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RESEARCH PAPER

**Looking at *The Lives of Others*:  
How the German film industry transformed its  
domestic box office fortunes**

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## **Looking at *The Lives of Others*:**

### **How the German film industry transformed its domestic box office fortunes**

#### **ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:**

*This research paper presents an examination of the average annual box office reception of domestically produced films in Germany, focussing particularly on how Germany's local film industry has significantly increased its domestic box office share during the past decade, and what lessons the less robust Australian film industry could learn from the healthier German model.*

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**NB:** *Throughout this paper, whenever German films have been named their titles have been given in German only (with just a few exceptions); this stylistic decision was made as my paper is focussed on German domestic box office success as opposed to the international success of German cinema, and so I wanted to recognise the original names of the films in question.*

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Australia and Germany are both nations of cinemagoers, where "going to the movies" remains a very popular pastime. Australia, with its population of 22.3 million people, had approximately 85.9 million cinema admissions in 2012, and overall box office takings of almost \$1.13 billion AUD.<sup>1</sup> In comparison, Germany (with its much larger population of 81.8 million people) had around 135 million cinema admissions in the same year, with overall box office takings around the €1 billion mark (approximately \$1.44 billion AUD).<sup>2,3</sup>

Yet, despite some similarities between these two cinema-loving nations, there is one area in which the reception of films in Australia and Germany differs greatly - local films at the box office. While one nation seems to be producing local films that achieve regular success at home, the other nation sometimes seems to be struggling to get its domestically produced films seen by large numbers of its own people. Almost **42%** of all film titles (or 220 films in total, including fiction features and documentary features) released at the cinema in 2012 in Germany were local German productions (or qualifying German co-productions with other countries), with the box office share for domestic films accounting for almost a fifth of all cinema admissions, at **18.1%** (or 24 million cinemagoers).<sup>4</sup> Yet only **6%** of all films (or 18 films, including fiction features and documentary features) released at the Australian box office last year were Australian productions (or qualifying Australian co-productions with other countries), resulting in only **4.3%** of box office takings in Australia last year being for Australian films.<sup>5,6</sup>

It is important to note here that German films have not always performed so well domestically; in 1998, the German box office share for locally produced films was only 9.5%, and it wasn't until a decade ago that German films regularly began commanding more than 15% of their country's annual box office share.<sup>7</sup> **Since 2003, however, the fortunes of German films at the local box office have improved greatly, and the aim of this research paper is to deduce *why* and *how* –** why it is that Germans regularly go and see German films at the cinema, and how did the German film industry turn itself around so that now almost a fifth to a quarter of all box office takings annually are for domestic films? Ultimately, I hope that the answers to these questions may lead to a greater understanding of how the less robust Australian film industry may tackle the apparent reluctance of many Australians to see domestically produced films at the cinema.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/wcboadmission.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/german-box-office-2012-record-408404>

<sup>3</sup> Australians pay far more to attend the cinema than do Germans; the regular admission price for an adult to see a film at a multiplex cinema chain in Germany is around the €8.50 mark (or \$12.25 AUD), while the average multiplex cinema admission price for an adult in Australia is now as high as \$18 AUD. Main sources: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/pain-in-the-box-office-for-aussie-movie-fans-20110719-1hndy.html> and [http://www.ffa.de/downloads/marktdaten/3\\_Besucher\\_Umsatz\\_Preise/3.4\\_Entwicklung/eintrittspreise\\_08bis12.pdf](http://www.ffa.de/downloads/marktdaten/3_Besucher_Umsatz_Preise/3.4_Entwicklung/eintrittspreise_08bis12.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Source: [http://www.ffa.de/downloads/marktdaten/1\\_Fuenf\\_Jahre\\_Blick/07bis12\\_jahresabschluss.pdf](http://www.ffa.de/downloads/marktdaten/1_Fuenf_Jahre_Blick/07bis12_jahresabschluss.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/wcfilmxcountry.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Source: <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/wcboshare.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Source: [http://www.ffa.de/downloads/publikationen/ffa\\_intern/FFA\\_info\\_1\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ffa.de/downloads/publikationen/ffa_intern/FFA_info_1_2012.pdf)

This paper addresses many of the different factors that have contributed to the relative growth in box office success of domestic films in Germany during the past decade or so, and investigates a number of different hypotheses on the subject, as follows. Do intrinsic language and cultural factors play any role these days in the strong reception of local films in Germany? Could the difference in reception of domestic films also be attributed to major differences in film marketing strategies in Germany in the past decade? How much of a role does the strong financial support provided by both the various State and Federal Governments in Germany play in the success of that country's films? Are the predominant film genres produced in Germany a factor in those films' box office success, and, subsequently, is it possible that Germany's Government funding agencies have more of a "commercial bent" now than in previous years? Does Germany have more of a "star system" than Australia, leading to greater reception of star-driven domestic films at the German box office? What other factors might have led to the continued growth of the German film industry on the home front during the past decade?

If I can identify what it is that enables German films to perform relatively successfully locally, the transformation of Germany's domestic box office fortunes during the past decade and the ongoing success of German cinema may provide real guidance to an Australian film industry that sometimes seems a little eager to wave the white flag in its struggle with the annual onslaught of Hollywood films at the box office.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

German films had a couple of bumper years at the domestic box office in 2008 and 2009. For the first time ever, in 2008, more than a quarter of all films seen at cinemas in Germany that year were German films, with the total box office share for domestically produced films standing at a very healthy **26.6%**. In 2009, the upward trend continued, with German films accounting for a whopping **27.4%** of all ticket sales at German cinemas that year. During that same period, Australian films accounted for only 3.8% and 5% of the total Australian box office respectively.<sup>8</sup> But German films have not always performed so well domestically; in 1998, the German box office share for locally produced films was only 9.5%, and it wasn't until a decade ago that German films regularly began commanding more than 15% of their country's annual box office share.<sup>9</sup> Since 2003, however, the fortunes of German films at the local box office have greatly improved. In 2012, four German feature films drew more than one million audience members each to the local box office. As far as Government film-funding bodies, such as Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA) and FilmFernsehFonds Bayern (FFFb) are concerned, any locally produced film that attracts more than a million audience members at the box office in Germany can be considered a great success. However, on the other hand, a film that is produced as an ultra-low budget production for very little money, but which attracts only 200,000 cinema goers for example, can also still be seen as a success in terms of box office reach and return on investment (ROI).<sup>\*</sup> This relative measure of success has not changed particularly in the last decade or so in the eyes of the FFA, in a country where actual audience numbers have always been the preferred figure for determining a film's relative box office success, rather than simply looking at pure financial returns at the box office (or ticket sales, in other words), as is more often the case in Australia when box office success is discussed.

