

COMING SOON (TO A THEATRE NEAR YOU): THE TEMPORALITY OF GLOBAL FILM DISTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIA

Abstract

This article explores the changing contexts of international film exhibition in Australia over a 20-year period (1989–2009) by examining in some empirical detail Australia's position in the global flow of films during this time. It argues that, at the most abstract level, distributors are engaged in the management and mediation of time and space in the field of global communications. It is proposed that distributors, through the organisation of temporal differentiation, are explicitly active in the creation of both cultural and commodity value. This is particularly apparent as film distributors explore and engage new methodologies of film release, which emphasise overlapping, intersecting and contradictory temporalities in the cinema experience.

Distance is as characteristic of Australia as mountains are of Switzerland.

— Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance* (2001)

The days of our isolation are over. We live in an age when the earth's surface seems to be contracting under the influence of scientific discoveries that almost baffle our imagination.

— Arthur Calwell, Australian Minister for Immigration and Information, 1946

The figure of the film distributor, as described in industry accounts, looms as a lingering, dark shadow over the history of the Australian cinema. A recent Australian documentary investigating the fate of the local industry proposes that as Australian film culture dies, it is distributors who dance. Fittingly titled *Into the Shadows* (Scarano, 2009), the film flagrantly represents distributors as comic-strip figures adorned with the devil's horns. They are, as one reviewer innovatively summarises it, 'bastardly' (Ma, 2009).

Filmmaker Marcus Gillezeau, in his guidebook to the Australian film industry, is similarly disenchanted with distributors and explains the cause of his ill-feeling:

Distributors have a unique role in the industry. They often put up the least money, are first in line for any receipts or income, and jet around the world going to fabulous film and TV markets at your expense. Consequently, some independent filmmakers see distributors as little more than a necessary evil. (Gillezeau, 2004: 40)

Dyspeptic views such as these have long historical antecedents in Australia. It is possible, for example, to hear in the words of contemporary producer John L. Simpson, when he is interviewed in *Into the Shadows*, an echo of Raymond Longford's railings against 'The Combine', the 1913 vertical integration of distributor Australasian Films and exhibitor Union Theatres. Longford accused 'The Combine' of using blind and block booking to limit exhibition opportunities for unaffiliated (i.e. local) producers. For Simpson, it is quite simple: distributors operate in the manner of organised criminals:

So many independent cinemas are used to receiving instructions: take this under these terms, or we'll drive you out of town, run you out of business. That's how organised crime works. There's a power relationship with organised crime that says with a big stick, you can only have this under these terms. If you don't take it, I threaten you. For me, that's a terrible way to do business. But that's the model out there in distribution land. (Simpson, in Scarano, 2009)

The belief that distributors are defined by their single-minded commitment to inhibiting local exhibition opportunities is not confined to filmmakers. Film critic David Stratton, summing up the Australian film industry's fortunes for 1989, was moved to make:

One final note: film distributors in Australia are becoming more and more capricious (or, perhaps, careful) about the films they release in cinemas. Increasingly, interesting films are being by-passed for cinema release, or they are given the most token theatrical window (often without any press screenings) before arriving with indecent haste on the video shelves. As a result filmgoers are being denied the chance to see films as they were meant to be seen, and the distributor has started to replace the censor as the major impediment to a full range of film appreciation. (Stratton, 1989: 79)

For Stratton, writing well before the advent of online and mobile media viewing, the reduction of the theatrical window and the expansion of ancillary releasing to video are tantamount to a form of industrial and cultural malice.

Given the satanic powers attributed to them by various industry sectors, we might expect that some effort has been made to understand in detail the influential role of distributors over the course of the Australian film industry. But this is not necessarily the case. With the exception of several government-initiated or sponsored reports – from the 1927 Royal Commission to the likes of Jones (1998) and Reid (1999) – the specific analysis of distribution in Australia has been scarce, though notable exceptions include the work of Lobato (2007, 2010), Walsh (1997), Bertrand and Routt (1989), Molloy and Burgan (1993), Luckman and de Roeper (2008) and Thorne (2007). This deficit is particularly telling at a time when film distribution and exhibition methodologies are fundamentally being challenged by new technologies and shifting audience preferences. As Mike Walsh has noted:

