Editorial: Synthesising film, representation and othering: film festivals and nation branding redux

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1 Introduction

The clutch of papers in this special issue shares some very common traits and in striving to address the aims of this initiative, some unexpected themes consistent across all offerings came to the fore. Most vividly, all papers examine the links between film, tourism and representations of the exotic other in Asia-Pacific contexts. What this implies is difficult to substantiate but perhaps one thing it emphasises is that Asia-Pacific remains one of the most desired canvasses upon which imaginaries of people and place can be developed. Furthermore, the region is emblematic of the practice that writer and academic Edward Said referred to as orientalism; a Eurocentric practice deeply tied to conceptualisations of people and place that are tinged with colonial-era sensibilities and with the tendency to diminish, downplay and frame the other as inferior, strange or lacking in sophistication.

Visual anthropology as a concept is trifold, including:

1   the visual itself

2   the human

3   the study of pre-and post-screening experiences influencing visual imaginaries.

Aligning tourism anthropologies with visual anthropologies is a *fait accompli* on account of the obvious complementarities in the use of the visual. That film festivals have long historical roots in being used as a tool for cultural diplomacy and nation branding, among others, is something that the collection of papers did not address directly and its inclusion

in this synthesis seems pertinent. A film screening embedded in a festival environment, the perceptions of international audiences, the different readings of the film by different audiences and discussions following the screening, expressing wider understandings of culture are aligned with the special issue thematic and therefore is used as a scaffold for this synthesis and illustrating wider understandings of visual and tourism anthropologies. The screening of Simon Verhoeven's 2016 German film *Welcome to Germany* at the German Film Festival in Australia, as well as an analysis of the panel and audience discussion underlines this reading.

Accordingly, this paper is demarcated into two constituent parts:

1   concisely synthesising the papers in this special issue

2   aligning film festival discourse as a missing and under acknowledged link in the formation of contemporary representations of people and place.

2   Synthesis

The special issue begins with a close reading of the 2016 film *Tanna*, set in Vanuatu and filmed totally in a local dialect and with untrained, home-grown indigenous actors exclusively (Cheer and Herrschner). While strictly not an ethnographic film, but instead one that leverages ethnographic sensibilities, the film was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2017 Academy Awards, among other international accolades. Setting *Tanna* apart is the sensitive treatment of people and place, and the elevation of indigenous people and culture beyond oversimplified and hackneyed conceptualisations of them as people from a primordial past. *Tanna* was never intended to be a global sensation and instead, it was motivated by the filmmakers' affection, admiration and respect for the people. This is emblematic of the film taking the largely unconventional and unprecedented approach of adopting a local dialect, spoken only in the vicinity of where the film was shot. The island of Tanna is one of Vanuatu's most coveted destinations on the basis of the rich cultural heritage *in situ*, as well as containing one of few active volcanoes in this part of the Pacific islands region. Most importantly, *Tanna*'s rendering of indigenousness portrays a sophisticated and complex people who in many ways are like the rest of us – seeking love, belonging, happiness and respect. In achieving this, the film is a benchmark of the productive and effective portrayals of the exotic other, eschewing the practice of Said's orientalism.

Mostafanezhad, Coates and Coates' offering to this collection leverages the global juggernaut that Chinese tourism (domestic and international especially) has become. A consequence of growing affluence and the oft cited rise of the middle classes has seen a growing desire and capacity to travel, so much so that now Chinese outbound travel is dominant in just about every destination around the globe. Consequently, the greater presence of Chinese nationals around the globe has brought into question whether destinations are 'China ready' and in particular whether understandings of the contemporary Chinese traveller are in synchrony with the vastly rapid intergenerational and intra-generational changes that have taken place. Film is argued to have a vital role to play in this because external perceptions of China may not have caught up with the rapid transformations that have ensued. Contemporary Chinese desires to be seen as sophisticated, modern and worldly beyond the agrarian context of decades gone by, and the current context of communism, hyper-industrialisation and human rights, is evident

on the world stage. This extends toward geopolitical representations of the country where the narrative from many in the West is of China as a threat and interested only in its economic expansion.