So, was there a particular turning point for the German film industry? In 1996 and again in 1997, German films did comparatively very well at the local box office (taking more than 15% of the market share both years, compared with the usual share of around 10%, which was standard for cinema admissions for locally-produced films in Germany until about a decade ago). Importantly, 1996 and 1997 saw the release of a number of films by up-and-coming German directors and actors, and German audiences obviously responded positively to these new, local box office drawcards. In 1996, *Das Leben ist eine Baustelle*, directed by Wolfgang Becker (who went on to direct the hugely popular and internationally successful *Goodbye, Lenin!* in 2003) and starring the popular Jürgen Vogel, and *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*, starring the perennially popular Til Schweiger and Moritz Bleibtreu, were both released and performed notably well at the local box office. In 1997, *Comedian Harmonists*, starring the popular Heino Ferch, and *Winterschläfer* (directed by Tom Tykwer, who would go on to enjoy much future success at both local German and international box offices with, among others, *Lola Rennt*, known in English as *Run Lola Run*, in 1998, and *Cloud Atlas* in 2012), both stood out among the German offerings at local cinemas and

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<sup>8</sup> Source: <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/australianshare.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Source: [http://www.ffa.de/downloads/publikationen/ffa\\_intern/FFA\\_info\\_1\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ffa.de/downloads/publikationen/ffa_intern/FFA_info_1_2012.pdf)

dominated the box office takings for domestic films that year as they attracted what were considered larger than usual audiences in that era.