Cinema is one of the major institutions of internationalism and/or cosmopolitanism in Australian culture, yet Australian film policy has been habitually discussed, and Australian film history customarily formulated, within a culturally nationalist framework ... The founding presumption and conclusion of this approach – the doomed, romantic struggle of Australian

film producers – limits the definition of the Australian cinema industry to its smallest and least powerful sector, production, at the expense of incorporating distribution and exhibition, where Australian companies have often enjoyed considerable agency, and where there have been significant variations in industrial tactics. (Walsh, 2007)

Walsh identifies a prevailing cultural romanticism as a principal reason for the absence of more granular analyses of the Australian cinema as a specific location in a broader international framework. In its focus on local output, Australian film history has inadequately attended to the busy industry of international import. But the unerring focus on local film production in accounts of the Australian industry has further repercussions for how we understand the cinema. For distributors, films are entities that must be transported, quantified, streamlined and timed in order to be sustained in the marketplace. At the most abstract level, distributors are employed to establish the parameters through which time and space are managed across the field of the global communications industries. Observing the cinema from the vantage point of distributors, then, is to see the cinema as a continuously unfolding *project*, constantly undergoing change, in which distributors and exhibitors tactically constrain and promote the processes and experiences of spatial and temporal differentiation.

This article explores the changing contexts of international film exhibition in Australia over the past 20 years by examining in some empirical detail Australia's position in the global flow of films during this time. Although the movement of films to Australia from other parts of the globe has not yet been the subject of detailed scholarly analysis, the history of international cinema trade and exhibition – its velocity, tempo and timeliness – has been influenced by changes in technologies of communication and transportation, and is suggestive of broad-based revisions to temporal, political and economic relationships throughout the rest of the world. It is this orchestration of films through space, and particularly time, that concerns this article, especially as the conventions of past practice in the distribution industry become increasingly contingent and are currently subject to unprecedented levels of variation.

Parameters of the study

With the aim of understanding the shifting parameters of the circulation of films to Australia, data describing the annual Australian film release slate at three historical points – 1989, 1999 and 2009 – were compared. The extent of the period under study (1998–2009) is constructive in that it includes within it several notable industrial developments. Most recently, the digitisation of cinema screens and the exploration of online and on-demand distribution methodologies have begun in earnest. In relation to the US film industry, the late 1990s saw its box office revenues derived from world markets overtake revenue from domestic box office, which traditionally had formed the majority basis of its income. On the exhibition side, from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, an ambitious cinema construction campaign was initiated, with the number of screens across the globe (including Australia) expanding as new multi-screen venues proliferated.

In order to calculate the gap or 'stagger' of films from first to Australian release (see Table 2 below), information was collected on international films

released theatrically in Australian cinemas in those three years specifically (a total of 570 films not including Australian films, IMAX titles, short films, documentaries or re-releases, although Australian co-productions were included).¹ Gathered data included the date and location(s) of first release, date of Australian release, Australian distributor and box office ranking. Lists of theatrically released titles for each year were compiled from information provided by the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com). Release dates for these films (including both first release and Australian release) were also sourced from the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), which provided a consistent basis for the data over the years studied as well as the most extensive set of global release dates for individual film titles. Information about Australian release dates was tested by triangulating the IMDB reports against data derived from the records of the Motion Picture Distributors' Association of Australia (MPDAA) and the holdings of the AFI Research Collection. Anomalies between the IMDB and these additional sources were discovered in less than 7 per cent of all recorded Australian release dates (and in almost all cases consisted of less than a few days).

It was noted that data integrity dwindled in correspondence with the box-office ranking of films. Films with lower box office results tended to produce less consistent information from the IMDB. In order to ensure the most coherent data set over the decades, much of the following analysis is based on observing the top 150 films ranked by box office position. These are films that are most likely to have received capital city theatrical releases in Australia for more than a week, as well as a significant theatrical release in a territory other than Australia. Furthermore, as the study is intended to understand the role of film distributors in a theatrical release market, festival screenings – either overseas or in Australia – were excluded. Further study of the impact of festival screenings on subsequent releasing patterns would, however, make an interesting addition to this analysis – especially as festivals appear to be used increasingly by both US and European distributors as a multifocal strategy for launching titles into the global marketplace. It would also be instructive to understand how the development of a stand-alone circuit of festival releasing has impacted on the theatrical diffusion of films of particular genres (i.e. art-house or indie films) in particular locations.