Three Chinese films are chosen to underpin this offering: *If You are the One* (*Feicheng wurao*, dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2008), *Finding Mr. Right* (*Bei jing yu shang xi ta yu*, dir. Xue Xiaolu, 2013) and *Lost in Thailand* (*Ren Zai Jiong Tu zhi Tai Jiong*, Xu Zheng, 2012). The critical discourse that emanates highlights a disjuncture between the real and the perceived insofar as the country and its people are concerned. Indeed, contemporary mobility of Chinese nationals is an imprimatur of modern China and that this underlines outbound travel and the formation of new geographic frontiers that were hitherto deemed impossible on account of entrenched political and economic constraints. However, rapid progress in the last couple of decades has meant that along with China's growing economic and political global footprint, international travel by Chinese nationals is arguably the most outward demonstration of the country's rise. This has meant that recasting China and Chinese people has come about rapidly with Chinese film at the forefront of this project. Tourism accords its participants bragging rights and status and in contemporary China, this is highly valued. Consequently, Chinese film has embraced travel narratives and the blending of the real and the reel is central to the development of representation narratives.

Higgins-Desbiolles and Canosa shift the geographic gaze of this collection to Myanmar and the women known as the long neck women. Shalom Almond's film *My Long Neck* is described as blending ethnographic and auto-ethnographic elements and provides insights in how the exotic other manages to exist as an exhibit of curiosity within the human zoo. The long neck women in many ways are emblematic of the shifting ground in Southeast Asia where development and modernisation trajectories continue to intensify leaving traditional people at odds and between two, and sometimes more worlds. Tourism thrives off the human zoo for it is what underpins 'product' that destination developers and marketers keenly seek to mine and shape into items on a traveller's itinerary. Moreover, the human zoo often provides the unique value proposition that marketers employ to boost destination differentiation and competitiveness.

In *My Long Neck*, the native is the gazer and is in charge of the viewfinder, turning the tables and interviewing tourists, enquiring into what brings them to this part of the world and why they do the things they do. This twist to the participatory style of filmmaking introduces a richness and texture that radiates authenticity and sensitivity, counterpoised against the common practice where the agency to self-represent tends to be removed from the other, leaving them with little meaningful agency. The question of who speaks and whose view is authoritative is raised by Higgins-Desbiolles and Canosa and signals that film can be a powerful medium to enable muted voices to be heard, and for the gazer or tourist to rethink their own conceptualisations of people and place. The other question raised concerns the value of tradition, more so the extent to which the traditions of the other are monetised and how this trickles through and down. As Higgins-Desbiolles and Canosa argue, films like *My Long Neck* invite us to consider the wider ramifications of tourism that leverages the exotic other and the extent to which human zoos might be morally and ethically problematic.

The final two contributions once again journey onto other geographic locations within Asia: Japan and Indonesia. Crowe-Delaney weaves a journey through rural Japan,

referencing the rural decline that is apparent and how this intersects with ageing. Indeed, rural Japan and its urban city counterparts are portrayed as being worlds apart. Crowe-Delaney employs the Japanese film *Okuribito*, (*Departures*, 2008, Western release title), set in Yamagata Prefecture as the basis for her analysis. *Okuribito*, references historic tourism within which narratives of nature, space and place are foregrounded with concerns about authenticity emphasised. The Japanese aesthetic is fundamental to representations of the country and its people and is often underpinned by a restrained sensibility, compact, sturdy and dependable, overlaid with a rich cultural and spiritual heritage. The staged authenticity of rural lifestyles is foregrounded in *Okuribito* and these align with global conceptualisations of a Japanese rural idyll. Yet this under acknowledges the many tensions and constraints on rural Japanese lifestyle; the very things that touristic representations seek to smooth over in the interest of destination development. Thus, the distinction between the staged authentic and the existential authentic is accentuated.