Figure 1

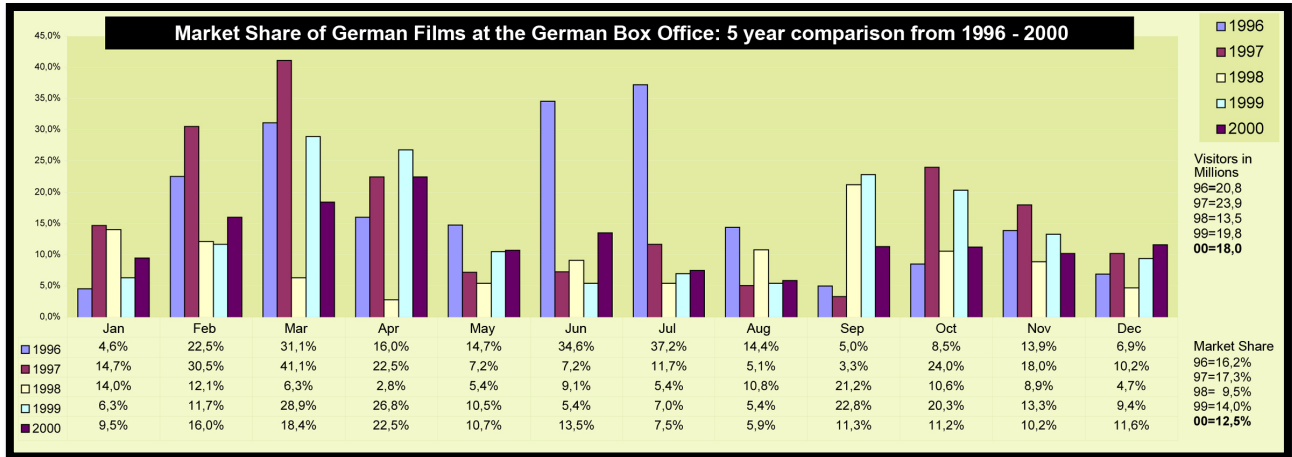


Figure 2

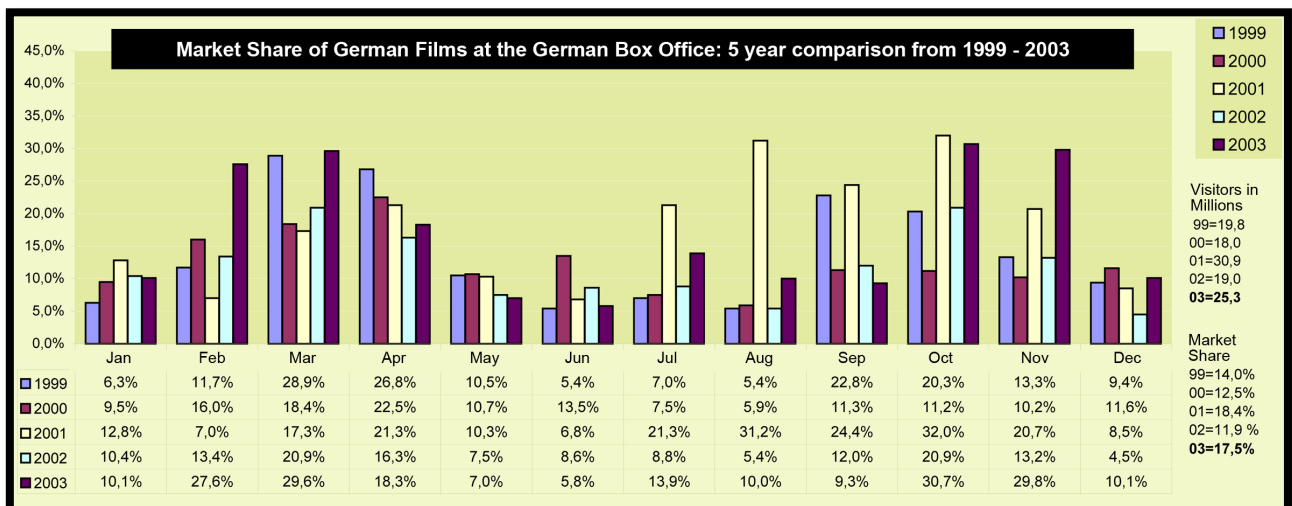


Figure 3

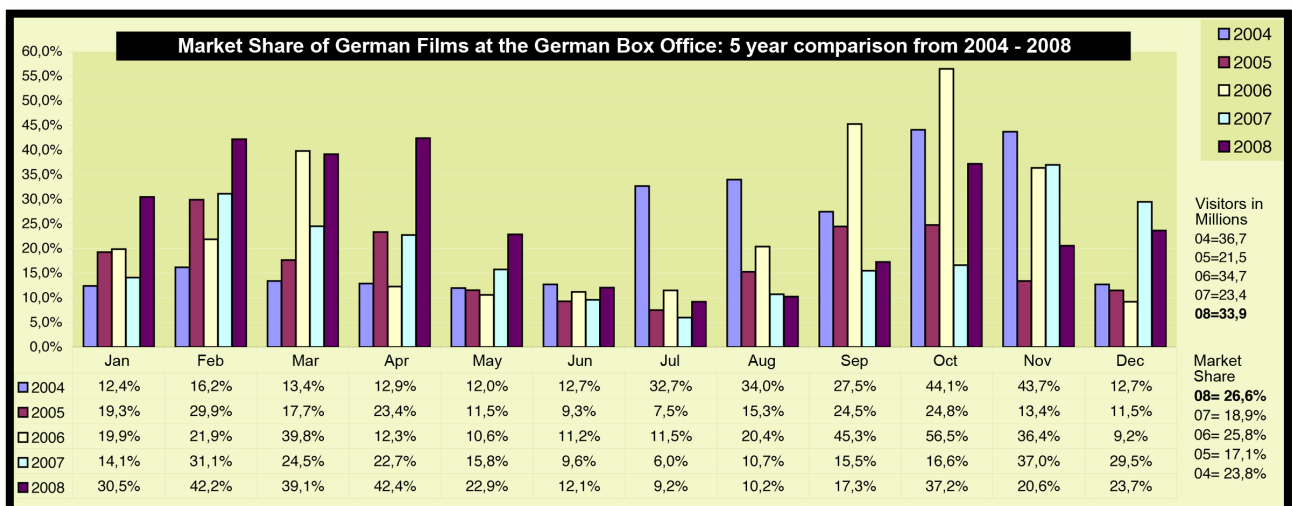
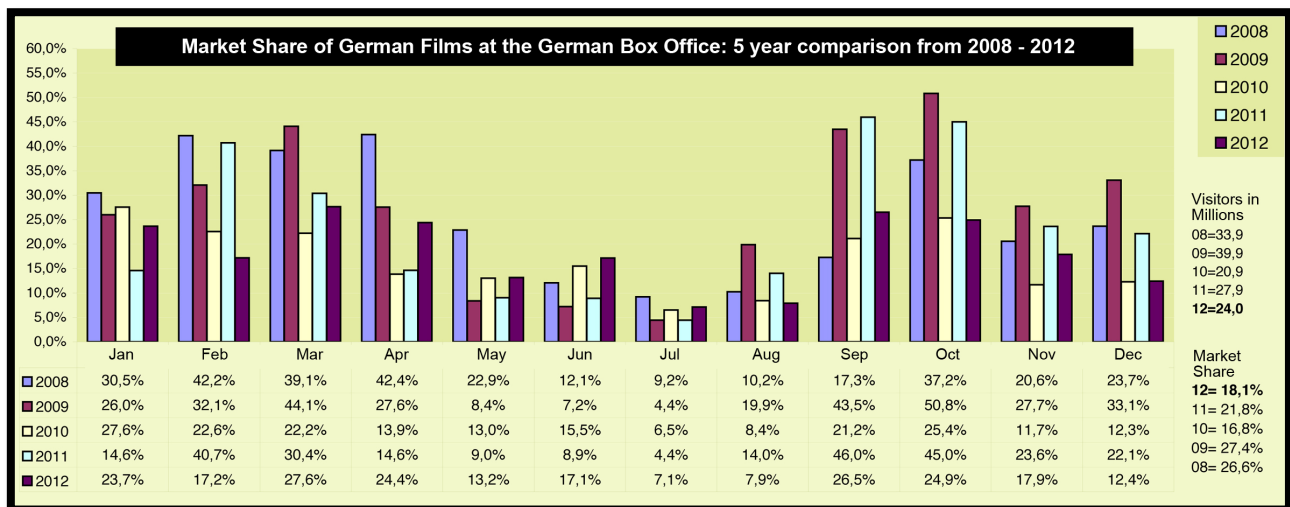


Figure 4



**Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 (above):** Every year, the German Federal Film Board or Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA) releases statistical graphs showing the market share of German films at the German box office (focusing on a 5-year comparison). These graphs paint an interesting and clear picture of the year-on-year growth in popularity of German films at the domestic box office since 1996, with 2006, 2008 and 2009 remaining the strongest years to date for German films screening at home.

Another historical factor to be considered when looking at Germany's changing box office fortunes is that it is now more than twenty years since reunification. The real change in the public's willingness to embrace German films at the box office started to happen almost a decade after reunification, when enough time had passed for a range of institutions and programs providing financial support and promotion for German films to have been established – a range that has only grown more significant in the past decade. This, in turn, has enabled an increased volume of film production in Germany, and this increased output of films has also equalled an increased diversity of the films that are being made and seen in Germany, out of which a growing number of crowd-pleasers and box office successes have emerged.

**\* NB:** In terms of the average budget for German films produced in 2013, under €1.5 million (approximately \$2.2 million AUD) is low budget, up to €3 million (around \$4.45 million AUD) is considered mid-budget, and anything above €5 million (approximately \$7.4 million AUD) falls into the high budget category for German films, according to the FFA and FFFB.

## **FILM EDUCATION & TRAINING IN GERMANY, & THE GERMAN FILM ACADEMY:**

According to Gabriele Pfennigsdorf from FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, the incredibly strong industry education and training for filmmakers that is available in Germany today has been one of the most important factors in determining the increase in local box office success for German films during the past couple of decades.

Since reunification over 20 years ago, a wider variety of excellent training opportunities at a number of top film schools has been on offer for prospective German filmmakers. Germany now boasts a whole generation of post-reunification filmmakers who have come out of these different film schools, and who can deftly handle and confidently manage a broad spectrum of genres. In other words, many German filmmakers are now potentially more "film literate" than some of their predecessors and, to put it simply, are subsequently producing what many consider to be better (or at least more popular) films.

There are now six official dedicated film academies in Germany, at which the annual competition for places is very high and the expectations placed on graduates are similarly elevated. These film academies are as follows:

### ***The Academy for Film and Television "Konrad Wolf", Potsdam***

Germany's oldest and biggest film academy is based in Potsdam, in the grounds of the world-famous Babelsberg Film Studios. The academy, which was founded in East Germany in 1954, offers courses in eleven practical subject areas for over 500 students annually.

[www.hff-potsdam.de](http://www.hff-potsdam.de)

### ***The German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB)***

This academy is located in the heart of Berlin, in the Sony Center at Potsdamer Platz, alongside the Deutsche Kinemathek. It was founded in 1966 in West Berlin, and is the alma mater of several talented, internationally recognised auteur German filmmakers, such as *Das Boot* director, Wolfgang Petersen.

[www.dffb.de](http://www.dffb.de)

### ***The University of Television and Film Munich***

Several Academy Award winners, including Caroline Link (director of *Nirgendwo in Afrika*) and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (director of *Das Leben der Anderen* or *The Lives of Others*), graduated from this prestigious school. Founded in 1966, the University of Television and Film Munich is internationally renowned and develops the talents of 200 students annually.

[www.hff-muenchen.de](http://www.hff-muenchen.de)



### ***The Film Academy Baden-Württemberg***

The Film Academy, based in Ludwigsburg, is a publicly funded institution belonging to the State of Baden-Württemberg, which covers the complete repertoire of practical film studies.

[www.filmakademie.de](http://www.filmakademie.de)

### ***Hamburg Media School (HMS)***

In the heart of Hamburg (known as Germany's "media city"), the HMS offers courses in screenwriting, production, directing and cinematography. There are six places available every year in each of the four subjects. Like the other German film academies, the HMS, founded relatively recently in 1991, complements theory with practical classes and film productions.