Film distribution and 'relational time'

Until recently, geographies and economies of scale have prohibited the instantaneous releasing of films across the globe. Instead, the cost of striking prints and then transporting them over vast distances, and conversely, the savings represented by redeploying film prints from one territory to another, underpinned the development of staggered, exclusive 'windows' as the principal mechanism for managing the global dispersal of cinema. Additionally, the division of the world into endemically organised release 'territories' (i.e. North America, Europe, etc.) was more than a spatial segmentation of the global market; it was a temporal one as well. Under these arrangements, well into the 1990s, it was not uncommon for Hollywood films, for example, to be delayed by up to four months before sallying overseas along a well-worn, steeply inclined release track that paused first in large markets before meandering fitfully down to the smallest. In this sense, it is possible to see how the business of film distribution has, for much of its history, been concerned

inherently with the relegation of chronologically organised hierarchies that both promote and demote different markets through a process of temporal ranking. The chain of sequential release windows is also then a chain of relative (descending) value (see Himpele, 1996).

This contingency at the heart of the spatial and temporal movement of films challenges the idea that global media flows are identical in their universality or unimpeded in their localisation. Instead, it suggests that the relative velocity with which films arrive at particular markets matters industrially, culturally and politically. Peter Putnis (2010), writing about the diffusion of the colonial press in Australia, identifies two temporal contexts for the early media: 'local time', which governed the production and consumption of endemic news; and 'relational time', which governed the production and dissemination of international news. Every aspect of the diffusion of news was marked by these different temporal terms of engagement, and presented major challenges for time management, requiring calculated adjustment as new communication technologies became available (Putnis, 2010: 167).

This article is particularly concerned with the unfolding of 'relational time' (or temporal differentiation) in the distribution of international films to Australia and the circumstances of their exhibition. At the simplest level, it is possible to see how perceived delays in the arrival of films on Australian screens serve to define the Australian market as culturally dependent, with 'production' mostly occurring somewhere else and 'consumption' occurring nearby (see Wilks, 1994). This representation of the relational time of the cinema, however, under-estimates the role of distributors in actively managing anticipation through the constant temporal reshaping of 'currency' for audiences. It also fails to recognise the ways in which the specific scheduling of films at multiplex venues, for example, creates a type of mixed periodicity made up of irregular combinations of temporal compression and extension on any given night of the week. The role and agency of distributors and exhibitors in continuously shaping and reshaping these temporal differentiations are not yet well understood, although the stakes for industry participants in managing these itineraries and schedules are high, as demonstrated in a major industry review commissioned by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) in 1997 (Jones, 1998).

The ACCC review followed a substantial increase in the number of complaints it received from independent cinema exhibitors. The complaints were particularly related to the limitation of opportunities for access to first-release films and the accompanying conditions of film hire imposed by film distributors on small exhibitors. The Jones Review found that, while smaller independent operators could get a film *at the same time* and on the same terms as the major exhibitors, their principal concern was the inflexibility of the distributors' season requirements for the title. In other words, exhibitors were not complaining about their ability to achieve release simultaneity *per se*, but were arguing that the onerous terms imposed by distributors in order to achieve a timely release were disadvantageous (e.g. contracts would stipulate a minimum period of time and a minimum number of sessions during this time for which a title was required to screen before it could be moved on). Reduced programming flexibility had a particularly high impact on exhibitors with a small number of screens, and what underlies the Jones Report is an implicit division between multiplex and non-multiplex exhibitors.

The application by distributors of a temporal differentiation in terms of release duration made it difficult for independent exhibitors (i.e. non-multiplex venues) to meet the minimum expected session requirements.

The Jones Report resulted in the development and implementation of an Industry Code of Conduct. In the five years following its inception, the Code Conciliator received more than 100 complaints from local exhibitors (see Table 1) based on issues such as terms of supply (including session times and length of season) and late date of supply.

Table 1: Code of Conduct complaints from local exhibitors

	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04
Complaints received	24	10	12	24	32	20
Terms of supply		-----29%-----		42%	84%	60%
Non-supply		-----43%-----		58%	16%	25%
Late date of supply		-----26%-----		0%	0%	0%

Source: Martin (2005).

