



The Films of IVAN SEN

The Films of Ivan Sen Symposium
INSPIRE Centre, Building 25, Teal Room
Telita Street, University of Canberra
9:30am–5pm, Friday July 10 2015

Program

- 9:30 – 10.05 Welcome**
Smoking Ceremony
Welcome to Country
Nick Klomp (DVCE) introduction and welcome.
- 10.05 – 10.30 Keynote**
Ross Gibson
- 10.30 – 10.50 Morning Tea**
- 10.50 – 11.50 Q&A with Ivan Sen**
Conducted by Susan Thwaites
(with chance to screen some excerpts from current film)

11.50 – 1.00 Session One

Jane Mills, ‘*Toomelah*: Resurrecting Borders’

Tim Thomas, ‘Film industry v/s film maker – a comparison of two production methods leading to an opportunity to test the *auteur* theory with reference to *Beneath Clouds* and *Toomelah*’

1.00 – 2.00 Lunch (Light lunch provided)

Including lunchtime screening of *Bluey*, recent award winning short film by Darlene Johnson (guest speaker).

2.00 – 3.15 Session Two

Mark Eby, ‘Engaging with an Indigenous Community: Comparing the filmmaking approach of *Toomelah* with *Aliko & Ambai*’

Gillian Cowlshaw, “Letter to Ivan Sen from a struggling fan”

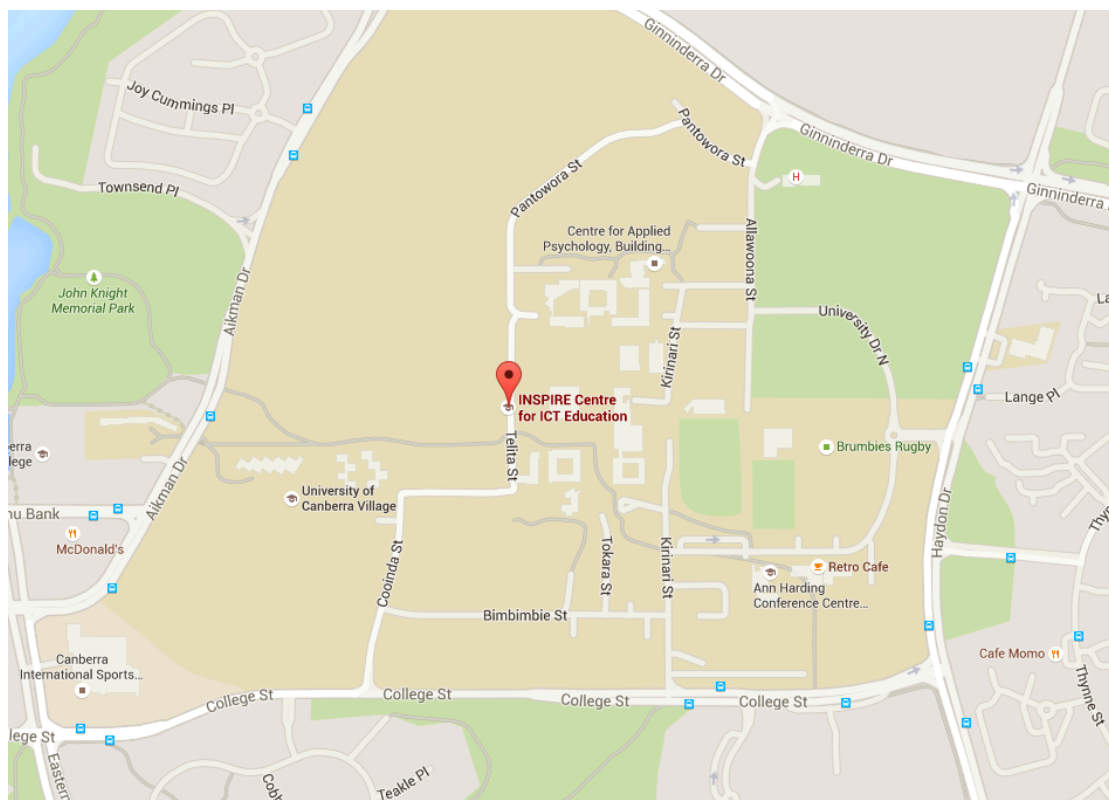
3.15 – 4.00 Q&A with Darlene Johnson

Conducted by Ross Gibson

4.00 – 4.15 Afternoon Tea

4.15 – 5.00 Wrap up

Summing up discussion and dialogue with Ivan Sen



Abstracts and short biographies:

Toomelah: Resurrecting Borders

In this paper I explore how Ivan Sen's film *Toomelah* (2011) amounts to an affirmation of the values of intercultural dialogue between peoples who do not always see the world in the same ways as each other. Operating at the intersection of two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, this film speaks to Indigenous/settler, local/national and international/global cinematic relations, and negotiates such binarisms to visualise a disruptive, postcolonial space where, as Laura U. Marks writes, 'non-Western cultures erupt into Western metropolises and repressed cultural memories return to destabilize national histories' (2000). Sen's visualisation of the land and landscape of Indigenous peoples whose sense of belonging to a nation has long been denied or ignored and often enforced by a policy of cultural genocide, contests a prevailing orthodoxy that insists upon blurring or dismantling borders. I argue that *Toomelah* makes a strong argument for the resurrection of Indigenous national and cultural borders.