[www.hamburgmediaschool.com](http://www.hamburgmediaschool.com)

### ***Academy for Media Arts Cologne (KHM)***

Each year, approximately 200 students acquire specialist knowledge in feature film production, screenwriting and documentary film production at the Academy for Media Arts in Cologne.

[www.khm.de](http://www.khm.de)

In addition to the six official film academies, there are now over 30 universities, art colleges and technical colleges throughout Germany that offer an interesting range of film-related courses in motion picture sciences, media, design, visual communication and acting.<sup>10</sup>

The increased opportunities for high quality education and training in film production in Germany has also coincided with the establishment a decade ago of the official "industry guild", **the German Film Academy**, or **Deutsche Filmakademie**, founded in 2003 in Berlin. The Deutsche Filmakademie exists to provide German filmmakers with a forum for discussion and a way to promote the reputation of German cinema, both nationally and internationally, through publications, presentations, discussions and regular promotion of the subject in German schools.<sup>11</sup> It is an independent organization and is financed by membership dues. Full members must be recommended by at least two filmmakers who themselves have already been accepted as full members of the Academy.

Since 2005, the winners of the German Film Prize, or Deutscher Filmpreis (known colloquially as the Lolas), have been selected by members of the Deutsche Filmakademie. With a cash prize of €3 million, it remains the most highly endowed German cultural award. In 2008, the Academy launched its successful Internet service, *24 – Das Wissensportal der Deutschen Filmakademie* ([www.vierundzwanzig.de](http://www.vierundzwanzig.de)). The portal provides an insight into film production, with the hope of making the work of independent filmmakers in Germany more accessible, transparent and accountable.<sup>12</sup> The work of the Deutsche Filmakademie in establishing this online portal, as well

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<sup>10</sup> Source: <http://www.young-germany.de/topic/study/courses-degrees/film-ready-for-the-red-carpet>

<sup>11</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche\\_Filmakademie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutsche_Filmakademie)

<sup>12</sup> Source: <http://www.vierundzwanzig.de/>

as its involvement with the Lolas and its work in schools and the media, has certainly had an influence on increasing the profile and awareness of German filmmaking and cinema in the minds of the German public during the past decade.



*This may not entirely be “where the magic happens”, but it may at least be where it begins...*

**Figure 5 (above) and Figure 6 (below):** The German Film and Television Academy Berlin, or Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (DFFB), centrally located in the Filmhaus at Berlin’s famed Potsdamer Platz (alongside Kino Arsenal and the Deutsche Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen), is one of Germany’s top film schools and has produced many award-winning, successful alumni.



## **FILM FINANCING & GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF THE GERMAN FILM INDUSTRY:**

The last couple of decades have seen Germany completely reinvigorate its Government film funding strategies, so that the country could now be said to have some of the most healthy and robust film financing models and streams of Government funding support in Europe, if not the world (apart from the "mega" film industries of the USA's Hollywood, China and India).

The official over-arching Government film funding body, administered by Germany's Federal Government, is the **German Federal Film Board** or **Filmförderungsanstalt (FFA)**. The FFA was initially established in 1968 to support filmmaking in West Germany, and the Government body has been overhauled several times since then (most obviously in the wake of German reunification in 1990).<sup>13</sup>

The FFA's current functions include enforcing measures to improve the structure of the German film industry and to promote German cinema both nationally and internationally, supporting the national economic affairs of the German film industry, improving foundations for the distribution and market driven exploitation of German cinema, at home as well as abroad, and working towards an alignment and coordination of measures for film financing support offered by Germany's Federal and State Governments.<sup>14</sup>

More specifically, the areas of work in which the FFA currently offers concrete financial support for the German screen industries are as follows:

- Production Funding Support (Feature Film and Television), through the Deutscher Filmförderfonds
- Film Sales & Marketing Funding Support
- Support for Film Theatres / Cinemas
- Video / DVD Distribution Funding Support
- Script Development Funding Support
- The French-German Agreement (encouraging a high volume of official co-productions between France and Germany)
- Eurimages
- Funding Support for Advanced Education and Training
- Research
- Development of Television Suitable Cinema Projects

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<sup>13</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema\\_of\\_Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Germany)

<sup>14</sup> Source: <http://www.ffa.de/index.php?page=profil&language=en>

Last year, the total expenditure in subsidies by national film funding bodies and the federal states in Germany amounted to €343.54 million, the majority of which was used for production support.<sup>15</sup> It is widely acknowledged that, without such strong, diversified government funding and film financing opportunities, the growth of German cinema during the past decade would not have been feasible and the wide variety of films currently being produced in Germany would also not be evident.

One of the most important changes to film funding models in Germany in the past decade or so was the establishment of the *Deutscher Filmförderfonds'* automatic funding system, which has played an elementary role in enabling many films with high production costs to be realised. The main production incentive now provided by the FFA is the **German Federal Film Fund** or **Deutscher Filmförderfonds** (DFFF), which was established in 2007. The DFFF is a grant given by the German Federal Commissioner for Culture and the Media and, to receive the grant, German film producers are required to fulfil different obligations, including a cultural eligibility test. The fund offers a total of €60 million a year to German film producers and co-producers, and individual grants can amount to up to 20% of the approved German production costs. For a project to qualify for a DFFF grant, at least 25% of the production costs must be spent in Germany (or only 20% if the production costs are higher than €20 million). The DFFF supports film projects in all categories and genres.<sup>16</sup>

In 2011, almost 30% of all film titles released at the box office in Germany were local German productions (or qualifying German co-productions with other countries), with the box office share for domestic films standing at 21.8%.<sup>17</sup> But, interestingly enough, unlike in some other territories, in Germany there are no Governmental guidelines or regulations in place to ensure that a certain percentage of films released at the box office each year in Germany are German films. Instead, release strategies and, subsequently, the number of German films that German distributors release to their domestic market each year, are determined by the current state of the "free market". However, Government film funding agencies, such as the national FFA and Bavaria's own **FilmFernsehFonds Bayern** (FFFB), do support German cinema operators by offering substantial premiums to cinemas that feature noteworthy or standout programs (which could mean, for example, German film programs or particularly strong children's cinema programs). Perhaps as a result of the financial support offered by the Government to German cinema operators, the operators are able to be profitable and remain in operation when exhibiting "smaller" or locally produced films, rather than rely solely on exhibiting Hollywood blockbusters or "tent pole" films.