This documentation of the long-standing tussle between exhibitors and distributors in the Australian market is especially revealing in the way it highlights a critical contestation over the organisation of temporality in the diffusion of films to audiences. The complexity through which this temporal differentiation is negotiated and produced within the distributor–exhibitor relationship indicates that the scale and register of the temporal texture of the cinema should not be underestimated. Most evident are the differing expectations of exhibitors and distributors in terms of the organisation of ‘local time’, the length of season, the specificity of the program schedule (sessions times) and timeliness of supply. The important question of the equitable availability of films within a market (‘simultaneity of release’), which in part initiated the ACCC Report and which was controversially glossed over in its final report, concerns the organisation of ‘relational time’. The analysis and findings of the Jones Report suggest that expectations *within* a market for simultaneity are extremely high. However, the question of the organisation of ‘relational time’ *between* film markets (‘international stagger’) remains an area of significant intersection.

Temporal differentiation and ‘felt internationalism’

One of the key industry developments in the period immediately preceding the Jones Review, and at the heart of its documentation of exhibitor-distributor anxiety, is the emergence of the multiplex as the dominant method for theatrically delivering films to audiences. Australia was an early adopter of multi-screen venues. Multi-screen cinemas in the late 1960s and early 1970s were known as complexes (the term multiplex in relation to cinemas emerged in the United States in the

late 1970s and generally referred to suburban, rather than CBD, locations). The Hoyts Cinema Centre in Melbourne was the second ‘complex’ in the world to open (after an AMC cinema in the United States), although the Cinema Centre was announced first. The following year, Hoyts opened its Entertainment Centre in Sydney, claiming it to be the world’s largest at seven screens (*Australasian Cinema*, 1976: 1). Village began opening multiplexes in Australia in 1988. Between 1986 and 1996, Hoyts and Village (in conjunction with Amalgamated Holdings, which owned Greater Union and Time Warner) opened more than 40 multiplexes in suburban shopping centres (Shoebridge, 1996: 20). Listings held by the MPDAA currently identify 493 multiplexes in Australia (including drive-ins). Before the mid-1990s, the biggest cinema complex in Australia boasted 11 screens. The mid-1990s heralded the construction of megaplexes (15+ screens). These figures are not restricted to mainstream venues. From the late 1990s, there has also been a rise in the number of art-house screens, spurred by the interest of multiplexes and megaplexes in this market segment.

Over the period studied in this survey, the number of screens in Australia increased threefold but the number of cinemas accommodating these screens was dramatically reduced. It is also useful to note Australia’s leading role in global multiplex expansion during this period. In the early years of this century, Australian exhibitors Hoyts, Village and Greater Union had all constructed screens on several continents outside Australia (in fact, at one point Hoyts had more than twice as many screens offshore, Village well more and Greater Union almost as many). However, despite the global rush to move films into multi-screen venues, recent research into British and American multiplexes has noted that after the explosive expansion of multiplexes in the 1990s, these two markets became ‘over-screened’, resulting in the premature closure of some newly developed multi-screen venues (Allison, 2006; Collins et al., 2005).

In his unparalleled work on the rise of the multiplex cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, Charles Acland (2003) notes the pivotal role that the circulation of global cinema has for delineating spatial and temporal differences in public life. Acland charts an emerging expectation for international simultaneity in contemporary cinema, and a resultant reevaluation of the space and time of new film events. For Acland, this increased sense of simultaneity of cinema circulation that accompanied the era of multiplex exhibition heralded a sense of global synchronicity which he labels ‘popular cosmopolitanism’ or ‘felt internationalism’: a ‘structure of feeling about senses of allegiance and affiliation – about being in step – with imagined distant and synchronized populations’ (Acland, 2003: 237).

In suggesting that this cultural simultaneity has produced new transnational communities that reside in people’s imaginations but also bear material consequences for the organisation of social life, Acland extends to a global scale Benedict Anderson’s conceptualisation of nations as communities imagined in the same time.² For Anderson (1991), national identity is embedded in temporality twice over. First, this occurs in terms of the way newspapers create an imagined geographical coherence by combining events from different parts of the world into a single issue of the newspaper, as well as a temporal coherence in which the newspaper’s publication clocks these events progressively in time. Second, and most importantly for understanding Acland’s work on the cinema, Anderson

charts the way in which widespread daily news reading acts as a synchronised activity, thereby leading to a form of ‘community imagining’.