In her paper, Britta Boyer, a designer and filmmaker by trade and now academic researcher, leverages her eye for design in linking film as a digital interlocutor for community-based tourism. The idea of digital ethnography and visual narratives is used to interrogate the connections between sustainable development, fashion and tourism, and the vexing alignment this has with Balinese traditions and spirituality. Boyer analyses her own film, *Paradise Paradigm* that laments the transformation that the last few decades have brought to the island and its people. *Paradise Paradigm* is critical of externally-driven change seeing it as a mixed blessing where the costs of change have mostly been shouldered by the Balinese, while non-Balinese have plundered and profited from paradise. Representations of Bali and Balinese people are very often laden with references to paradise, friendly people and the Land of the Gods; great copy for marketers and developers, however eliding the realities and struggles on the ground. The despoliation of Bali and its people is the othering that *Paradise Paradigm* interrogates and the film seeks out local voices to articulate the consequences that have emerged. Balinese agency to reject and/or mitigate further transformation is almost negligible as the economic development machine rolls on. *Paradise Paradigm* is a complex and challenging work, yet evocative in its pleas to bring back the old Bali and that people power might be the best avenue for this to occur.

3   Focus: contemporary representations of Germany and Germanness

International imaginaries of nations and representations of people have become increasingly important as global competition for trade intensifies, and in particular for tourism, arguably one of the underpinnings in the establishment of a nation's brand [Goldsmith and Crawford, (2014), p.88]. In 2017, Germany topped the Anholt-GfK Global Nation Brands Index with notable improvements in global perception of its culture, governance, and people (Anholt, 2017b). Simultaneously, the country is experiencing increasing international visitation, in particular toward cultural tourism with visitation from Australia increasing from 0.7 million in 2013 to 0.8 million in 2016, and forecast to reach 1.1 million in 2030 (Deutsche Zentrale für Tourismus, 2017). Integral to the country's most recent tourism campaign 'Germany – simply inspiring' are visual impressions, ranging from peer created social media, to destination marketing and non-touristic films (ibid).

Films, as impressions of culture, society and politics of a country are much more than destination branding, which as a form of nation branding, falls under the wider umbrella of diplomacy and foreign affairs – a topic particularly complex in Germany, where imaginaries, or *Deutschlandbilder* are often disproportionately dominated by Bavarian culture and World War II (Wood, 2017; Denscheilmann, 2013). In an Australian context, World War II has dominated imaginaries of Germany (Nickl et al., 2018). In recent years, the refugee debate has emerged as a major topic in both countries, highlighting the contrasting approaches evident and a connection exemplified by Frank-Walter Steinmeier (President of Germany) when he opened the Asia Pacific Regional Conference in Perth in 2017 stating a desire to: "compare notes on the issues confronting both our countries as well as our regions in Europe and the Asia Pacific" (Steinmeier, 2017).

Figure 1 Advertising banner from the German Film Festival 2016 (see online version for colours)

Note: Used with permission from the Goethe-Institut Australia.

Drawing on longitudinal research that leverages the German Film Festival in Australia (Figure 1) and organised by the German cultural institute, Goethe-Institut from 2002–2016, representations and discourses surrounding the German refugee debate in Australia are shifting, most notably where imaginaries of the Holocaust and Hitler have moved from Germany as perpetrator and victim, to the Germany of today as human rights champion. However, the emergence of a post-post-war Germany is evident as themes highlighting lessons learned from the Holocaust and subsequent *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has emerged. The process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* describes the continuous struggle to grasp and deal with Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust. This changing imaginary has had a considerable impact in transforming the way that Germans as the other, are conceived of around the globe and the way in which Germany represents itself through its cultural diplomacy efforts. Cultural diplomacy describes the way nations showcase themselves through art, literature, exhibitions and film and is closely linked to concepts of public relations and soft power, as coined by Nye (1990).