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<sup>15</sup> Source: *German Film Scene* (2012: 7 May 2013), published by German Films

<sup>16</sup> Source: [http://www.dfff-ffa.de/content\\_dfff/dfff\\_leitfaden.shtml?language=en](http://www.dfff-ffa.de/content_dfff/dfff_leitfaden.shtml?language=en)

<sup>17</sup> Source: [http://www.ffa.de/downloads/marktdaten/5\\_Marktanteil\\_deutscher\\_Filme/fuenfjahresvergleich\\_07bis11.pdf](http://www.ffa.de/downloads/marktdaten/5_Marktanteil_deutscher_Filme/fuenfjahresvergleich_07bis11.pdf)

Unlike in Australia, many successful local films released in Germany are co-productions with other countries; in 2012, more than a third of German films released at the box office were co-productions.<sup>18</sup> The Government funding agencies in Germany are currently investigating the extent to which co-productions between Germany and other countries have contributed to the overall increase in the box office success of German films at home during the past decade. However, while the willingness of German production companies and the German film funding agencies to invest in co-productions may have led partly to greater domestic film success in recent memory, it is often the case that the most successful local films at the German box office are either comedies or family films, which on the whole are produced entirely in Germany and are not actually co-productions.

Besides Federal, State and regional film agency support, funding by television channels is another important source of film financing in Germany, with support from Government agencies often dependent on the agreed financial participation of a TV broadcaster.<sup>19</sup> However, while it may seem to be a matter of course now for film production companies in Germany to secure co-production funding by a television network (comprising, most often, of a broadcast rights deal) during the financing stage of a project, it is certainly not a compulsory element that the film production companies must have in place in order to qualify for Government support. Frequently, television broadcast rights are simply included as part of an overall rights deal with film distributors. It is true, however, that a substantial television broadcast deal can be very important for the financing of a feature film in Germany and this is certainly the case with low budget films or films by up-and-coming filmmakers, who otherwise wouldn't necessarily be able to secure any theatrical distribution deals (as is also the case in Australia). Television broadcast co-production deals therefore probably have the most resonance and importance in Germany for low budget, independent films, which would otherwise not be made.

The myriad methods for successfully financing film productions in Germany through such avenues as film distribution (and prospective funding from distributors), video / DVD production firms, co-productions between numerous States and with TV networks, and the many Government funding institutions, can certainly be identified as one of the most important factors in determining German cinema's increased domestic box office success. Australia's film financing agencies and screen industry bodies would be well advised to look more closely at Germany's various film funding models and government film financing structures, with an eye to replicating similar increased success for domestic films at the Australian box office.

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<sup>18</sup> Source: *German Film Scene (2012: 7 May 2013)*, published by German Films

<sup>19</sup> Source: *German Film Scene (2012: 7 May 2013)*, published by German Films

## **DOMESTIC MARKETING & PUBLICITY CAMPAIGNS FOR GERMAN FILMS:**

As any good Hollywood film producer knows, a marketing campaign can be one, if not *the* most, of the decisive factors in determining how well a film will perform at the box office. As is the case in all fields of business, promotion and marketing is a vital part of any product release; Hollywood film studios will invest in legendarily expensive marketing campaigns to maximize revenue early in a film's release cycle (today, the larger Hollywood marketing budgets tend to equal anywhere between half to three times the film's actual production budget!).<sup>20</sup>

However, the marketing budgets enjoyed by Hollywood studios are rarely, if ever, enjoyed by films produced in countries such as Australia and Germany. The much smaller film marketing budgets seen in Australia and Germany mean that locally produced projects can never be as widely promoted as their Hollywood counterparts and, subsequently are at an immediate disadvantage when it comes to their ability to attract a substantial audience and experience box office success. To put it very simply, why would an audience go and see a film if they are not even aware that the film is currently screening in cinemas?!

In Germany, the FFA and other Government funding agencies have actively identified marketing as one of the most important factors in driving people in Germany to the box office to see local films and, as such, marketing potential and costs are now considered as part of most funding decisions made by these agencies. There are a number of successful, powerful film distribution companies in Germany that now also have access to Government funding support, and this has certainly translated into much more money being available today for marketing campaigns for German films than was previously available. Additionally, dedicated film marketing companies, such as the Hamburg based boxoffice Filmmarketing GmbH, now operate in Germany with the sole purpose of providing more targeted and strategic film marketing campaigns (based on knowledge of target groups and extensive audience research and analysis).<sup>21</sup> Consequently, today's marketing campaigns for German films are also more professional, more strategic and more successful in their ability to attract local audiences to the box office.

Particular avenues for the marketing and publicity of German films at home have now been identified as being more successful and reaping more rewards (or having a better return on investment, or ROI) than others, and these avenues include:

- Prominent outdoor advertising throughout towns and cities
- Print advertising (there has been a noticeable increase in the prevalence of film focussed print publications in Germany during the past decade)
- Targeted marketing aimed at certain core audience groups (such as teenage girls) via social media channels, online portals and sponsorship / contra deals with retail outlets

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<sup>20</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film\\_promotion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_promotion)

<sup>21</sup> Source: <http://www.bofm.de/home.html>





*German Film Marketing 101 with Til Schweiger, aka if it ain't broke, don't fix it...*

**Figure 7 (above) and Figure 8 (below):** Til Schweiger's films *Keinohrhasen* and *Kokowääh* (both of which were written, directed and produced by the German cinema powerhouse, who also starred in them) were two of the most successful German films at the local box office in the past decade. *Kokowääh* in particular, attracted more than 4.3 million viewers to German cinemas on its release in 2009. The fact that identical posters were used for both of Schweiger's successful sequels to his original box office smash hits shows that Schweiger and his team at Barefoot Films understand their market very well, and know exactly when to change marketing tactics and when not to!



## **A LOOK AT FILM GENRES IN GERMANY:**

The German films that have had success at the local box office in the past few years have come from a wide range of genres, from romantic comedies (*Rubbeldiekatz*, *Kokowääh* and *Keinohrhasen*), historical dramas (*Quellen des Lebens* and *Das Leben der Anderen*), co-production blockbusters (*Cloud Atlas*), culture clash comedies (*Türkisch für Anfänger* and *Almanya: Willkommen in Deutschland*), romantic dramas (*Sommer vorm Balkon*), action thrillers (*Schutzensel*), documentaries (*Pina*) and family films (*Famous Five*, *Ostwind* and *Hanni & Nanni*). It remains very important to film funding bodies, such as the FFA, that there is a wide range of genres on offer amongst the German films released locally each year. As Gabriele Pfennigsdorf from FilmFernsehFonds Bayern (FFFB) explained, *"No funding agency wants to support predominantly only one genre, and all of the agencies enjoy supporting projects with a diverse range of themes."*

But, as Berlin based scriptwriter and film critic Andreas Resch has observed, *"If there is one genre that functions best in an economic respect in the German cinema landscape, it is the comedy."*<sup>22</sup> As a general rule, locally produced comedies fare particularly well at the German box office, while thrillers and whodunits do not attract such substantial audiences. One of the most obvious reasons behind this disparity of success for different genres could be that the (often very popular) actors who appear mainly in cinematic comedies are rarely seen on German television (with the exception of Michael "Bully" Herbig), and so German audiences embrace the opportunity to see these comedy stars on the big screen. On the other hand, whodunits or "Krimis" are currently a dime a dozen on German television, remaining the most popular of all TV drama genres. The prevalence of well-made whodunit series on TV, complete with complex plots and high production values, may negate the need that German audiences may otherwise feel to seek out such dramas at the cinema.