If, according to Anderson, ‘simultaneity through time’ is crucial to the development of imagined nationalness, then we might also understand Acland’s suggestion that a perceived rise in the number of coordinated opening weekends across the globe might give the impression of connecting people ‘to geographically distant and temporally synchronised communities’ (Acland, 2003: 239). Acknowledging the difficulties that geographic differences in time present for truly coincident film openings (if films were actually released in exact synchronisation across global time zones, then one person’s matinee would be another’s late show and so on),³ Acland counters by noting that even between spatially dispersed places in different time zones, the cinema is encountered consistently. There is an expectation that between cities one would find similar film events, show times, locations of theatres and pricing structures. ‘In this respect, the current cinema does not indicate geographical distinctiveness (e.g. between cities) as much as it does temporal particularity.’ (Acland, 2003: 240) Here, Acland distinguishes between the comparative geographic time at which a cinema event occurs (the various ‘temporal particularities’ that create the differential basis for ‘relational time’, however small) and other overriding structures of time in the film industry, such as seasonality, timing, duration and rhythm (which produce ‘local time’) in order to propose that cultural difference as (spatial) distance may be overcome through the (temporal) synchronisation of exhibition schedules. In a sense, then, Acland is arguing that the transnational alignment of ‘local’ time is itself a proxy for a kind of temporal globalisation – that ‘local time’ is now a form of ‘relational time’.

Both Anderson and Acland rely on the assumption that communities are by definition co-temporal. But Acland’s admission of temporal ‘particularities’ suggests that it is possible to also imagine the global diffusion of cinema in such a way that temporal differentiation (no matter how abbreviated) is acknowledged rather than overlooked. Instead of the ‘before and after’ of temporal sequence (with its attention on cultural lag, queuing, waiting), perhaps we might also imagine a role for temporal differentiation in experiences of coexistence and simultaneity, in which it is the relationship *between* different timeframes – for example, between local and relational time – that requires continuous management by film distributors and understanding by film analysts. Rather than proposing that cultural alacrity and coincidence are the key criteria through which transnational or cosmopolitan identity is measured, this study of global film circuits proceeds on the basis that there is a place for examining the role of global media circulation in enabling the coexistence of overlapping, intersecting and contradictory experiences of temporality.

Temporal differentiation and ‘international stagger’

One of the most detailed examinations of the scheduling of international release itineraries or ‘international stagger’ was conducted by the industry journal *Screen Digest* in December 2005. The *Screen Digest* survey analysed the gap between the release of key titles theatrically in the United States and their cinematic debuts in three European markets (Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom). The data sample in the study was limited to titles that had reached the Top 50 box office

positions. Analysis of release strategies between 2002 and 2005 revealed that, of the top 90 titles in the study, there had been a 'limited but measurable' shift towards closer release dates. For example, the average stagger between the US and UK release of a title in this period closed from 47.6 days to 30.8 days.

Two key observations of industry practice are provided to explain this contraction. The first concerns changes in the way audiences communicate with each other about the films they see. The use of theatrical screenings to create word-of-mouth promotion of titles is not new – but historically the impact of marketing campaigns was confined to a local market. More recently, the rise of internet reviews and advertising has meant that the domestic release of a US title can generate almost instantaneous 'buzz' for a movie around the world. This also means that US films do not necessarily have to release in the United States to generate strong publicity, and as a result a wider range of first-release locations would be expected to emerge from the data.

The second, and perhaps more commonly provided, cause for theatrical release contraction is piracy. By decreasing the time between the US and international release of a title to minimise illegal digital distribution of titles, the industry implicitly assumes that consumers are prepared to pay for a premium theatrical experience, providing they do not have to wait (too long) in order to do so. This practice relies on assumptions about audience preference within historical distribution practices such as run-clearance-zone systems of staggered delegation in which films were more highly priced at first release and least expensive at the end of their run.

There may well be other factors for more recent decreases in the global circulation of films, however. As previously mentioned, one of the prime reasons for the staggering of releases in international territories was the cost savings that derived from reusing film prints. Both the shorter period of time in which titles are expected to earn their principal theatrical revenues and the prospect of widespread digital distribution of titles obviate the need for a long gap between releases. Other commentators have pointed to the impact of heightened competition for domestic screens within the United States: 'One factor driving the day-and-date global campaigns is that the foreign market isn't gridlocked like the Stateside market.' (Groves, 2004: 8)

Screen Digest's data also revealed that, although the stagger between markets was lessening, there was not necessarily a corresponding increase in simultaneous releasing. *Screen Digest* defines 'simultaneous release' as a release between territories made within seven days either before or after the primary release date. This allows for local theatrical conventions such as the organisation of openings on a specific day of the week. On this basis, *Screen Digest* observed that, in the United Kingdom alone, the number of films opening simultaneously actually declined over the period studied.