4 Film festivals and cultural diplomacy

National film festivals curate images of a nation overseas and such mechanisms embody the process of cultural diplomacy where nations set out to portray themselves in a positive light via bilateral and people-to-people exchanges. With a long and rich cinematic history and a thriving film industry, Germany produces more than 150 feature

lengths productions annually, many of which can be read as commentary on German social and political developments (Mai and Winter, 2006). Film festivals emerged in the early 20th century with an objective similar to that of world fairs, to represent nation, culture and technological advancements on an international stage (de Valck, 2010). The power of film was amply illustrated in Germany during the Third Reich where cultural production and film were powerful tools for the dispersal of propaganda (Rentschler, 1996). After World War II, film festivals regained popularity, with the first post-war film festival opening in 1947 in Locarno, Switzerland. This was also closely linked to European post-war recovery and film festivals soon became an integral part of the Cold War, showcasing Western and Eastern cultures and political systems (Frost, 2017). Today, film festivals are an important part of cultural diplomacy and bilateral relations between countries and have become a major force for nation branding (Ooi and Pedersen, 2010).

Figure 2   Directors of the German Film Festival 2017 in Bavarian dresses during the shooting of the trailer (see online version for colours)

Note: Used with permission of German Cinema Melbourne.

When reading film as a virtual journey, film festivals are comparable to a travelogue, displaying the many aspects of the country to potential visitors. Germany is a popular destination for Australians with the Oktoberfest and Berlin ubiquitous on the agenda for many travellers. The German Film Festival in Australia represents a varied image of Germany with many films set in small towns and rural areas, and on a variety of contemporary themes (Figure 2). Since its inception in 2002, three main thematic categories have governed the selection of films;

1   the Third Reich

2   the GDR (East Germany)

3   migrant directors showcasing Germany's multicultural society (Herrschner, 2015).

As the least known facet of Germany, the latter attracts much attention, and the refugee 'crisis' of 2015/16 endures as a topic of considerable public interest. It is this that highlights the shifting perceptions of Germany; once tainted by the Holocaust and now emerging as a country that has actively learned the lessons of the past and determined to

atone for this. This becomes clear in films curated and embedded in events at film festivals, and in discussions concerned with human and environmental rights and social justice (Herrschner, 2018).

5   The German Film Festival in Australia

From 2002–2016 the German Film Festival in Australia was a flagship event for German culture in Australia. Organised by the Goethe Institute – the official organisation representing German language and culture abroad – it was an integral part of Germany's cultural diplomacy. The event was sponsored by German companies in Australia and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2016, the Goethe Institute Australia underwent a change of CEO's and in 2017 the decision was made to discontinue the German Film Festival. Multiple factors contributed to this decision, especially the desire to shift toward a different approach to cultural diplomacy more focused on partnership and exchanges than representation.

Following the 2017 announcement that the German Film Festival would cease, the German community in Melbourne and Sydney were quick to mobilise volunteers to curate their own version of the German Film Festival in Melbourne. German Cinema Melbourne was formed, emblematic of a diaspora response to continue using film as a mechanism for bi-lateral cultural diplomacy as a form of civil society diplomacy. The festival relied heavily on donations from the wider Melbourne-based German diaspora. This community effort was underlined by a strong desire to reconnect to German heritage and to represent an image of Germany that beyond the hackneyed stereotypes of beer, *Lederhosen* and Hitler. Qualitative approaches were employed including panel and viewer discussions at the event. Focusing on the event, rather than the film alone can facilitate an understanding of the particular readings of the film through the eyes of foreign audiences (Figure 3). In the case of German Cinema Melbourne, interrogating Verhoeven's *Welcome to Germany* and its subsequent panel discussion allowed for deep insights into Australian understandings of Germany's 'refugee politics' and of contemporary Germany in general.