As to the question of whether or not the German Government film funding agencies have more of a commercial skew today than in previous decades when it comes to funding films from certain genres, the commercial potential of a film is certainly an important criterion now when it comes to making funding decisions, as is the cultural impact that a project may have. Naturally, the funding agencies welcome opportunities to fund films that present a significant potential to reach a wide audience at home. However, this has always been the case as far as the funding agencies are concerned and, according to the FFFB's Gabriele Pfennigsdorf, the economic and artistic potential of projects vying for funding are considered to be of equal importance and do not cancel each other out when the agency's funding decisions are being made.

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<sup>22</sup> Source: <http://film.fluter.de/de/507/film/11217/>



## **GERMAN STARS & BOX OFFICE DRAWCARDS:**

It cannot be said that Germany has anywhere near the type of "star system" that is seen in Hollywood, or even France or India (in Bollywood). Any semblance of a "star system" that does exist in Germany is very conditional and hinges more on the appeal of certain films (and film genres) than particular stars. That said, there are a couple of standout exceptions to this rule... namely, Herrn Schweiger and Herbig, aka **Til Schweiger** and **Michael "Bully" Herbig**.

Whenever the most successful German films from the past decade are discussed, the names of these two gentlemen arise. In 2011, *The Hollywood Reporter* quoted producer Boris Schonfelder as saying, "It's just a fact that any year you don't have a film by Til Schweiger or Bully, the box office goes down, the market share of German films drops and everyone gets worried."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Til Schweiger's most recent romantic comedy, *Kokowääh 2*, has proven to be another box office hit in Germany, already attracting more than 2.5 million viewers to the cinema this year alone.<sup>24</sup>

In terms of sheer box office power, Schweiger is Germany's most successful filmmaker. Since 1968, when the FFA started counting, no other German actor has drawn more people to the cinemas. He currently runs his own Berlin based production company, Barefoot Films, and, in recent years has released at least one box office success in Germany each year.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike Schweiger (who began his acting career in German television dramas), Bully Herbig began his career on radio, later moving into television (with his wildly popular comedy show *Bullyparade*) and then cinema. His 2001 film, *Der Schuh des Manitu*, was seen by over 11.7 million people in the German-speaking world, and remains one of the most successful German films to date.<sup>26</sup>

So why is it that Til Schweiger and Bully Herbig hold such particular appeal for German audiences? Is it because they seem to make films specifically for the domestic market, rather than also trying to ensure international box office success?

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<sup>23</sup> Source: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ktktk-98821>

<sup>24</sup> Source: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/german-box-office-til-schweiger-433179>

<sup>25</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Til\\_Schweiger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Til_Schweiger)

<sup>26</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Herbig](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Herbig)



*The Masters of the German Box Office – both Til and Bully are skilled at producing successful comedies that see them laughing all the way to the bank...*

**Figure 9 (above):** Til Schweiger (left) and Bully Herbig (right) are far and away the biggest box office drawcards in Germany, and are both multi-talented writers / directors / producers / actors. The box office appeal of these stars can "make or break" a year at the German box office; luckily for German film fans and for local box office statistics, both Schweiger and Herbig have new films being released in cinemas during the latter part of 2013.

Interestingly, films from the multi-talented, multi-tasking Til Schweiger and Bully Herbig (both of whom write, direct, star in *and* produce their box office smash hits), as well as those featuring the up-and-coming star, **Matthias Schweighöfer**, succeed primarily only in Germany, as they seem to have their finger on the pulse of exactly what Germans – and, in particular, young cinema-going Germans – want to see on the big screen. Their films are made first and foremost *by Germans for Germans*, and local audiences seem to respond in kind by throwing their support behind projects that cater for their needs and which are oriented particularly towards the German domestic market. Schweighöfer, Schweiger and Herbig's most successful films are also all comedies, tying neatly in with German audiences' strong preference for this genre of film. These popular filmmakers may not always garner a great deal of critical approval but they certainly appeal to German audiences and know how to draw the public to the cinemas.

Over the past couple of decades, Australia has produced numerous actors who could be considered bona fide stars or box office drawcards, such as Mel Gibson, Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman. However, unlike in Germany (where local stars like Schweiger, Schweighöfer and Herbig remain relatively unknown outside of their native country, as significant Hollywood success continues to elude them), most Australian stars readily make the transition to headlining Hollywood films (not least due to language and accent factors), after which time their box office appeal cannot be said to be entirely "local". It may be very difficult for the Australian film industry to ever combat the "talent drain" of Australian stars to Hollywood (especially as the

international success of Australian actors should always be applauded and encouraged, not discouraged!); the German film industry has not yet really had to contend with such a "talent drain", although certain German actors (such as Daniel Brühl and Diane Kruger) are now gaining more international attention and a higher profile in Hollywood films. It will be interesting to see whether or not home-grown German stars such as Til Schweiger and Bully Herbig do end up pursuing Hollywood success outside of Germany in future, and how this may in turn affect their strong appeal as German stars making films solely for German audiences.

It is also important to note here that some critics now argue that the German film industry has in fact become too reliant on a handful of stars for box office success these days. However, only time will tell if this is actually the case or not. What is already evident is that, as is the case in any film producing territory, the nurture and development of future "star" talent must be encouraged if the German film industry is to enjoy continuity of box office success.



*Take a plain white background, throw in a full-frontal shot of an eternally youthful and clean-cut Matthias Schweighöfer pulling a comical face, chuck in a couple of quirky sidekicks or cute potential love interests, add a title and tagline in red text and you've got a recipe for German box office gold, apparently...*

**Figure 10 (above):** Matthias Schweighöfer is currently one of the biggest box office drawcards in his native Germany, known for his many roles in successful romantic comedies and "Männerkomödien" (aka male-oriented comedies or "Bromance" films, as they are known in Hollywood). The strikingly similar nature of the three posters featured above, each advertising a comedy starring Schweighöfer, suggests that the marketing teams behind these popular films know exactly what German audiences want and expect to see from one of their favourite movie stars.