This study into international stagger in the Australian context involved several adjustments to the *Screen Digest* methodology. The *Screen Digest* analysis, while pointing to some intriguing trends, is limited by the concentration of the period under examination and the narrow number of films in circulation during this time. In order to more fully understand Australia's position in the global scheduling of film releases, an expanded data set (as outlined above in the 'Parameters of the

study' section) was collated. The resulting analysis confirmed several key aspects of the *Screen Digest* study but, in its detail, also revealed some unexpected trends.

As demonstrated by the *Screen Digest* survey, the Australian data set found that, over time, films arrive in Australia from a much wider range of opening sites, a trend particularly apparent with US titles. This shift on the part of US distributors from favouring a domestic premiere to a broader range of locations for launching their movies before they arrive in Australia is a significant feature of the Australian data set. A noticeable reduction in US premieres occurred across this period (down from 112 in 1989 to 55 in 2009). Instead, an increasing number of films produced in the United States are granted premiere releases outside North America, indicating a considerable revision of the 'meta-geography' of the film industry (Lewis and Wigan, 1997). So, although these releases are often clustered endemically (Belgium/France/Switzerland or Russia/Ukraine/Kazakhstan), just as often the release clusters seem to bear no geographic or temporal logic (Indonesia/Italy/Singapore/Spain/USA or Canada/Iceland/Spain/Turkey/USA). Given Australia's consistent historical reliance on a large slate of films from the United States (125 films of the top 150 in the sample had US production involvement in 2009, 127 in 1999 and 123 in 1989), it is now possible to see Australia as one among many competing possible premiere locations, each of which bears an unspecified relationship with the others. This would also seem to indicate that studio P&A would, of necessity, need to be more globally oriented with less opportunity for localisation.⁴

However, despite this significant increase in simultaneous releasing across a range of international locations, the majority of these global launches did not feature Australia as a premiere location. So, although the number of films premiering in Australia and opening here as part of a global day-and-date release campaign has risen by a small margin, this figure is far outweighed by the large number of films that opened previously in a global simultaneous release that did not include Australia. One notable feature of the recent data, which does not appear in the Top 150 films, is the significance of the Australian market for Bollywood films. For example, although they do not all appear in the top 150 films for 2009, data were found for a total of six Indian films released in Australia.⁵ Four of these were simultaneously globally released (including in Australia). And they were – by a considerable margin – the fastest films to arrive on our shores. The average number of days it took for these Indian films to arrive in Australia was 1.5.

If we take the top 150 films in each of the years of comparison, we can see that films are arriving on Australian screens from their international release locations more quickly. There is a steady reduction in the median interval describing the international stagger between Australian and the world over the period. The top 50 box office earners have arrived steadily more quickly from 1989–2009. Again, this is a significant observation, as it strongly suggests that the contraction of international stagger actually precedes the introduction of digital technologies and the vagaries of official and unofficial internet delivery.

Another fascinating apparent anomaly produced by the study is the revelation that the most significant acceleration occurred in films in the lowest section of the top 150 box office performers. But, for all the films for which quality information was located (beyond the top 150 films in each year), the statistics are curiously ambivalent. The overall release interval actually increased rather than decreased

between 1989 and 1999 – from an average of 163 days in 1989 to 204 days in 1999 before decreasing again by 2009. This would suggest the bottom tier of films – those in the lowest 50, for instance – is slowing down the overall speed of releasing, thereby confirming that there remains a polarisation of release patterns between the top and bottom of the box office listings. Although it was not a relevant feature of this data set, 1999 was also a strong year for reissued releases, which would act as a further form of temporal anchoring. These results suggest that seasonality (in which specific titles are intended to play at particular times of the calendar, such as holidays) still has some bearing on the temporal texture of the release slate.

Industry analyst Sandy George concurs that the particularity of national and local calendars (particularly the non-alignment of holiday seasons) weighs upon the industry's expectations for genuine simultaneity of release: 'Increasingly, to fit in with international marketing campaigns and to guard against piracy, high-profile films are launched simultaneously throughout the world, although busy holiday periods such as Christmas are still preferred for the release of blockbuster titles.' (George, 2008) Further analysis of the data at the level of specific release dates is warranted to test this conclusion.

