *In Search of Anna*—subtle, difficult to classify, 'entertainment' which nonetheless requires a deeper level of engagement on the part of the audience—almost inevitably slip through the cracks of this kind of historicising procedure.[22]

In light of this, it is concerning to observe how commonplace it is for present-day cultural commentators, such as playwright Louis Nowra and Screen Producers Association president Antony Ginnane,[23] to crudely bemoan the local cinema's inability to produce more blockbusters along the lines of Baz Luhrman's *Australia* (2009). Australian cinema since 1970 has in fact developed a proud tradition of producing understated, uncompromising films designed to extend the boundaries of both the aesthetic and the psychological in a local context. Accorded a low-key DVD release but otherwise long forgotten by Australian critics and audiences,[24] *In Search of Anna* is a film to be rated not only alongside the many superior productions of local 1970s cinema mentioned here, but also such international 'non-mainstream' or cult classics of the decade as Bob Rafelson's *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976), Werner Herzog's *Stroszek* (1977) and John MacKenzie's *The Long Good Friday* (1979).

In short, Esben Storm's *In Search of Anna* is a film of passion and compassion, with many social and political nuances that are true to the nation and the people, a film of integrity and worthy of the limited critical praise it has to date engendered. It is without doubt deserving of a more prominent place in the long history of cinematic achievement in Australia.

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21   Hocking, S. (ed.), *100 Greatest Films of Australian Cinema* (Richmond, Vic: Scribal Publishing, 2006). In his introduction, Hocking advises that the final list was obtained through the employment of 'a selection of our own esteemed filmmakers, critics and commentators, who submitted their personal Top 20 lists from which the final 100 was compiled' (p. 23).

22   Arguably the only selection to disrupt this is Bert Deling's obscure *Pure S(hit)* [1976].

23   Nowra, L., 'Nowhere Near Hollywood: Australian Film', *The Monthly*, 52 (2010), 44-52; 'Aussie Films: Nobody Goes to See Them', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 2008.

24   Available from Smart Street Films, PO Box 7265, Bondi Beach, NSW, 2026. I am most grateful to Hayden Smart (principal of Smart Street Films and, incidentally, sound editor for *In Search of Anna*) for providing me with a DVD copy of the film.

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