## POTENTIAL LINGUISTIC & CULTURAL FACTORS:

One hypothesis for the continued success of German films at the domestic box office is that Germans may still see themselves as quite culturally distinct from Americans (when compared, say, with how Australians view themselves). Therefore, it can be deduced that Germans may prefer to see their own lives, culture and language portrayed on screen more often, rather than just always taking in Hollywood films and a representation of "Ami" culture. Undoubtedly, there is a certain type of humour that succeeds only in its own language and in its country of origin, and this rule also applies to cinematic comedies. "Dialect" films (or films with scripts that employ a large number of idioms), such as the widely successful 2006 Bavarian language comedy, *Wer früher stirbt ist länger tot*, definitely belong to this category of comedy. Accordingly, in the case of certain films a direct correlation between language, culture and success at the box office can be established. But does a film's original language really play such a huge role in the popularity of that film, and do German audiences really prefer to see films originally produced auf Deutsch?



*German humour – it's not an oxymoron after all...*

**Figure 11 (above):** As has already been discussed, Michael "Bully" Herbig is one of the most successful German comedians of all time, and his second feature film, *Der Schuh des Manitu*, broke domestic box office records when it was first released in Germany in 2001. The huge appeal of Bully's comedies for many Germans can be traced back to just how "German" these films are – with recognisable German stereotypes and characters speaking Bavarian dialect, these films are clearly made for German audiences alone (rather than also being aimed at an international audience) and, subsequently, German audiences respond by rewarding Bully with great loyalty at the box office.

The dubbing industry in Germany is very strong, and nearly all foreign language films (including those from Hollywood) released at cinemas in Germany are synchronised or dubbed into German. Unlike Australian audiences (who tend to see any foreign language films that are released at the Australian cinemas with subtitling), German audiences are entirely accustomed to seeing (or hearing!) dubbed films. Whether a film is dubbed or not does not appear to be a real decision making factor for Germans at the box office; as far as German audiences are concerned, a good film is a good film – whether it is dubbed into German or not.

Many of the most successful German films that have been released in the past decade or so have dealt with difficult periods during Germany's past, such as *Sophie Scholl – Die letzten Tage* (the Third Reich), *Der Untergang* (the fall of the Third Reich and end of the Second World War), and *Das Leben der Anderen* (the Stasi in East Germany). While some German film practitioners have suggested that German audiences may feel obliged, due to a sense of national guilt, responsibility or social obligation, to view such historically significant and important films, other figures in the film industry, including representatives from the FFA and FFFB, reject this notion. Thus, while it is true that the German people have demonstrated willingness to address, confront, recognise and reflect upon their own history, both good and bad (the same of which cannot always be said of the Australian people and some of the less proud moments in this country's history) and the darker chapters of 20<sup>th</sup> century German history (including Nazism, the Third Reich and the Holocaust, and also the actions of the Stasi under the East German regime) continue to have enormous resonance and meaning for many Germans today -, as most German film producers understand, even with historical dramas, the quality of the script and the production plays the biggest role in determining a film's success.

It should also be noted here that, on the whole, historical or period dramas are very expensive to produce. As such, the bulk of German films that are released at the domestic box office each year are *not* in fact films that deal with such difficult periods in Germany's history; such films are actually less common at the local box office than their international success and award nominations would have an Australian audience (for example) believe, although they do tend to garner more of a presence on German television than they do at the box office.

## **CONCLUSION:**

From only 9.5% market share annually of the German box office in 1998 to an average of often well above 20% during recent years, it is evident that the German film industry has managed to turn around positively the domestic box office fortunes of German films within the past 15 years. Today, German audiences go to the cinema in ever-increasing numbers for a variety of reasons – most of which, however, have not changed particularly during the past decade or so. In terms of making a choice to go and see a German film at the cinema in particular, it seems that German audiences tend to do so when they are particularly interested in a certain title (as it has entered their consciousness via a successful marketing and publicity campaign), when a film seems to hit a particular nerve (in terms of its linguistic, historical or cultural context), because they want to laugh (and the film on offer is a locally produced comedy featuring intrinsically *German* humour), or simply because they want to see one of their own "local heroes" or favourite actors, such as Til Schweiger, Michael "Bully" Herbig or Matthias Schweighöfer, on the big screen.

Although a number of the Australian films that have had the most success at the Australian box office in the last 20 years (such as *Red Dog*, *The Castle* and *Muriel's Wedding*) have been films that have tapped into our national psyche and celebrated "Australianness" and the unique nature of our country and culture, in Australia we still often talk about a "cultural cringe", or the slight embarrassment that is felt at the representation of our own culture on screen. But perhaps cultural cringe is always going to be more obvious or evident when a country has emerged from being a colony settled by a "mother country" whose own culture was formerly imposed on the indigenous population as a "necessary" part of colonisation (as was the case with Australia and its relationship with Great Britain). The closest that Germany, once a colonial power in its own right, has come to having another country impose its cultural will on its local population can be seen in its relationship with America since the end of the Second World War and the implementation of the Marshall Plan, and the way in which American culture is sometimes simultaneously embraced *and* rejected by young Germans (possibly for this very reason). For Australians to truly embrace local films at the box office in the way that Germans have embraced their own films during the past ten years, I believe that we have to move beyond any lingering cultural cringe and really embrace what differentiates our culture from both that of Great Britain and Hollywood (or the United States).

Meanwhile, from my research, it is clear that there are a number of different factors that have contributed to the relative growth in box office success of domestic films in Germany during the past decade or so. These factors include:

- an increase in the availability and quality of education and training for filmmakers in Germany, and the subsequent increase in the quality of films that German film school graduates are producing and releasing to the domestic market;



- the establishment of an official "industry guild", the German Film Academy or Deutsche Filmakademie (which has in turn led to an increased awareness about German films and filmmaking in the minds of the German public);
- reinvigorated Government film funding strategies, and the current strength of the financial support provided for filmmakers by both the various State and Federal Governments in Germany;
- the establishment of the automatic funding system of the German Federal Film Fund or Deutscher Filmförderfonds;
- the financial support offered by Government funding agencies to German cinema operators which has, in turn, decreased the need of cinemas to rely solely on the exhibition of big Hollywood blockbusters in order to remain profitable;
- the successful financing of film productions in Germany through such varied avenues as film distribution (and prospective funding from distributors), video / DVD production firms, co-productions between numerous States and with TV networks, and the many Government funding institutions;
- the fact that marketing campaigns for German films have become more professional, strategic and successful in their ability to attract local audiences to the box office recently;
- the prevalence of local comedies in German cinemas (as this is by far the most beloved genre for German audiences at the box office);
- the overwhelming popularity of local German "hit makers", Til Schweiger and Michael "Bully" Herbig (as well as star-on-the-rise Matthias Schweighöfer), thanks to their willingness to produce films entirely targeted at a domestic audience (without also worrying about box office success internationally);
- intrinsic linguistic aspects (whereby certain films, particularly some comedies, succeed only in their own language and their country of origin); and
- the continued resonance of the darker chapters of German history, and the desire for many German filmmakers (and audiences) to explore such chapters cinematically.