Like most industry forecasters, George identifies new ancillary streams – especially in the home entertainment market – and the consumer expectations deriving from these opportunities as exerting the most pressure on global cinema scheduling:

Cinemas show films before those films are available on television or on other home entertainment formats and this has helped them stay in business. However, as broadband speeds improve and computers and televisions converge, it will be increasingly feasible to download high-quality material to view at home. These new technologies combined with the desire for instant gratification mean simultaneous release is inevitable, for some films at least. (George, 2010)

Shuker and Smith (2010) similarly suggest it is consumer practice and expectations that have put pressure on windows more generally: 'Maintaining windows has grown more difficult as consumers have grown accustomed to an array of devices that make it easier to watch movies whenever and wherever they want.' In their account, it is the pace of the consumer's mobility – from device to device – that is of paramount concern, rather than the pace of movement of the films from territory to territory. Brian Lowry (2010), writing about the issue of release windows for the movie industry journal *Variety*, speculates that audiences are segmenting along these lines: 'Those who rush out to see movies right away, and everyone else, more content to take them in on a big beautiful TV.' For Lowry, there are audiences who are highly motivated by instantaneous gratification (the demanding early adopters) and those who are happy to wait (but who presumably expect to pay less if they do).⁶

Table 2: International stagger (Australia)

<i>Total films</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2009</i>
Number	150	220	200
Average gap (days)	163	204	98
Top 150 films ranked by box office earnings			
Average gap (days)	163	133	72
Median	132	97	41
1–50 (average)	104	64	24
51–100	135	117	70
101–150	299	218	123
Top 150 films ranked by stagger (fastest to slowest)			
1–50 (average)	53	32.5	4
51–100	132	98	35
101–150	307	267	92
No. of releases 30 days and less	11	21	63
No of releases 365 days and more	11	10	6
Australian premieres	2	2	6
No. of Australian/global simultaneous releases	3	4	8
No. of simultaneous releases not including Australia	1	13	35
US premieres	112	96	55
Canada premieres	7	7	2
UK premieres	3	6	14
Europe premieres	17	15	14
Asia premieres	0	6	7
Other	5	1	9

Source: Primary Data collated from IMDB, MPDAA, AFI Research Collection. *Source:* Primary Data collated from IMDB, MPDAA, AFI Research Collection.

In this context, it is plainly in the interests of theatre owners to tighten windows between international releasing but maintain control over the window from theatrical to ancillary. This task is a day-by-day proposition, as the technical and legal environment changes apace. On 7 May 2010, for example, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved a request by the MPAA to permit recent movies to be sent directly to households prior to their release on DVD or Blu-ray by allowing media companies to encode their video programming with a signal that would prevent consumers from recording content. This initiative has been widely reported as signalling the end of significant windows between theatrical and ancillary releasing, despite assurances made by the FCC: ‘We are convinced that MPAA [Motion Picture Association of America] member companies will not make any substantial changes to the release window in the absence of adequate protection of high-value content.’ (Bond, 2010)⁷

These developments suggest widespread challenges for distributors, too. Creating market anticipation of forthcoming titles requires delicate management. If expectations for a specific title are too high, consumers may well prefer to accelerate access to content by whatever means possible – rather than waiting to pay a premium for the experience. Sony Pictures Releasing managing director in Australia, Stephen Basil-Jones, recently noted:

We’ve got to recognise that the consumer and general public want films and filmed entertainment much quicker and on different platforms these days. And the fact is they are going about it in illegal ways to get it. We have got to get smarter about delivering material to them in a timely fashion. (Basil-Jones, quoted in Kroenert, 2010)

Audience demand for synchronous access to content has been most noticeable in the organisation of global serial TV episode transmission dates. The final episode of *Lost* screened recently in the United States (and seven other countries) at 2.00 p.m. AEST. Channel 7 delayed its telecast of the program until 8.30 p.m. the following day, arguing that the familiar timeslot would better suit viewers. Dedicated followers of the show, many already familiar with online access to the program (*Lost* is widely viewed online and in 2009 was reportedly the second-most downloaded TV program in the world), let their keyboards do the talking:

‘Ridiculous,’ says comedian Wil Anderson, a *Lost* die-hard. ‘If I was going to watch it on Wednesday, I could not go on the internet at all for two days. I will definitely have watched it by Wednesday.’ (Griffin, 2010)

These observations of media audience behaviour suggest, not for the first time, that the particularity of the contemporary cinema experience no longer lies in its exclusive priority position in a distributed sequence but in its differentiation as one of many temporally aligned events. In other words, what is important to understand may no longer be the velocity of temporal differentiation in the global consumption of films (how long it takes for films to arrive in Australia), but rather the changing terms of temporal engagement altogether. We need to move from distinguishing how a cinema event is located in a ‘before and after’ experience of global media to understanding the temporal quality of events experienced as simultaneously ‘here and there’. As the Australian data suggest, some aspects

of this shift have been foreshadowed prior to the advent of online technologies emerging during a period of multi-screen cinema expansion in the 1990s.