Bio:

Associate Professor Jane Mills, PhD, teaches film in the School of the Arts & Media, at UNSW. She has a production background in journalism, television and documentary film, and has written and broadcast widely on cinema, media, screen literacy, censorship, feminism, sociolinguistics and human rights. Her current research projects concern screen literacy learning, cosmopolitanism, geocriticism and sojourner cinema. Jane is the Series Editor of Australian Screen Classics (co-published by Currency Press and the National Film & Sound Archive). Books include: *Jedda* (2012); *Loving and Hating Hollywood: Reframing Global and Local Cinemas* (2009); *The Money Shot: Cinema Sin and Censorship* (2001).

Title: Letter to Ivan Sen from a struggling fan.

I'm an envious ethnographer. I see Ivan Sen's films as achieving more power and truth than much ethnographic writing. When I saw *Toomelah* in 2011, I almost wept, but also wondered, and wrote to the director as follows:

Dear Ivan,

After watching the Australian premier of your film last night (Saturday 18th State Theatre), I asked you in the Q and A how the Toomelah people had responded to this confronting portrait of their community. You replied that what is confronting to some is everyday life to others, and that your sister, (who I imagine to be a resident of Toomelah), laughed all the way through. I applaud your desire to capture the nature of everyday human existence, especially the kind from which others turn away in shocked embarrassment. But laughed? At conditions that nearly drove a small child to suicide? About women who seemed bereft of feeling, human attachment or impulses of

care? About men who seemed emotionally disabled, painfully flailing about for some meaning in the world, finding domestic drug dealing a little space to feel like men? [etc]

I believe we need to ask these difficult questions and others — whether there is a source of hope in the film; who laughs and who weeps on seeing *Toomelah*; what the audience's response and responsibility are. These questions are about political intentions and effects, real questions to which I do not know the answers. I will discuss them in more detail in the Symposium.

Bio:

Gillian Cowlshaw's ethnographic work explores structural and interpersonal relations between Indigenous and other Australians. Publications include the historical ethnography *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas* (Michigan U.P. 1999), *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race* (Blackwell, 2004) and *The City's Outback* (UNSW Press, 2009), an adventurous ethnography in the suburbs. The 2004 book, which won a NSW Premier's Award, is set in Bourke, NSW. Gillian Cowlshaw, University of Sydney

Engaging with an Indigenous Community: Comparing the filmmaking approach of Toomelah with Aliko & Ambai - Mark Eby PhD Candidate, RMIT

A film critic has written that in Ivan Sen's feature film, *Toomelah*, there are issues

“from deaths in custody to education to cultural extinction, unemployment, substance abuse, stolen generations.” But although these are all woven into the fabric of the film, Sen has no interest in setting an agenda. “I wanted to make a film that was truthful to a little boy's experience of his world.” (Bunbury, 2011)

This presentation will explore the idea that being truthful to experience creates an immediate intimacy and establishes a highly effective connection with an audience. I will compare Ivan Sen's approach in *Toomelah* to the one used for the feature film *Aliko & Ambai*, shot last year in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and still in post-production. Most feature film productions in Papua New Guinea, including this one, have been tied to communication for development (C4D) funding with specific agendas for addressing social issues. But *Aliko & Ambai* in a similar way to *Toomelah*, engaged with an indigenous community and worked with untrained actors. The presentation will also discuss how the approach was different because of the C4D agendas, including capacity building and training for young PNG filmmakers and how creative collaboration was facilitated with the aim of connecting with local audiences. Ivan Sen's approach to filming *Toomelah* might be

considered more intimate and effective and could also be used in PNG, making films that are truthful to young people's experience of their world.

Bio:

Mark Eby has worked as an independent filmmaker for over 15 years. He is currently a PhD candidate in Media and Communication at RMIT University in Melbourne. The working title of his project is Facilitating Narrative Film Production in Papua New Guinea: A case study of *Aliko & Ambai*. He has been the lead researcher on two Pacific Media Assistant Scheme (PACMAS) Innovation Grants funded by ABC International Development and AusAID. He is currently a research assistant on the Mobilising Media for Sustainable outcomes in the Pacific Region ARC Linkage project at RMIT. His work explores the possibilities for local film production and distribution through village cinemas in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

Title: Art and Industry – A Discussion of Process

In 1993 I went on a road trip with the visual artist Michael Riley. I was part of a film crew helping Michael make a documentary, *Quest for country*, about time and how people use it. As a technician used to working in an industrial context I found myself presented with an alien approach to time that felt irresponsible and chaotic. It took me until Dubbo to understand that Michael was demonstrating a fundamental difference in how time is used. Not better, not worse, just different.

In contrast in 1992 I worked on the Donobri International Communications production *Jindalee Lady* directed by Brian Syron.

Comparing and contrasting the industrial machine used to make *Jindalee Lady* with the lived experience of making *Quest for Country* provide a point of comparison with Iven Sen's *Beneath Clouds* and *Toomelah*.

Bio:

Dr Tim Thomas teaches Media Production in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra. From 1986 to 1998 he worked extensively within the Film and Television industry, working his way through the camera department hierarchy, and when he wasn't doing that he sold pots and pans. In 2000 he started his second childhood studying visual art at the ANU National Institute of the Arts. As an academic his research interests include the nature of stories and the part played by a work of art as it brings stories into time.