The Australian film industry could serve to learn many important lessons from the more robust and increasingly successful German film industry. I believe that these lessons include:

- ensuring that there are ongoing opportunities for local film practitioners to gain solid, world-class **education and training** in the practical aspects of film production;
- increasing **Government funding initiatives** (including specific support for film marketing and for local cinema operators), which in turn leads to a dramatic increase in production levels and an increased ability to compete with Hollywood films at the box office;
- developing more visible, strategic and professional **marketing campaigns** for local films;
- encouraging a **variety of genres** at the box office, BUT particular focusing development and marketing efforts on those films with the greatest **commercial potential** (e.g. comedies and family films, in the case of Germany and potentially also Australia);
- encouraging and developing **"home grown" stars** who write, direct and produce (as well as act in) films specifically for a local audience;

- developing more projects that speak directly to a **local audience** (without worrying so much all the time about success in the international marketplace); and
- not being afraid to address on film certain **darker or more difficult chapters** of a nation's history, as audiences may actually want to see more films that speak the truth of what has really taken place on local soil throughout history.

Germany's local film industry has significantly increased its domestic box office share during the past decade, transforming its local profile and filmmaking fortunes in the process. I believe that the positive transformation of Germany's domestic box office fortunes and the ongoing success of German cinema today can provide real guidance to the less robust Australian film industry, particularly if Australian filmmakers and film funding bodies pay attention to the many lessons offered by the healthier German model, as discussed in this research paper. In short, in order to portray our own lives more successfully on screen, it may be time for Australian filmmakers to start looking more closely at *The Lives of Others*.



*It's time for Australian filmmakers to start looking at The Lives of Others...*

**Figure 12 (above):** The critically acclaimed 2006 drama *Das Leben der Anderen* (or *The Lives of Others*) performed very well at the German box office, attracting more than 1.5 million viewers to local cinemas. The film also went on to achieve great success internationally, eventually winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.



## **VALUABLE GERMAN FILM INDUSTRY CONTACTS & RESOURCES:**

**Filmförderungsanstalt**, Berlin (Federal film funding body): [www.ffa.de](http://www.ffa.de)

**Deutscher Filmförderfonds**, Berlin (funding pool for Federal Film Fund and FFA initiatives): [www.dfff-ffa.de](http://www.dfff-ffa.de)

**Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg**, Potsdam (official film funding body for the state of Berlin-Brandenburg): [www.medienboard.de](http://www.medienboard.de)

**Berlin Brandenburg Film Commission**, Potsdam (film commissioning body in the state of Berlin-Brandenburg, as part of Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg): [www.bbfc.de](http://www.bbfc.de)

**FilmFernsehFonds Bayern**, Munich (official film funding body in the state of Bavaria): [www.fff-bayern.de](http://www.fff-bayern.de)

**Film Commission Bayern**, Munich (film commissioning body in the state of Bavaria, as part of FilmFernsehFonds Bayern): [www.fff-bayern.de/film-commission](http://www.fff-bayern.de/film-commission)

**German Films Service + Marketing GmbH**, Munich (Federal organisation responsible for the international marketing & promotion of German films): [www.german-films.de](http://www.german-films.de)

**Erich Pommer Institut für Medienrecht, Medienwirtschaft und Medienforschung**, based at the HFF „Konrad Wolf“ in Potsdam (national media research): [www.epi-medieninstitut.de](http://www.epi-medieninstitut.de)

**Deutsche Kinemathek and Museum für Film und Fernsehen**, Berlin (Federally-supported film archive and museum of German cinema): [www.deutsche-kinemathek.de](http://www.deutsche-kinemathek.de)

**X Filme Creative Pool GmbH**, Berlin (internationally successful film production company - Tom Tykwer, Dany Levy and Wolfgang Becker are directors with X Filme): [www.x-filme.de](http://www.x-filme.de)

**Barefoot Films GmbH**, Berlin (hugely successful film production company, founded by Til Schweiger): [barefootfilms.de](http://barefootfilms.de)

**herbX film: Film- und Fernsehproduktion GmbH**, Munich (very successful film production company, founded by Michael "Bully" Herbig): [herbx.de](http://herbx.de)

**Wiedemann & Berg Film GmbH**, Munich (film production company): [www.wb-film.com](http://www.wb-film.com)

**Constantin Film AG**, Munich (hugely successful film production and theatrical marketing & distribution company, founded by the legendary German producer Bernd Eichinger): [www.constantin-film.de](http://www.constantin-film.de)

**Red Arrow International**, Munich (international television and film sales, marketing and distribution company): [www.redarrowinternational.tv](http://www.redarrowinternational.tv)

**boxoffice Filmmarketing GmbH**, Hamburg (dedicated strategic film marketing & PR company): [www.bofm.de](http://www.bofm.de)

**University of Film and Television (HFF) „Konrad Wolf“**, Potsdam (renowned film academy): [www.hff-potsdam.de](http://www.hff-potsdam.de)

**Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin**, Berlin (renowned film academy): [www.dffb.de](http://www.dffb.de)

**The University of Television and Film Munich**, Munich (renowned film academy): [www.hff-muenchen.de](http://www.hff-muenchen.de)

## **PERSONAL BACKGROUND & GOALS IN UNDERTAKING THIS RESEARCH PROJECT:**

In 2012, when I decided to apply for the Australian German Association – Goethe-Institut Fellowship, there was no doubt in my mind what the subject of my proposed research paper would be. I am passionate about many of the questions and topics at the core of this research project, as I have a strong personal interest in the domestic growth and future success of the Australian film industry, as well as an ongoing interest in and connection to the German film industry. Professionally, I am currently freelancing as a Script Supervisor in the South Australian and Victorian film and television industries. Having previously studied both German and Screen Production at Flinders University and, later, Film and Television Producing at the Victorian College of the Arts, and having worked both in media marketing and directly as a crew member on various Australian film and television productions during the past 12 years, I know all too well that Australian films often struggle to find a domestic audience, let alone an international one, unfortunately leading to a real downturn in the industry during the past decade or so.

One of my main goals in undertaking this research project was to determine how the German film industry (including the German Government's film funding agencies, German producers and local distributors) actively turned its fortunes around for the better, so that the reception of local films at the German box office has remained healthy at around the 20% mark annually for the past decade. In turn, my aim was to try to identify what measures the Australian film industry could potentially look at adopting in order to achieve the same for local films in Australia.

Building on my own practical knowledge of both the Australian and German film and television industries, the research that I undertook in Germany during the first half of 2013 really helped me clarify the lessons Australia could learn from Germany in terms of supporting and successfully marketing domestic film productions.

I hope that this research project will open new channels of communication between the more successful domestic German film industry and the local Australian industry. I am excited about publishing my findings as to what it is that has enabled German films to perform relatively successfully locally, and communicating the results of my research to interested and relevant film industry members in Australia, as I believe that the domestic success story of Germany's national cinema can give real hope to the Australian film industry.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

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