Conclusion: Just you wait

In *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern (1983) describes the proliferation of inventions that emerged between 1880 and 1914 (including the cinema), that transformed the temporal experience of the world: ‘Acceleration technologies speeded up the tempo of current existence and transformed the memory of past years into something very slow.’ (1983: 309) It is possible to see, in a present period indelibly marked by the advent of radical new film technologies, similar arguments that depict theatrical film exhibition as a dawdling heritage media. For many, the prospect and practice of digital distribution have caused the differentiation of time to be understood in the film industry in increasingly narrower calibrations. But it is not simply that the tempo of industry processes is ‘speeding up’, or that there has been a shortening of socially anticipated durations. What is most interesting in understanding the recent history of the distribution of films is to examine the changes that have occurred in the organisation and form of temporal differentiation. Changes to the form of differentiation in the contemporary film industry can be observed in terms of both the emergence of new methodologies of temporal ordering (alterations to the ‘before and after’ sequencing of film releases, one following the other) and also in changes occurring at the intersection of time and space in which coexistence also contains a temporal differentiation (as evidenced in the ‘here and there’ particularities and exigencies entailed in simultaneous releasing).

Both multiplexes and digital distribution share, to varying degrees, a challenge to linear conceptions of temporal differentiation in the cinema. Instead, they rely on the contingent combination of both relational and local time, the tactical interplay of non-synchronised diversities of ‘different’ times in seemingly simultaneous events. Managing the relationship between relational and local time in the experience of cinema consumption is of particular importance for a location like Australia, which in distribution terms is geo-temporally ‘ahead’ of other film markets and yet historically has frequently lagged ‘behind’. One key task for the continued study of film distribution, then, is to move on from the belief that we are living *in* different times to the fundamental understanding that we are living instead *with* different times.

Notes

- ¹ In part as a result of these exclusions, and also because the originating data set is different, the total number of films surveyed in this study differs from the aggregated annual release figures provided by Screen Australia in *Get the Picture* (2010).
- ² An even earlier progenitor of these observations is Marshall McLuhan and his notion of the ‘global village’, which similarly rests on an argument about the role of the media in producing the sense of transnational synchronicity: ‘Post-literate man’s electronic media contract the worlds to a village or tribe where everything happens to everyone at the same time: everyone knows about and therefore participates in, everything that is happening the minute it happens. Television gives this quality of simultaneity to events in the global village.’ (Carpenter, 1960: xi)
- ³ The third *Matrix* film (*The Matrix Revolutions*, 2003), for example, was released synchronously on 5 November 2003 in 60 countries, which specifically included the cities of Los Angeles

(6.00 a.m.), New York (9.00 a.m.), London (2.00 p.m.), Moscow (5.00 p.m.), Sydney (midnight), and so on.

- ⁴ As early as 2001, US distributors began closing down their overseas offices on the basis that local promotion campaigns could now be fully incorporated into US domestic marketing budgets and strategies (Dunkley and Harris, 2001: 1).
- ⁵ The MPDAA records 35 Indian titles that were theatrically released in Australia in 2009, accumulating almost \$5.5 million box-office gross. This number of titles constitutes more than 10 per cent of the national total of commercial releases (see Walsh, forthcoming).
- ⁶ The assumption that contemporary consumers are of the belief that *time* is indicative of relative value (rather than *convenience*, for instance) remains to be tested.
- ⁷ A couple of recent examples suggest an imminent period of unprecedented experimentation as distributors test the window between theatrical release and ancillary formats. The Sex Pistols documentary *Who Killed Nancy?* (Parker, 2010) will be released theatrically in New York with same-day iTunes and VOD distribution. The producers of the still-unmade documentary *The Bengali Detective* (Native Voice Films) will partner with the film site Babelgum to advance release online prequel episodes leading up to theatrical release in 2011.

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