6   Post-post-war Germany in Australia

The comedy *Welcome to Germany* or *Willkommen bei den Hartmanns* by Simon Verhoeven tells the story of a well-off family in Munich who decide to host Diallo, a young refugee from Nigeria. Stereotypes, cross-cultural misunderstandings and grotesquely exaggerated characters form the basis of much of the humour that served to lighten the atmosphere of what is otherwise a serious topic of discussion. This is covered from a range of aspects, from firm supporters of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's *Willkommenskultur* (welcome culture) who reinvent their own Germaness in response to Diallo's arrival, to the extreme right-wing political group PEGIDA. Besides the two extremes, the film also includes the more mundane fears of cross-cultural contact, cultural change and terrorism. Such symbolisms underline issues of relevance in the contemporary German context.

Figure 3   Image used with permission from Lago Film (see online version for colours)

Since 2016, 'refugee politics' in Germany has much discussion of Germany in Australia. In light of Australia's own, significantly contrasting 'refugee politics', the theme provides space for discussion not only in the public realm, but also in political debates where both governments critique the other's approach to refugees. While the more conservative and right-wing discourse in Germany mentions Australia's point-based approach to immigration and off-shore processing of refugees, Australia references Germany and its can-do approach to allowing refugees to settle in Germany. *Welcome to Germany* provided fertile grounds for debate for both German and Australian audiences as evidenced in ticket sales. More distinctly it highlights the contrasting political milieu and for many Germans in Australia, this is seen as evidence of a changed German nation.

The screening of *Welcome to Germany* was followed by panel discussions with representatives from two non-government organisations involved in refugee rights in Australia. This emphasised the role of Germany as human rights advocate, as well as the changing role the Holocaust plays in international imaginaries of the country. Honesty to address uncomfortable truths and allowance for an open debate was mentioned by panellists in response to the film. Whilst the film was criticised in Germany for its focus on representations of the two political extremes in the 'refugee debate': that is, ardent supporters of a *Willkommenskultur* and those adamantly against it. However, audiences and panellists read the film differently with their imaginaries describing a country where discussion and debate tends to be more straightforward. Further, they agreed that such a production would never occur in Australia and that Australia is a long away from seeing the 'refugee crisis' in the same light. Here, Germany maintains the moral high ground and is more aware of its global responsibilities and the urgencies related to social justice and humanitarianism. This perception is supported by Simon Anholt's Good Country Index, where Germany ranks 5th in total and Australia 23rd out of 163 countries (Anholt, 2017a). In discussions with the audience about their motivation to see the film and interest in Germany, traditional topics such as beer, Oktoberfest and sausages were mentioned sparsely, as compared to the motivation to experience Berlin's lifestyle and to be 'immersed in the history in Germany'. This illustrates that the process of

Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Germany influences contemporary perceptions of the country and its people.

7 Conclusions

The intersection between film and tourism and the extent to which film underlines the development of representation of people and place is resoundingly in the affirmative. The collection in this special issue invites a more thorough and expansive investigation of the ways by which the representation project can more sensitively and adroitly construct imaginaries of people and place that are fecund and respectful. A prime example is the Holocaust in film and how it acts a visceral reminder of Germany's past as well as post-war Germany. This post-post-war Germany is evident in the perception of Germany's approach to refugees and the discourse surrounding the topic in Australia during the German Film Festival. As a form of dark tourism, this *Vergangenheitsbewältigungs* or responsibility tourism is represented in the popularity of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, but also in the audience involvement and the popularity of films such as *Welcome to Germany*.

Film supports the notion, that cinema indeed is a virtual journey that may inspire corporeal travel, a relationship at the core of this endeavour on film and representations of another. Analysing film and in this case a film festival allows for the development of nuanced insights and unexpected readings of international film. This outlines the impact of the audiences' own reading of a film and the cartographic agency of film when charting imaginaries of unknown countries and their peoples. This two-fold relationship between audience and film also forms the nexus of visual anthropology and tourism anthropology where the interconnectedness between the two influences the development of representations of people and place.

Acknowledgements

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